Pairing: Spike/ Xander
Genre: ADULT
Summary: Spike meets a Xander who never met the slayer

Disclaimer: The following pages are not for minors!! The fanfic on these pages contains m/m slash (male on male sex), bondage, BDSM, rimming, oral sex, anal sex, bloodplay, and violence. For adults, this is a nice little fantasy. For children, this is a good way to really warp your sense of sexuality!! If you're not of legal age, go read something else. I don't own any of these guys and I don't make money off this. I'm just having some fun. Oh, and if you're looking for abuse, rape, torture, chan, or sexual violence, go somewhere else! My guys like what they're doing, and they don't do anything unless both partners are getting off on it!
Secondverse

by

Litgal

1
The Gang

Xander struggled in the inhumanly strong grip of the monster that had grabbed him from the street. Twisting his head around to look at his coming death, Xander could see alien angles in the twisted face and yellowed eyes, and oh shit, fangs. What the hell? Vampires weren’t real, Xander thought even as the beast drove fangs into his shoulder. The agony of the bite quickly evaporated into the pain/pleasure feeling of pulling a scab, and then Xander felt himself start to harden despite the fact that he really didn’t have the blood to spare, but Xander Jr. demanded his share even as Xander’s struggles started become more about driving back into that bite. Then the mouth ripped away, tearing the skin where neck met shoulder and blood flowed
freely, some Xander’s but mostly the blood of the vampire because Xander now knew that vampires were real, and wandering the streets of L.A. And his mom worried about muggers, he thought as he slumped to the ground as a black man pulled back his baseball bat for a second swing.

With a start, Xander woke in his bed. The sun shone through the streaked windows eliciting a groan from the dark haired boy. Rolling his nearly six feet of lean body over onto his side, Xander threw an arm over his eyes and cursed; he could have sworn he closed his drapes, but obviously not. And why was that old dream bothering him now? He’d gotten past all that. Pulling himself upright in his bed, he found his mother looking down at him with an ominous expression.

“Xander Harris,” she barked. Internally he groaned, but on the outside he just put on his most neutral expression and smiled with his big brown eyes wide. “What the hell were you up to last night?” she demanded with his jeans in her hands. Shit. In the dark, Xander hadn’t seen the large bloodstain on the knee.

“Nothing, mom. Gunn and Casey were horsing around and Gunn scraped up his knee, and I was down next to
him, trying to help, and I must have gotten his blood on my jeans when I was down next to him—helping him.” Xander realized he was babbling, but he just couldn’t seem to stop. Damn, a simple answer would have been believable, but even he didn’t believe his Xander-babble. Obviously his mother didn’t either because she continued to stand there, unmoving, unsmiling, and definitely unconvinced.

“That Gunn is a gang leader if I have ever seen a gang leader, and I do not want you anywhere near that boy. When your father moved us to this god-forsaken city, I told him it was a mistake, but no. That man just had to have his way.”

“Mom, I’m eighteen and Gunn isn’t a gang leader and the whole thing with the jeans was an accident. I’ll wash them now,” Xander retorted as he got out of bed and pulled the jeans out of his mother’s hands as he started toward the bathroom. The last thing he needed was for his mother to start one of her diatribes against his father. Yes, the bastard had left the family after moving them to L.A., but in his defense, the man had believed all that crap about making it rich in real estate.

“I am still your mother, and I don’t want to outlive
you. I’m calling your father.” Mrs. Harris beat Xander to the door and pushed him to the side as she left his room ahead of him. Xander yielded without complaint; he only rolled his eyes and continued toward the bathroom. What did she think dear old dad would do; the man never paid child support, he avoided visiting, and didn't even call except for holidays, and then the calls were short and generally painful.

Xander reached the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Was he really so unlovable that his father didn't even care? Nope, not going there. He just needed to get the blood out of his jeans as quickly as possible before he lost another pair. He could understand his mother’s concerns, but he didn’t think it would make her feel any better if he announced that the blood came from a vampire’s victim who he had tried to give CPR while Gunn and the “gang” dusted the vampire and his buddy. Nope. Not going there either. Xander gave his reflection a lop-sided smile. At this rate, most of his own brain was going to be off-limits. Of course, other people had been telling him that he and his brains weren't on talking terms for years now.

“Mom, I have stuff to do,” Xander yelled as he left he apartment to the sounds of her arguing with his father
over the phone. He only hoped his mother assumed he had work as opposed to having to look for work—again. He wondered if there were any fast food places in L.A. that hadn’t fired him yet. Once out on the street, Xander made a beeline for the warehouse that Gunn, Casey, and a half a dozen others had commandeered, turning it from a boarded up storage room into a bunk-house slash command central. Xander slipped in the door unnoticed and sat on an old faded floral couch that Casey and Troy had brought home late one night after patrol.

“Xander,” Gunn finally acknowledged, flashing a smile. Xander smiled back with a soft, “Hey.” He knew that he didn’t truly fit. He wasn’t one of the “brothers,” he couldn’t fight off a pack of fledgling vampires single handed, and he hadn’t grown up in the neighborhood; however, Gunn’s friendliness made all that disappear. Deep down in his heart, Xander realized he had a bit of a crush on Gunn, but he would never tell the tall African-American that. He didn’t *think* Gunn would beat the crap out of him, but the others might, and Gunn would certainly never let him stick around after that conversation. Xander found himself with itching fingers. Damn it, he had already told himself that his growing awareness of men's bodies, their firm bodies,
their firm, muscular bodies were 100% off limits. Why wouldn't his brain just do what he told it to?

“We’re heading out on a supply run, wanna come?” Gunn asked

“Uh, no thanks,” Xander quickly replied. The guys might call it a “supply run” or “collecting the vampire tax,” but the police called it shoplifting. Considering Xander’s ability to find trouble, he didn’t want to take that chance.

“Man, you cannot keep trying to work some shit job all day and then fight vamps at night,” Gunn insisted as he put down the stake he had been sharpening and walked over to the couch. “You’re going to get your sorry white ass killed doing this,” Gunn commented as he gently smacked Xander on the side of the head.

“Not really a problem right now,” Xander admitted wryly as he rubbed his eyes. From Gunn’s comment, he knew he must look like shit, but the stress of the fight and getting fired had made a good night’s sleep difficult.

“Oh man, not again.” Gunn sat next to Xander on the bed. After a long pause, Gunn sighed softly. “I know a guy who might have a job—he went to high school with
us before I dropped out although I doubt you ever met him. He didn’t exactly come to class much,” Gunn said in a voice barely above a whisper, "not that I did either."

“Don’t put yourself out,” Xander quickly responded. “I don’t want your friend getting pissed with you because I call in sick or am too sore to lift some box.”

“That’s why you lost this last job?” Gunn asked quietly. Xander loved the fact that he got to see Gunn’s quiet side—the caring side of the man who usually spent his time beating the shit out of vampires and fighting off the gangs that tried to make this small slice of the LA inner city their own. No one could doubt that this territory was Gunn’s, and Xander thanked god that his parents had chosen this section of town.

“I dropped a crate of glasses,” Xander admitted. “Have you ever heard 60 glasses hitting a tile floor all at once?” he asked with a small smile. “Impressive. It sounded like someone had driven a car through the big window. Hell, two people jumped right out of their chairs.”

“Damn, you do know how to make an impression, don’t you?” Gunn gave Xander a second slap on the side of the head, and Xander found that he enjoyed even this
limited physical connection to the large man. “I doubt T will want you dropping his glasses, but he’ll understand if you’re too sore to do your normal lifting,” Gunn continued.

“Understand as in...”

“As in I saved his ass from three vampires a while back. He’s in the know, so tell him you got your ass kicked covering my ass on patrol and he’ll cut you some slack. You go see him or you stop coming on patrol—I’m not going to have you turned because you’re too damn tired to do anyone any good. Course—the offer to let you stay here and do a bit of tax collecting with us—that offer’s still open.” Gunn finished.

“Um, the tax collecting thing? I’m thinking no. I’d get caught and you know it.” Xander mumbled as he tried very hard not to think about Gunn and Gunn's ass in the same sentence. In his mind, covering Gunn's ass took on whole new meanings.

“Most of the business owners don’t mind—they know what we do. And Luther won’t give you any trouble at all if you stay here,” Gunn nodded over toward the short, heavy set Luther who was currently restringing a
crossbow. Every chance he could, Luther expressed his dislike for Gunn’s only white crew member.

“Yeah, I can handle Luther—well, okay, I can’t handle Luther, but I can ignore his random insults...and I don’t mean to suggest that what you’re doing isn’t legit, I mean you provide a real service to the neighborhood and I wouldn’t—”

“Xander, breathe,” Gunn finally ordered with a quiet laugh. “I’m not trying to back you into a corner. You stay here, you don’t—it’s your choice.”

“I just don’t want you to think...” Xander froze. How could he finish the sentence without sounding condescending? Most of him understood the system Gunn and his guys used, but another part of him really didn’t want to get involved in the less legal parts of the system. Part of him still believed stealing wrong, even if it allowed the guys the time to concentrate on vampire hunting, and the vampire activity had certainly increased recently. “I don’t mean to suggest...” Xander’s voice faded out again.

“Forget it, man. I don’t take it personally. You got more heart than any ten other guys I know, and I know you just
aren’t comfortable with the way life is here. We do what we gotta do to take care of the neighborhood. That doesn’t mean you have to.” Gunn assured Xander with a small squeeze on his upper arm.

Xander felt his blood rushing to new zones: his face reddened and his groin tightened into a familiar knot that he hurried to cover by leaning forward to retie his sneaker. Of course leaning over didn’t help the problem, but at least he wouldn’t reveal his problem to Gunn. Xander just wished he could reach out his hand and run it down Gunn’s well developed leg, sliding it around to the inside of his thigh. ‘Oh, Xander,’ he thought to himself. ‘Xander you’d better just stop now or you’re going to have to retie this sneaker for the next week.’ Luckily Gunn didn’t seem to notice.

“I just don’t know if you want to work for T; we could find another place I suppose.” Now Gunn seemed to be nervous; Xander could see Gunn studying his fingernails with great interest. Anything capable of making Gunn nervous terrified Xander, but on the good side fear made the blood retreat from his cock. In fact, his balls seemed to be climbing back up into his body.

“Gunn?” he asked warily.
“He runs a club that might make you a little nervous—no offense, but you are a bit white-bread,” Gunn pointed out with a smile. He absent-mindedly ran his hand over his shaved head, a gesture Xander associated with eminent danger.

“White bread?” Xander asked. “The only people who think I’m white bread are standing in this room,” Xander sat up and gestured toward the nine young men engaged in various activities across the room. Casey and Luis battled it out on a Playstation set up on a plastic milk crate; Luther still fought with the broken crossbow, by the expression on his face, Xander guessed he was softly cursing. Fredrick, Lou, and Trey all slept on pallets laid out on the floor, catching some sleep after the previous night’s excitement. The same vampire that had caused the wound that bled all over Xander’s jeans had thrown Trey into a brick wall and his buddies had nearly killed Luther and Fredrick. In short, everyone was rather short-tempered and tired today. “If I hung out with anyone else, my whole vampire-bait act and front-line first aid performances would qualify as high-drama. It’s just compared to you guys that I end up looking white-breadish.”
“True ‘nough,” Gunn agreed, “but I still don’t know whether you want to be around T’s type of scene. He runs a club over near Glitters,” Gunn finished and Xander’s breath caught in his throat causing him to make a small strangled noise. Glitters sat at the center of gay island in the center of the club district. Gunn must have heard the noise because he quickly continued. “We can find you some other place, man, no need to choke.”

“No, it’s fine. If he’s willing to give me a chance with my employment record, I’ll give it a try. Gotta be better than scraping grease out of exhaust fans or washing dishes. I mean unless he wants me to clean out his exhaust fans. Cause I need the money, so I’ll take the job even if he does want me to clean the fans...or wash the dishes.” Xander stopped when he noticed Gunn was laughing. Xander-babble strikes again, revealing his nervousness but hopefully not its cause.

“Makes you that nervous, huh?” Gunn asked. “But you’re still gonna take the job—I’ll give you credit for having balls, and you just tell T that the guys have to lay off you or I’ll come down there and have a conversation with anyone who gives you a hard time,” Gunn promised. Xander sat on the odious couch in absolute shock. Within a matter of seconds, Gunn had given him
an excuse to spend large amounts of time in exactly the place he wanted to be, and he had expressed the sort of protectiveness that Xander found incredibly sexy. He took a deep breath to try and counteract his body’s attempt to send all the blood to his crotch. He wished, for only the five millionth time, that Gunn had any interest in him at all. Of course, his luck held, and Gunn remained 110% straight, at least publicly. Who knows what Gunn did in private, but that's not the kind of relationship he wanted. He'd hid long enough, so when it was time for him to fall for some guy, he wanted to be obnoxiously public about it. God, fall for a guy, he was turning into a real girl. Next thing you know he was going to buy romance novels at the grocery story, Xander thought to himself.

Simple fact: he wanted permanence, someone who publicly acknowledged him. He wanted someone who found him so irresistible that he couldn’t keep his hands off. The real problem was that Xander knew just how resistible he could be. Gunn had this presence—this grace during a fight and strength that no one could resist. Luther had this whole dangerous thing going for him. A fight with a tall older vampire had left Luther with a long scar down his right cheek so that Xander tended to think of words like rakish and striking and daunting every
time he saw the man. Casey had this quiet almost child-like charm that he often used to beguile half the females in LA all at the same time. Xander realized that he had nothing to offer compared to any one of these men. Even on patrol his job was to stay safely behind the others and help anyone who fell during the fight.

The first time he met these men, he had recently transferred to their high school, and he had foolishly gone out on a late night walk to avoid one more parental fight. Four of them had rescued him from a vampire attack that had left him seriously short on hemoglobin. Compared to them, he was weak, plain, and utterly white-bread, and despite his objection earlier, he suspected that he would have played second string no matter where he ended up. Maybe fate decided that it needed a comic relief to balance out all the heroes and Xander’s name had just come up.

“So, what’s the name of his place?” Xander finally asked, realizing that Gunn watched him with a curious expression. No doubt he had stood there zoning for long enough for Gunn to start worrying, but Xander wasn’t about to share his private thoughts with the man.

“It’s called Safari. It’s over by the Walgreen's on the
corner. Go in and give him your name. I’ll call and make sure he knows who you are.”

“Thanks Gunn.” Xander stood up and just stood there for a minute, unsure of how to express his gratitude without expressing slightly less appropriate feelings. After all, Xander had no death wish, and lusting after Gunn in the middle of the crew would shortly lead to much Xander-beating, and he knew it. After a second or two, he turned and left the room without another word. Next stop: one serious mega-sized life change, or so he hoped. His life could use some changing.

2
The Club

When Xander pushed the door open, he found himself speechless, which really amazed him given his propensity for Xander-babble. However, faced with the interior of the club, even in the harsh florescent lights the cleaning crew used before the club opened for the evening, he
couldn’t form thoughts much less form words.

The owner had obviously taken the whole “safari” theme farther than Xander could have ever imagined. The walls features murals of nearly naked “savage” men hunting lions with spears and European explorers leading expeditions in g-strings and those funny hats white men always wore in the Tarzan movies. Half walls with planters apparently at random created little nooks of privacy, and Xander found his mind instantly obsessed with what might happen in the shadows behind one of those half-walls. Of course, anything that happened there would be visible to anyone walking close enough to peak through the foliage or anyone standing at either of the open ends, but that made it even more exciting. The best view, however, had to come from the walkway that ran the length of one wall. The walkway was raised about three feet off the ground, and metal bars separated it from the main club. Xander wondered if security used the protected space to monitor the crowd, but the bars seemed a little too far apart to protect those inside the walkway. The tables and bar and chairs were all made of bamboo and had a definite “safari” feel complete with a grass awning over the bar. Xander realized that the décor was nothing less than tacky, but still, it had its appeal. While he was still standing there,
open mouthed and silent, a young red-head walked up to him while wiping his hands on his apron.

“You Xander?” he asked without much enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Xander finally turned away from the décor to look at the men who were even now cleaning the club and chatting in small groups. If he had expected a gay bar to be filled with sexy, irresistible men (which he had), he was in for a disappointment. Not one of the men did anything for Xander—they ranged from downright ordinary to borderline nasty. The blue haired man with the cigarette hanging out of his mouth and various unidentified stains decorating his sweat-marked t-shirt made Xander itch for a shower. Just being in the same room make him feel dirty.

“T says you’ll work the food runs.” The redhead announced indifferently and then began walking away without checking to see if Xander followed. “Screw up and your ass will be out that door before the night’s over, sweet cheeks,” he finished as he continued to walk away. Xander felt the familiar sinking feeling that always preceded an ugly reintroduction to unemployment.

“John, you mind your manners or you’ll be the one
whose ass meets that door,” a thin black man announced as he came out one of the doors marked “Employees Only.”

“T” the red-head named John tilted his head toward his employer before turning and joining a group of table cleaners on the far side of the room.

“Hey, Xander. I’m T.” The man held out his hand and smile warmly as Xander stepped forward to shake his hand.

“Thanks for the job; I really need it,” Xander admitted.

“No problem. I owe Gunn so much that I’ll never pay him back. It’s more than just saving my ass, he protects that whole neighborhood and my family lives there. Course, I hear you have something to do with protecting that neighborhood too, so I figure I owe you whether or not Gunn called in a favor.”

“Nah, not me,” Xander hurried to correct T. “I just clean up after the guys and help the wounded limp off the battlefield.” Xander liked the fact that this man looked at him with respect, but he didn’t want to mislead him either. Xander knew he couldn’t hold his own in any
fight, and if T thought he was a vampire fighter, the man might expect Xander to handle gay-bashers or drunken fights when Xander couldn’t even handle two little old ladies fighting over the last box of Depends.

“Hey, you go up against vampires when most of the world stays inside and pretends they don’t exist. Hell, even the few people who have survived vampire attacks pass them off as cultists or gothic muggers. You got nerve hanging with Gunn and that crew, and I don’t think Gunn would let you if he didn’t trust you at his back,” T continued as he used a warm hand on Xander’s shoulder to guide the young man into the back kitchens. Xander wanted to argue.

He wanted to point out that Gunn put up with him because Xander had nagged him into it. He wanted to describe how, after Gunn had saved him from the attack, he had followed the upperclassman after school to see what the “crew” did in those late nights. He wanted to explain that Gunn had finally let him join the crew only because he got tired of finding Xander playing vampire bait half a block down from the crew as he tried to follow them. Looking back on his sophomore self of four years earlier, Xander realized he’d been pathetic. Of course, now he was nearly 19, lived at home, couldn’t keep a job
more than a month, and had to rely on his friends to save his life on a fairly regular basis since he tended to attract any vampire within a five mile radius. Yeah, he could safely say he hadn’t grown out of that whole pathetic stage yet.

“So, you have a paycheck here whether or not you can make work that day—got it?” T demanded. Xander took a minute before he could process that.

“Whoa, that’s not the kind of job I’m looking for,” he quickly assured the man as they navigated well lit stainless steel prep areas that were currently abandoned. “I don’t do the whole vampire tax thing,” Xander finished.

“Tough,” T told him with a smile. “I want to help out the cause and most of Gunn’s men won’t even come here to claim free drinks—not even before we open to the public. You have some serious homophobic vibes in that group.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Xander muttered. When a confused expression crossed T’s face, Xander found himself blushing. He silently cursed himself for the slip. T and Gunn talked, and he didn’t need his own
orientation becoming a topic of discussion for Gunn and the crew.

“Well just don’t let the guys give you shit,” T continued as if he hadn’t heard Xander—which he clearly had. “Doing the food runs is light work compared to the other jobs, so there’s a bit of jealousy going on.”

“Yeah, as evidenced by the whole indifference and dislike thing. What is the job? I mean, exactly,” Xander asked.

“You’ll notice out there several tall tables—we set up free food on those to encourage people to stay and buy more drinks. Doing the food runs means keeping those tables full of nice, salty food that makes people want lots and lots of drinks.”

“That’s all I do?” Xander had expected T to offer him either get some completely disgusting job, like cleaning grease traps, or some totally embarrassing job like stripping. Yeah, like anyone would want him to strip—at least not anyone who didn’t want all the customers running away screaming.

“Yeah, that’s it. But there are a couple of different ways to do the job,” T confided as he began to pull boxes out
of a walk in freezer. “My cook called in sick, so I’m pulling snack duty today,” he explained as he tore open a bag of potatoes and dumped them into a sink full of water.

“Let me help,” Xander offered as he took the potato scrubber out of T’s hand and began grabbing potatoes. “What exactly do you mean ‘different ways to do the job’?” he asked as he efficiently scrubbed each potato and dropped it on the side prep area where T grabbed it and started filling baking sheets.

“Well, you do the job dressed like that and you’re going to have to rely on my paycheck to pay your bills,” T offered with a smile and a wink. Xander stopped scrubbing in order to look at his boss in confusion.

“And I shouldn’t rely on your paycheck?” he asked totally confused.

“You certainly can,” T quickly assured him. “That’s fine, and Gunn said you probably just wanted the paycheck. In fact, maybe I should move you back to cooking,” he commented as he watched as Xander finished the last of the potatoes and pulled out a baking sheet of his own to lay out the potatoes for baking, “but
with a few wardrobe changes you could make a nice profit doing the food runs.”

“Did Gunn warn you that I was a little dense? Cause I can’t make any sense outta what you’re saying,” Xander gave one of his small patented ‘Don’t expect me to understand *that*’ looks that had once worked so well to keep teachers from asking him questions in class.

“The food runners often get tips,” T said as he grabbed both trays of potatoes and slipped them into the preheated oven. “But those baggy pants just sort of scream ‘don’t look at me’ and that shirt…” T sighed. “That shirt is an offense against Hawaiian people everywhere. Really, how can you wear that without getting mugged?” T waved in the general direction of Xander’s shirt, and Xander looked down. The orange and yellow flowers on the green background were a little bright, but Xander liked the bright, vivid colors. In a city neighborhood where dirt brown and smog gray were the two standard colors, he loved his bright and cheerful wardrobe. Of course, it didn’t hurt that Goodwill carried this type of clothing, and he definitely couldn’t afford to shop any place but a used clothing store.

So the shirt and the décor—not a match?” Xander
guessed. He wasn’t sure what he should do since he only had a couple of solid colored shirts, but then maybe he should just stay in the kitchen. He opened his mouth to make that offer, but T cut him off.

“I don’t care what you wear—you can prance around in swim trunks or a Santa suit, makes no difference to me. However, you’ll get more in tips if you give the customers something to look at—not that you aren’t a looker in even those clothes,” T finished. Xander just silently stared at his tall, thin boss as his brain tried to process that last piece of information.

“You mean people would actually give me tips for bring out free food?” Xander finally formed the question just as T pulled down an entire stack of bowls and put them on the counter. He heard a snort behind him, and when he turned, he had to put a hand on the cold steel counter just to keep his balance. The man who was currently walking through the kitchens could easily qualify as a god. His long, thick, dark hair flowed in waves past his shoulders, and his dark eyes shone with intelligence and a teasing sparkle. His features showed either Hispanic or Native American influence, and he had an exotic face that was only emphasized by a spiral tattoo on his temple.
Of course Xander Jr. certainly couldn’t ignore the body if the tightening of the jeans was anything to go by. The man’s shirt hung open and Xander could see clearly defined abdominal muscles that twitched in unison. The arms below the sleeves flexed, but the man was not an overly muscled monster—no his muscles suggested those of a runner or soccer player, not the heavy, slow muscles of a body builder. By the time Xander pulled his eyes back up to the exotically beautiful face, he could see amusement written all over the slightly upturned lips and single raised eyebrow.

“New guy?” the god asked T.

“Xander,” T nodded his head toward Xander as he separated the bowls and pulled out a giant bag of peanuts which he began to ration using a large ice scoop.

“Xander,” the god offered his hand. “I’m Charlie, and you can get a lot in tips if you’re willing to give up that awful shirt,” Charlie confirmed as he closed his hand around Xander’s outstretched digits. Without thinking, Xander had come out from behind the prep table to shake Charlie’s hand, but now he realized how exposed
he truly was with Xander Jr.’s unmistakable interest and Charlie no more that a few inches away. For one second, Charlie’s eyes flashed downward toward the unmistakable interest straining the seams of Xander’s jeans, and then he looked right into Xander’s eyes and gave a slow wink. “T, can you spare Xander long enough for me to get him a decent shirt, at least?” Charlie asked without taking his eyes off Xander.

“Figured you’d take an interest. Just keep your hands to yourself...unless you have an invite,” T added that last part after just the briefest hesitation. Xander realized that his carefully constructed heterosexual facade, complete with hateful ex-girlfriends who wanted him dead, was truly crumbling.

“Come on, I have something you can borrow,” Charlie offered as his hand closed in on Xander’s upper arm in a tight grip. Xander felt his cock jerk in his jeans, and he shifted his hips as he walked and tried to give the uncooperative organ more room. He just thanked god that he was wearing fairly loose jeans because otherwise he might have damaged himself.

“Um, do you have an employee bathroom around here?” Xander asked, trying to keep his voice neutral, but he
doubted that he did because Charlie’s expression turned even more amused. Charlie nodded toward a hallway where, Xander assumed, he would find a bathroom, but for one moment Xander didn’t think Charlie was going to let him go. The large hand remained solidly attached to his arm, and Xander wasn’t sure exactly how to handle the situation. Xander Jr. had a suggestion or two, but before Xander could come to any conclusions, Charlie released his arm, and he darted toward the bathroom with as much speed as possible without looking like an utter fool. The gentle chuckle behind him made Xander wonder whether he had succeeded, but when the bathroom door came into sight, he could no longer find the energy to care.

Xander pushed the door open and found himself in a completely unremarkable bathroom that could have been the employee bathroom in any number of fast-food places where he had worked. Piles of toilet paper and boxes of cleaners sat stacked against one wall and the room had the strange stale smell that came from a lack of air circulation, but the only thing Xander cared about was the fact that it had only one toilet, so he could lock the door and have the entire closet-sized room to himself. He did so quickly and unfastened his jeans, allowing his erection to emerge with a happy sigh.
The organ was already turning red, tiny drops of white liquid gathering at the tip before slowly rolling down his cock. Xander reached a hand down and gently stroked the vein on the underside, enjoying the sensation for a brief moment, but he realized that he didn’t have much time before providing Charlie with entirely too much entertainment, so he closed his hand around the shaft and began a more aggressive stroking, thrusting his hips up on each stroke and struggling to remain silent since Charlie was probably leaning right outside the door. Xander closed his eyes and rested on shoulder against the cool white tile and he stroked faster, his fist closing slightly to give him more friction, more stimulation even as the precum dribbled down between his hand and his cock providing lubrication for his ever-more desperate thrusts.

With his eyes closed, Xander first imagined Gunn’s large hand closing around his cock, Gunn’s other hand going to Xander’s chest where his fingers splayed out and pressed Xander back against the wall of the basement room even while the other crew members watched and realized that Gunn chose *him*. He imagined coming all over Gunn’s hand as Luther watched with undisguised jealousy. That fantasy quickly dissolved into one starring Charlie: a
fantasy where Charlie used some unknown key and walked into the bathroom finding Xander jerking off. Charlie would slip in behind Xander and encircle his waist with one arm while his other reached around to grab hold of Xander’s cock and pump it in time with Xander’s thrusts, Xander’s back pressed up against Charlie’s front, feeling Charlie’s own erection as proof of his interest.

However, when Xander felt his balls tighten and his leg muscles stiffen, his mind was strangely blank. No fantasy filled the last few seconds before his body reached climax and poured itself out into the toilet with an erratic splashing sound. Xander braced himself with one arm against the sink as he allowed his cock to slowly return to normal size before trying to pee. Xander closed his eyes and wondered how he was supposed to open the door and face Charlie after that. He had no illusions about fooling Charlie; Charlie knew exactly why he needed the bathroom, and he had probably gone to tell all the other employees just how pathetic the new guy truly was. But Xander knew that he needed the money and the job, no matter how much grief the other guys gave him. He had survived humiliation before, and he would again. Hell, humiliation was his normal state of existence. With a sigh, Xander tucked himself in, zipped up his pants, and
turned to face his imminent disgrace.

Xander opened the door to find the hallway empty. Okay, this was a new torture technique, but Xander had to appreciate its effectiveness. If Charlie had been waiting with a few evil comments or if half the staff had been waiting with smug expressions, he would have at least known what to expect. The whole not knowing what to expect actually sent his stomach into loops faster than anything Charlie and his buddies could have done. Xander wandered back toward where he left Charlie in the connecting hall. Several other men zipped down the hall, and given their general cuteness—at least in Xander’s opinion—Xander assumed that these men, like Charlie, worked up front.

“Move it or lose it, cutie,” one brunette kindly ordered with a gentle shove to one side as Xander paused in the maze of corridors, unsure where to find Charlie.

“Where’s Charlie?” Xander blurted before the brunette could leave.

“Charlie? The headliners use the last room,” the man waved toward the end of the hall before he opened a
door where three or four men were changing. Xander turned his face before he could get a look at something that he shouldn’t, even if he desperately wanted to look.

Following the hall to the end, he knocked on the last door even as he wondered what a headliner was. Almost immediately, Xander heard Charlie’s voice sing out, “For god’s sake just come in…it’s not like half the city hasn’t seen it.” Xander pushed the door open and thanked god he had stopped and taken care of his problem. If he hadn’t, the sight in front of him would have left him coming in his jeans, something he hadn’t done since he was fourteen and his two best friends talked him into playing doctor.

Charlie dressed, or rather didn’t dress, to fit with the safari theme in the main room. He had a leather loin cloth strapped across his hips, and as he adjusted the front flap so that it covered most of his private parts, Xander could see that he sported a healthy erection currently trapped within the confines of leather straps that looped around his balls and the base of his cock, forcing them away from his body. Xander’s own cock twitched in sympathy—that looked decidedly uncomfortable. Charlie just continued to adjust his small cloth so that when he dropped it, his genitals were visible
only in small glances as he walked.

Xander wasn’t even sure how the man could walk with his balls forced so far from his body, but Charlie still moved with quiet grace that just screamed sexy. Around Charlie’s upper body, looped so that it went from his left shoulder to his right waistline, a long bull whip drew attention to his beautifully cut stomach, chest, and back muscles, and the finishing touch was a pair of sandals that were nothing more than leather straps wound around first his feet and then up his legs in a crisscross pattern. Xander had never seen anything so sexy in his entire life. What’s more, he never expected to ever be so turned on ever again. He was realizing that despite his earlier side trip, Xander Jr. was quickly becoming a problem again. In fact, Xander didn’t even hear Charlie until the man had raised his voice with an amused snort.

“Earth to Xander, care to join us?” Charlie asked.

“Huh?” Xander really couldn’t find enough higher brain activity to manage more than the one syllable.

“Red or purple?” Charlie said in a tone that made it clear he had asked the question before.
“Huh?” Xander repeated stupidly despite the two shirts that Charlie held up on their hangers. This time Charlie didn’t just snort, he laughed outright—a large deep laugh that made Xander blush all the way down to his toes.

“Red, I think,” Charlie said as he pulled a red silk shirt off a hanger. “It'll look nice with those deep brown eyes of yours. You do have the look, don't you,” Charlie continued as he tossed the shirt at Xander.

“I don’t think I can wear this,” Xander objected as he held the shirt, which probably cost more than he typically made in a week.

“Sure you can—it’s left over from when I did food runs. It has a couple of stains, but in the dark no one will notice.”

“It’s yours?” Xander asked, imagining Charlie wearing the beautiful red silk. “I mean, I doubt it’ll fit me,” he quickly added.

“Xander, we're built pretty similar. You have some nice upper body development, and the silk will really show it nicely. And if you want tips, you need to show off a little,” Charlie confided as he pulled his hair back into a
leather thong at the nape of his neck. “Course we need to find you some other pants. Mine might be a little big, so I’m going to pop down and ask Mike if he has a pair you can borrow.”

“What’s wrong with my pants?” Xander shouted through the open door as Charlie disappeared down the hall. Xander didn’t have long to wait before Charlie reappeared with a pair of black jeans that seemed far too small for Xander to fit into.

“What’s wrong is that you’re going to lose most of your tips in pants that loose,” Charlie commented as he tossed the jeans to Xander. “Now hurry up and change. The club opens soon.” Without another word, Charlie left, pulling the door closed behind him. Xander stared at the closed door and then at the unfamiliar clothing still held in his hands. The shirt he could handle, and he quickly shed his bright Hawaiian print, dropping it on a plastic chair sitting in the corner of the small dressing room. As the red silk slipped over his skin, he understood women’s obsession with silk underwear. The smooth fabric slid over his skin making every nerve feel alive. The pants, which had landed on the seat of the same plastic chair with his discard shirt, required more thought. Xander didn’t know whether he was ready to parade around in
pants that left nothing to the imagination, especially when Xander Jr. was acting up, but he felt strangely reluctant to disappoint Charlie. Oh well, he could always change back later if he looked too stupid. Xander quickly slipped off his jeans before he could change his mind and slipped the black jeans on.

"Oh, and lose the underwear—the lines of it will show through the jeans," Charlie's voice floated through the door. From the tone, Charlie must have shouted the words, but Xander could barely hear them, meaning—and at this Xander really blushed—Charlie had just told him to go commando loud enough for the entire staff to hear him. Xander slipped the black jeans back down and shucked off his underwear.

With a small curse, he pulled up the stiff fabric and tucked himself in before buttoning up the button-fly, an act which caused no small amount of discomfort as Xander Jr. struggled to reach full size. Shit, he hadn't ever been able to recover this fast. Looking in the slightly warped mirror hanging on the back of the door, Xander faced a person he didn’t know. The red silk made his normally unremarkable upper body look moderately developed, and the black jeans followed every curve. He pushed his fingers through his thick, wavy brown hair
wishing it were either long enough to tie back or short enough to not curl up and get in his eyes.

“You ready?” Xander heard Charlie call as he reappeared in the room without even knocking—of course, it was actually his dressing room, but still.

“If you explain the tips comment,” Xander retorted sharply feeling slightly foolish and embarrassed.

“Whoa—you clean up nice,” Charlie commented with appreciation as he took in the new and improved Xander. Charlie took a step back and looked Xander up and down. “Very nice.”

“Um, yeah,” Xander just mumbled. “So, are you going to explain the comment?”

“How do you think the customers give you tips?” Charlie asked with a small tilt of his head.

“Don’t they usually put the money in a glass or jar?” Xander asked as he tried to pull at his jeans enough to give his cock room. As Charlie had reentered the room, Xander Jr. had reasserted himself in the now much tighter confines of the black jeans.
“Give it up, Xander,” Charlie laughed as he saw what Xander was attempting to do. “You’ll get more tips that way. But to answer your question, no, there are no jars. Your tips will end up down your pants, which is why you don’t want to wear loose pants.”

“Shit,” Xander swore, partly from the idea of getting that kind of attention and partly because the thought had sent enough blood straight to his cock to make the jeans a torture device.

“Oh yeah, that’s how to get the tips,” Charlie laughed as he slipped his hand down to cup Xander’s crotch. “Keep that up and you’ll take over my hours on the walkway.” Without another word, Charlie turned and left the room, leaving Xander to try and figure out how to walk. “Better hurry up and get T to show you the ropes before the club opens,” Xander heard Charlie shout from half way down the hall. For a moment, Xander stood in the small private dressing room staring at his old jeans. If he walked out of the room dressed like this, he might as well admit to everyone in the club that he was gay. A straight man might work at a gay club, but he certainly wouldn’t go out on the floor dressed like a rent boy—a rent boy with an erection making walking impossible and
straining the seams of his jeans. It would be like telling the whole world he was gay.

He had heart palpitations at the thought of telling Gunn or his parents, but telling stranger—he could live with that. Maybe he could even use it as a trial run—a practice coming out party. With more confidence in his walk than in his heart, Xander walked out of the small dressing room, closing the door behind him. The kitchen where he left T preparing snacks lay at the end of the hall, so he walked down the length of the hall where a few open doors revealed small groups of men preparing for work—most of them changing into the zebra print pants and white, open vests that functioned as a uniform. When no one made any disparaging remarks by the end of the hall, Xander began to believe that he didn’t look completely stupid. However, T’s comment nearly sent him running back for his own baggy and nondescript clothing.

“Holy shit, what the hell did he do to you?” T asked as he froze, his hand still full of shredded cheddar cheese suspended above the waiting potato skins.

“I can change back,” Xander quickly offered as he began backing toward the waiting hallway.
“The hell you can. That thick curly hair and big puppy eyes paired with that red silk—shit, I’m going to have more people looking at you than the dancers.” Xander stood with his mouth open, trying to figure out what he missed because at first glance the comment seemed complimentary, overly complimentary. In Xander’s experience, any compliments based on appearance simply provided the warm-up act for later humiliation. A small but emotionally scarring incident in 11th grade had tattooed that fact into his brain. However, T continued without commenting on Xander’s silence or his suspicious expression.

“Damn I had no idea you were such a cutie under those atrocious clothes. You must have been a swimmer,” T talked on as his hand resumed the job of preparing snacks. “As soon as I can get you to give up the slouch and put a little swing into those hips, I’m going to get you on that walkway—maybe dress you up like a lion with that think hair of yours, any chance you could let it grow out some?” Xander opened his mouth to comment on the question and the unlikeliness of anyone paying to see him as nearly naked as Charlie had been, but T continued his train of thought without giving Xander even a chance to jump in. Xander realized that even his Xander-babble
was helpless in the face of T who continued his monologue even as he slipped one tray of potatoes out of the oven and another into.

“Your biggest problem tonight is going to be getting the food to the stations. Each of the food stations has a soft yellow light above it, and it’s easy to see with the dance lights on, but the customers are going to descend on you like a flock of vultures. And here I thought you were going to have a chance to work your way into the job slowly.” Here T inserted a snort that sounded suspiciously like Charlie’s. “Don’t let customers push you too far. If they get too grabby-feely, look for one of the black vested bouncers. Give them a nod and they’ll pull you out.

"Don’t let customers pull you into a private corner or pull you to these rooms back here,” at this point T nodded to the rooms off the hallway Xander had just walked. “Lots of the regulars come back here, but you are so not ready for that, boy.” T winked at Xander, and Xander didn’t have to ask him what went on in those rooms. Xander felt his heart jump, and not in the way the sent Xander, Jr. to happy land. The thought of illegal prostitution or of having to fight off overly amorous men frightened Xander, and T must have recognized the expression.
“Don’t worry, I run a clean club and the only thing that goes on around here is love between consenting adults. I just don’t want you doing something you aren’t ready for because you didn’t stop and think. Besides, Gunn will tear this place apart if something happens to you, so you keep those bouncers in sight. I’ll tell them to keep an eye on you for the next week or so until you get your feet under you.”

“Grab a tray,” T ordered as he picked up a tray stacked high with peanut bowls and gestured towards the others that waited on the table. Xander picked up the one with some sort of fried bread and hurried to follow the thin man out into the main club. Xander wondered just how much caffeine T consumed in a day because he had never met anyone who so clearly needed to cut back.

“Uh, T?” he asked as they approached a narrow pillar that had a chest high counter running around it. “How are they going to know I work here?” Xander asked as he realized that nearly all of the other employees wore uniforms. Everyone had the zebra pants but while most of the men wore white vests that exposed their chests, a fair number of the larger men wore the closed black vests.
“Simple, you’re going to have the tray in your hands. Not all the employees wear uniforms, the walkway dancers change into street clothes after they dance and mingle with the customers. It’s a chance for them to pick up a few extra tips,” T explained as he gestured toward the walkway Xander had earlier assumed would protect security. The thought of Charlie dancing behind the bars send Xander’s cock through another round of torture in the tight jeans.

“And this is legal?” Xander asked dubiously.

“If the guys had sex for money or had sex on the dance floor, no. But they’re just talking to customers, and if a few want to slip a hand with a few dollars down their pants, that legal as long as the guys aren’t dancing at the time the customers are touching. Usually the dancers help with the food running because it really will be difficult keeping up with all the food stations, but just remember, you put the food out too fast and I just have to give more away, so don’t break your neck keeping the moochers in free peanuts and pizza bread,” T explained with a nod toward Xander’s breadsticks as both men dropped off a bowl of food at the pillar and walked on to the next one.
“T, I just don’t...” Xander stopped, unsure how he could finish the sentence. He didn’t want to work there—no, actually he wanted to very much. He didn’t think he belonged there—definitely, but he had pushed his way in where he lacked qualifications before. He didn’t know how to do this—definitely again. He couldn’t even say the word “gay” out loud, and he was about to let gay men touch him for money. Xander couldn’t process any of the possible options before T cut him off by answer without waiting for the rest.

“I know. Do what you can, what you want. When you need to leave, give me a head’s up in the kitchen and I’ll have one of the bartenders fill in or just have the dancers take the food. It’s fine darlin’, you’ll be fine.” With this final comment, T gave Xander’s arm a pat and took the tray since they had laid out the food on the last pillar-counter. “Carlos, meet Xander,” he called to a black-vest, and with that T disappeared before Xander could say another word.

“Hey Xander, you need anything, you give me a stare, and I’ll get right to you, okay?” Carlos commented as he gave Xander a smile that made Xander relax. Carlos was old enough to be Xander’s father if Xander was any judge
of age, but his body looked fit enough to break Xander’s real father in two. Comforting combination. “You get the rest of the food out ‘cause the fun is about to start,” Carlos added as he jerked a thumb toward the entrance. The club had obviously opened because the first few customers had started wandering in through the doors in pairs and small groups. The light instantly dimmed, and Xander made an ungraceful dash for the kitchen.

3
The Meeting

Xander had expected to last about fifteen minutes. Five hours later, he found himself still navigating the crowd with his tray full of both empty bowls needing refilling and full bowls he was trying to get over to the far food stations. Currently, three middle-aged men with nice suits and strong breath prevented him from making any progress. Xander just knew that Carlos hovered near, but he intentionally avoided eye contact. After five
hours at the job, Xander knew good tippers when he saw them.

“I haven’t seen you before,” the tallest man commented from behind, slipping an arm around Xander’s waist. Normally Xander would have felt compelled to push the stranger off, but he had discovered that the tray made that impossible. After sending a nearly full tray of pizza bread to the floor, he had discovered that his only two escape moves were twisting his body and making eye contact with Carlos. Luckily, the subsequent scramble on all fours to recover the ruined food before anyone fell on it led to a number of interesting gropes and so many tips that Xander had to go to the restroom, fish the money out of his pants, and have Carlos hang on to it for him. This time Xander twisted. As he moved, tall guy’s hand went from Xander’s bare stomach, where it had found its way under his shirt, to Xander’s bare hip by sliding into the already too tight jeans. The man’s hand wedged in prevented Xander from twisting to the right, so he tried to twist back to the left when suit number two moved in. This one reminded Xander of Screech from “Saved by the Bell,” but his voice sounded lawyer-smooth, even drunk.

“I would have remembered you,” he confided in a stage
whisper loud enough for his friends to hear. Screech-clone then grabbed Xander’s waist band and pulled Xander into his own body, tall guy still attached at the hip. Xander might have made eye contact with Carlos, only he felt the paper slide in with the man’s fingers. For the first time in months, Xander realized that he was going to have enough money that his mother wouldn’t have to take any overtime shifts to pay for the rent. He just smiled and held the tray to one side.

“First night here,” he agreed as suit number three moved in on the only open side. The man reached his hand up and put his palm on Xander’s cheek in the most intimate gesture Xander had ever shared with a man. Pulling Xander’s face toward his, suit #3 leaned in and kissed Xander—not a tender kiss, but a commanding kiss. His tongue reached out and slipped under Xander’s upper lip, pulling it out far enough for the man’s teeth to close over it firmly enough to earn a gasp from Xander. At the open invitation, the man’s tongue quickly moved into Xander’s mouth and suit #3’s hand slipped behind Xander’s head to keep him immobile as the suit explored Xander’s mouth even as Xander’s body remained trapped between the two friends. After a couple of minutes, the man pulled back and held up a twenty dollar bill.
“Very nice,” he commented as he slipped the bill in the front of Xander’s jeans so far down that the paper brushed the top of Xander’s cock. Xander looked up to see Carlos obviously perched to descend on the trio, but Xander intentionally broke eye contact, giving Carlos no reason to interfere. When suit #3 had deposited his money, he left his hand beneath Xander’s jeans, his splayed fingers stretching across Xander lower stomach scant centimeters from Xander’s now painfully enlarged cock. This gave Screech-clone a chance to let go of Xander’s jeans without risking Xander’s escape.

“My turn,” he announced as he placed his hands on either side of Xander’s face and pulled Xander’s head to his own. This time Xander knew what to expect, and he opened his mouth before the lip bite could be repeated. “Eager,” Screech-clone approvingly mumbled before covering Xander’s lips with his own. This time Xander felt the suction almost immediately, and the invading tongue worked at prying his own tongue out of Xander’s mouth and into Screech-clone’s. Xander complied and used his tongue to explore the other’s mouth, to find the unfamiliar tastes. Where normally Xander tasted gum and lemonade and sweetness in the kiss of a girl, this kiss tasted of alcohol and lust and a faint trace of cigarette.
Before Xander could finish cataloguing the differences, the man’s teeth closed even as the suction continued. Xander tried to withdraw his head, but a hand latched on to the back of his head and pulled him forward. He tried to pull back his tongue, but the teeth tightened and Xander froze. He supposed he could drop the tray, but he didn’t want to have to scramble for far messier potato skins with the dance floor this crowded. As soon as Xander froze, the man’s teeth eased up, and Xander felt the other man’s tongue stroking along the underside of his tongue in rhythm with a stroking that now began on his left nipple.

Xander relaxed, but then a nail raked his nipple, and he groaned as his body sent so much blood to his cock that it closed the distance between it and suit #3’s fingertips. When Xander felt the head of his cock nudge the warm finger, he groaned into the mouth that still held his tongue captive and still stroked it. “Nice hardly seems adequate,” Screech clone commented as he finally released Xander’s mouth. Suit #3 reluctantly withdrew his hand, and Screech-clone held up his twenty dollars. Xander held still as the hand with the money disappeared down the front of Xander’s jeans. This time, the hand didn’t stop until it had pushed the money
between Xander’s cock and his lower stomach, allowing Screech-clone to run his finger down half the length of Xander Jr., who twitched approvingly.

With a glance over his shoulder toward the black-vested bouncer, Screech-clone pulled his hand out until he once again had a firm hold on the front of Xander’s waist band. Suit #3 now closed his own fist around the left side of Xander’s waistband, leaving him unable to move at all, especially since he still held his tray between the two men.

Xander now turned his attention to tall guy who had kept his hand inserted beneath Xander’s jeans and on Xander’s right hip the entire time. Obviously the other two weren’t going to let go until the third got his kiss. Xander watched the dark-haired man over his shoulder, waiting to see how he would react. After several seconds of no one moving, Xander began to squirm, but he really couldn’t move much with all three men holding him. “Uh, food getting cold here,” Xander finally pointed out as he raised the tray slightly.

“Let’s take this somewhere private,” tall man suggested and nodded at the other two. All three of them began maneuvering Xander toward one of the semi-private
tables shielded by a half-wall planter. Xander felt himself being bodily pushed, and he planted both feet as firmly as possible.

“No!” he commanded as he looked around for Carlos. Before he could make eye contact, tall man pulled his head back around with a palm on his cheek.

“I promise to make you cry with pleasure,” he purred.

“And I said no. Either let me go right now, or you’re going to find yourself tossed out on your ass.” Xander insisted with more vehemence than he really felt. Of course, it didn't help that Xander Jr. kept insisting that this was exactly what he wanted.

“Playing cock-tease?” Screech-clone asked with a sneer.

“You started the game, you did the teasing. I’m just running food. Let me go now,” Xander hotly returned even though he couldn't turn to face Screech-clone with the tall man's hands holding his head captive. He was surprised when the men instantly complied, but when he turned, he saw that Carlos had obviously spotted the problem because he had moved up to stand directly behind Xander. His narrowed eyes and clenched fists
convinced the three suits far more than Xander’s words. Unfortunately, Carlos’ rock hard body also made a perfect target for the tray as Xander swung around. When his tray met the side of Carlos’ body, the bowls of potato skins slid wildly and then careened off the edge of the tray onto the bouncer’s black and white pants and then onto the wood floor.

“Shit,” Xander cursed as he instantly dropped to his knees and started grabbing bowls and now cold potato skins off the floor. Carlos stood stunned for a moment, but when the three suits hurriedly backed away, he looked down and assessed the damage.

“Are you sure you’re not doing this for tips?” Carlos asked as he checked out his grease stained pants and the men who now eyed Xander as he knelt on the floor scrambling to grab the scattered food.

“Hardee-har-har. Go on, get changed. They aren’t going to give me any more grief,” Xander told Carlos as he spotted the three suits disappearing into the dancing men on the floor. Carlos turned and nodded to one of the other bouncers to take up Xander watching before he left the floor. Xander sighed. Why did everyone think he needed a body guard?
“You look good on your knees, luv,” came a British voice, and Xander looked up into stunning blue eyes within a beautiful angular face that made Xander want to reach up and touch it. Of course, since his hands were covered in potato goo, that might not be the best move.

“Don't expect to ever see the sight again,” he dryly snarked back instead. That earned him a short barking laugh. However the laugh disappeared immediately as another customer came up behind Xander to join in the fun.

Xander figured he was about to endure another round of grab the new guy’s ass, but the British man stepped forward so that his boots were inches from Xander face and snapped, “Back off, git. Go find your own.” To Xander’s amazement, the other man practically stumbled as he backed away with his hands held up in a mock surrender. Xander leaned back on his knees and looked up at blue eyes in confusion. The man didn’t look particularly threatening: the long, black leather duster and bleached hair and black fingernails certainly suggested a certain willingness to break the rules, but the man’s build was almost painfully thin, and his fingers were long and delicate—hardly the sort to send another
man running in fear.

Xander was still trying to figure out why this man seemed so different when Mr. Blue Eyes crouched down on the balls of his feet, practically bouncing with energy. With a movement too quick to follow, he snatched the tray from Xander’s finders and grandly waved with his free hand. “Go on, grab it up ‘fore the great unwashed here fall on their arses.” Xander hurried to do just that, dropping the ruined and mashed treats into bowls and depositing those on the tray Blue Eyes held for him. Every time Xander turned to chase another bit of food, he expected the grope and the dirty dollar bill finding its way into his jeans; however, blue eyes just hunched down, still bouncing on the balls of his feet, with an almost predatory smile on his face.

Xander dropped the last of the bowls on the tray and pulled the small towel out to wipe his hands before dropping it back on the tray. When he then reached out to take the tray from the blue eyed man, the man whipped the tray behind his back with a smirk.

"What are ya prepared to pay for this, mate? After all, I don't do kind acts—expect to be paid for my services," the blonde leered. Xander groaned at the same time
that Xander Jr. twitched and grew. The blonde's eyes widened, almost as if he knew, but Xander refused to be intimidated. He had faced off against vampires and monsters, he wasn't going to back down to a Goth reject bar fly.

"Since the tray is mine, I don't expect to pay anything," Xander said, straightening up and standing over the still crouching stranger. When Blue Eyes also stood up, Xander sighed in relief when he saw that the lanky stranger stood a good inch shorter than him. At least he wouldn't have to ask the bouncer for a rescue...this time. "In fact," he continued as Blue Eyes ran his gaze up and down Xander's body. "In Fact," he repeated louder when it became clear that Blue Eyes wasn't listening. This time, those stunning blue eyes settled on his face with the eyebrows raised in a look of both curiosity and amusement. "You cost me quite a few tips scaring off the customers like that," Xander pointed out with a head nod toward the crowd behind him.

"So, you do the whole crawlin' thing for money, do ya?" Blue Eyes asked with the corners of his mouth twitching into an even wider smile.

"It's not like....I just dropped the ....You’re twisting my
words, and it doesn't change the fact that you're still scaring off the tipping customers AND keeping me from doing my job." Xander felt a moment of pride that he had managed to recover from the moment of babble. Of course, with those brilliant blue eyes staring at him as if they could see right through him, babbling in some form was inevitable. Xander Jr. valiantly tried to break through the denim of his jeans, and Xander watched as Blue Eyes' nose widened in an almost feral sniff. Damn, the man could even inhale sexy.

"Not stopping anything," Blue Eyes insisted. "You pay up and I'll be on my way, mate." Blue Eyes slowly winked at Xander who stood there silently trembling.

"I don't...If you don't leave, I'll get the bouncer. One look to him, and you'll find yourself thrown right out of here 'cause T doesn't take any shit from the customers. And this whole refusing to give me the tray shit, that is definitively giving me shit, and he won't take that," Xander gasped in one breath as Blue Eyes walked toward him. Xander unconsciously backed up until he found himself backed up against one of the half walls with his back toward the caged runway.

"What bouncer?" Blue Eyes inquired quietly. Xander
looked around in a panic and realized that the black-vested guardian had disappeared, leaving Xander backed against the wall with Blue Eyes a matter of inches away from him, the tray still held behind his back. Without a word, blue eyes set the tray down precariously on the half wall, the edge of the planter making it tilt dangerously.

"So, payment now," Blue Eyes demanded in his English accent as he slowly put a hand on either side of Xander, resting them on the half wall and leaning in toward Xander who had suddenly frozen. Xander felt his stomach tingle in a way that it never did with Charlie or even Gunn. He could feel his balls draw up in preparation, and he drew a deep breath, trying to calm himself before he embarrassed himself in front of the whole club, or at least the two or three men actually paying attention to their little drama.

"What payment?" Xander squeaked in an attempt to maintain his manly dignity. Okay, the squeaking part probably ruined the whole dignity thing, but he still wasn't going to play along. At least, he didn't plan to until he felt the hand descend on his arm. The long fingers grasped his arm much more tightly than he had expected, and he could feel the fingers through the cool
"Red, my favorite color," Blue Eyes whispered as he moved in toward Xander, leaning his body against Xander's slightly larger frame. His second hand moved in toward Xander's neck, slipping in under the silk, and caressing the junction of his neck and shoulder. When cool, slim fingers pressed into the skin of Xander's scar, Xander felt his whole body shudder in pleasure. "Oh yeah, knew I was right about you," Blue Eyes whispered as he lowered his mouth to Xander's and aggressively invaded with a strong tongue that tasted of whiskey and metal and cigarettes.

Xander felt himself moan into the mouth as he lost all control of his body. Blue Eyes ravished his mouth, caressed his scar, and slowly leaned his hip into Xander's erection. He could take no more, and he gave a small scream and came for the second time that night. Hoping that the rest of the crowd hadn't noticed since his scream had been muffled by Blue Eyes' mouth over his, he stood there with his eyes closed, semen soaking into his jeans, and Blue Eyes' hand still on his arm, holding him motionless with the single gesture. Xander's legs trembled and struggled to hold up his weight, but eventually Xander opened his eyes and found Blue Eyes
still grinning. "You tell Cassidy that Spike did that to you," Blue Eyes commanded as he ran a finger down the now damp crotch of the jeans.

4

Insecurities

Xander had not yet found enough brain cells to point out that he didn't know a Cassidy before Blue Eyes, correction—Spike, disappeared into the crowd. Only then did Xander look around and realize that he had just been returned to his favorite nightmare, still in progress. Quite a few men silently watched him with knowing smiles, and Xander watched as several nudged or pulled over friends and partners, pointing toward Xander and whispering meaningfully. Soon, T's prediction came true and more customers watched Xander blush deeply and retrieve the tray than watched the dancer currently prancing down the runway.

He considered making a mad dash for the kitchen. Oh well, he told himself, he had publicly humiliated himself and lost the best paying job he had ever held, but at least he had enough money to carry him through a month of job searching. Maybe T would still let him wash dishes, he mused as he considered the distance between himself and the kitchen door. Deciding that a dash would
probably end up with him fishing potato skins off the floor for a second time, Xander decided to go for the dignified retreat, not easy in cum-stained jeans. Xander groaned as he realized the jeans weren't even his. Good news: he didn't have to walk home like this. Bad news: he owed someone for one very expensive pair of jeans. Mike or Matt, he thought to himself as he tried to remember whose jeans he had just ruined. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't register that several members of the crowd had moved in on him until he looked up.

When a thick arm circled his waist, Xander jumped, and struggled to right the tray before he dumped it back on the floor. Obviously he had no business carrying the thing. "Nice show," a deep voice rumbled in his ear as a ten dollar bill appeared in front of him before the hand that held it slowly sank down and fingers slipped under the front of his jeans. The fingers continued to invade until Xander felt the paper suddenly slide easily into the slippery cream that filled his jeans. The hand withdrew and the slightly damp fingers slid up under his shirt and rubbed the substance into his skin. Xander stood silent, shocked, his fingers closing on the edge of the tray until the knuckles turned white. He couldn't imagine how his heart managed to beat with all his blood in his face which
burned with shame.

"Lovely," a second voice added as an older man with salt and pepper hair came up on Xander's right and slid his empty hand down the front of Xander's jeans until his fingers found the dampness. Xander felt the fingers press into his skin and slide along a couple of inches before the older man pulled his hand out with the collected cum pooling between two fingers. "Just lovely," the man intoned as his second hand held up a fifty. The man's damp fingers reached up toward Xander, and Xander pulled back sharply, or at least tried to. The thick arm tightened as Xander simply managed to push himself back into the first man's embrace. Xander felt the weight of the arm and the press of other men crowding in as the cum-covered fingers approached his mouth. "Be a good boy," the older man cajoled as he held up the fifty. When the fingers touched his lips, Xander opened his mouth with a small whimper that caused the man behind him to laugh. The older man slipped his fingers into Xander's mouth and rubbed the salty, slightly sour taste over Xander's tongue as other men now stepped up and slid their tips into Xander's jeans.

After a moment, Xander watched as the older man's face
slowly turned into a frown even though the fingers remained in Xander's mouth. Xander's brain had long since turned off, and so he simply gazed back until the man leaned in and whispered, "Suck, boy." Without a second thought, Xander began to suck; he had often had fantasies of men, but this surpassed even his wildest ones. He couldn't help feeling like he had fallen into some dream and would soon wake up in his own bed. Feeling this dream-like trance settle in over his mind, Xander felt free—free to do anything since he would soon wake and find that he had imagined it all.

In this trance like state, he sucked harder and then began to tongue the fingers enthusiastically. His hips thrust up to meet the probing hands even though his own erection could not meet the challenge of a third performance without more recovery time. The older man left his fingers in Xander's mouth even as he slipped the fifty dollar bill down the back of Xander's jeans, his fingers running as far as they could down Xander's crack given the tightness of the jeans and the fingers exploring the front of the jeans. Xander continued to suck and caress the fingers even after the hand had deposited the fifty and withdrawn and the older man slid his free hand through Xander's thick hair, pushing the curls away from this face. "So lovely," he finally announced as he pulled
his fingers out of Xander's mouth. Xander's eyes remained fixed on the gray-haired man until a darker complexion moved into his line of sight.

"Xander?" Xander heard the voice, but his eyes hadn't quite focused since blue eyes had left him leaning against the wall. He did suddenly register the lack of warmth behind him suggesting that the man in whose embrace he had stood just a moment ago had left him.

"Xander?!" the voice repeated more insistently, and Xander looked up into Carlos' worried face. "Are you okay?" Carlos asked as he slipped an arm around Xander's shoulders and glared at the few remaining customers who now hurried to back off.

"Yeah," Xander replied slowly, "I'm just fine." He didn't even convince himself with his weak and trembling voice, and he felt Carlos' arm pulling him toward the kitchen.

"Yeah, right," Carlos snorted sarcastically. "When I catch Billy, I'm going to beat the crap outta him for leaving you alone." Carlos promised as he steered Xander around several people and through the kitchen door. Xander only half listened as he continued to walk in his dream-like state and think about Spike pinning him against the
"Shit, what happened to the boy?" T asked as he tossed a baking sheet aside and took the tray from Xander.

"He dumped a tray of your skins on the floor," Carlos jutted his chin out toward the tray of mangled potato skins.

"Fuck the potatoes, what happened to him?" T asked, but Xander couldn't find the strength to do anything except brace himself against the metal table and take deep breaths in an attempt to restart his brain. "Xander?" T called his name gently as he walked around the table and laid a hand on the small of Xander's back.

"Well there's the tip stealer," a high-pitched male voice called out as Xander heard the slap of a stripper's sandals against the tile of the kitchen floor. "Did you see him out there?" the indignant voice demanded as the slapping noise came closer. Xander lowered his forehead to the prep table and prepared to be humiliated and fired—in exactly that order.

"What happened?" T asked the nameless stripper.
"He and some guy were hot and heavy on the floor—had a whole audience for it. Not sure, but I think the boy even finished the deed if the reactions of the audience were anything to go by. I'm out there shaking my ass, and he does the whole trembling, blushing virgin bit, blows his load in the middle of the floor, and steals every tip in the house." The voice snorted derisively.

"You outta be in pictures, 'cause you're one damn good actor with your whole wide-eyes, 'don't know what to do' act you have going," the voice stopped just behind Xander, but Xander didn't move—just let this be over and let T quietly fire him, that's all he hoped for at this point. "Just tone it down during my show or I'll show you," the voice finished with a threat. Xander didn't think the threat entirely necessary since T would shortly fire him, but he couldn't blame the stripper.

"Luis, you cool it or you'll be shaking that ass on the street," T retorted. "Xander?" T asked quietly, hand still on his back even as Xander leaned over the table. "That what happened?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Xander agreed. The details didn't matter and that is what basically happened.
"Carlos?" Xander heard the sharpness in T's voice and he braced himself to be forcibly thrown from the club. Luckily T was calling for Carlos, who Xander hoped would only shove him out the door and not actually throw him. Of course Carlos was entirely large enough to throw Xander if ordered, hell the man could probably bench press him, he realized with a start. He wondered if they would let him get his clothes or if he would have to walk home in the cum-stained jeans after all. If he got home. The vamps were out in force lately and he wouldn't call Gunn for an escort with his jeans still stained from his most recent humiliation. Xander mentally pulled himself to a halt to review the latest words he thought he heard T say. Reality didn't seem to be meeting expectations, so he listened more carefully. Yep, T was angry at Carlos for leaving him alone.

"I just went to change, and I ordered Billy to keep an eye on him," Carlos defended himself against the accusation Xander had only half-heard T make. "I didn't know things would get so out of hand, and I trusted Billy to keep him safe...I won't make that mistake again," Carlos finished with a growl. Xander struggled to understand what was going on. It sure didn't seem like T had fired him, so he
peeked over his arm to look at the thin black man. Yep, T looked angry as stick-poked bear, but the scowl pinned Carlos in place and the hand now moved in small circles on Xander's back.

"Wasn't his fault," Xander managed to murmur as he started to push himself up from the table. Since he wasn't fired, he had to show some pride, and hiding his face in his arms while the boss rubbed his back didn't seem very manly.

"The hell it isn't," T retorted sharply.

"No, it isn't," Xander snapped back. "I saw him call the other bouncer over, and he had to change his pants because of *me,* so if you want to get angry, get angry that I dumped the food on him in the first place." Xander stood up and turned so that T had to let go of his back.

"That was an accident," Carlos interjected quickly. "You didn’t do anything wrong."

"And neither did you," Xander turned to pin Carlos with a glare just as cold as T's own. "I'm a big boy, and you can't blame other people for my mistakes," Xander finished as he turned back to T.
"Honey, I doubt the mistake was yours," T slipped a hand over Xander's arm, and Xander could feel his own muscles tremble beneath the fingers. "What happened?" T asked gently.

"The blonde...things got a little out of hand with him," Xander finally admitted. "I thought he wanted a kiss for helping me pick up the mess, but when he backed me into the wall, I knew I was in trouble. I looked for a bouncer, but I couldn't find one. I should have just shoved the guy back and walked away. He was smaller than me," Xander finally admitted. In retrospect, the whole situation should have been easy to handle, but Xander just couldn't stop the shiver as he remembered the blue eyes and the sardonic smile that had immobilized him. T's hand tightened at the feel of the shiver and Xander found T's dark eyes searching him, looking for some sort of answer that Xander didn't have.

"How far did it go?" T finally asked.

"He didn't do more than lean on me, and I ruined the jeans," Xander sheepishly admitted. Xander heard a friendly snort behind him and Charlie appeared in the kitchen.
"If cum ruined clothes, I'd be running around naked by now," the well-built man laughed as he stole one of the fresh potato skins that lay forgotten on the prep table. He had changed out of his work clothes, but the tight green shirt and white pants still made him look like a god. "You want me to make a food run?" he asked T as he pulled a second tray down from the top of the ice machine and began to load the new potato skins and the peanut bowls that waited to be served.

"Please," T agreed with a smile before turning back to Xander with concern still in his eyes, but Charlie hadn't finished yet. He continued talking as he efficiently loaded the tray.

"Good job, Xander. Now that the customers know you're capable of that kind of show, you're going to rake in the big bucks," Charlie ruffled Xander's hair as he walked by with the tray of food held high in one hand. "We're going to have to work a little harder to keep their attention on the runway." With that, Charlie backed through the kitchen door into the main club.

"So I'm not fired?" Xander asked in a small voice. Charlie had given him some hope, but he didn't know whether to
believe it. He certainly wouldn't keep his job at the expense of blaming Carlos, but Xander did wonder if his words would simply mean they were both unemployed.

"You thought I'd fire you over this?" T asked with a quick wrinkle above his nose that appeared and disappeared in a flash.

"Well, yeah. I didn't handle the blonde guy very well, and then I embarrassed myself in the middle of the club, and then I just sort of stood there shell-shocked and didn't even try to do my job as guys touched me." Xander enumerated his crimes. He wanted T to make his decision based on the truth, and he knew that he hadn't handled the day well at all.

T gave a small defeated sigh. "Xander, you not only have a job, but I'd give you a raise just to keep you, not that you need one," T commented as he gestured toward the jeans where a couple of green paper corners stuck out from the waist band where a few timid customers had not pushed them down very far. "You and the blonde guy put on a nice show for everyone, and if you're okay with people seeing that, trust me, I have no problem with you doing it. Law says there can't be any touching of genitals, but what you did was both legal and highly
entertaining. Some of those men will come back just hoping to see a repeat of that." T's brow quickly wrinkled and smoothed for a second time.

"As far as embarrassing yourself, I'm sorry you aren't comfortable with what happened, but no one is judging you. And your job is to keep customers here and drinking. If the customers stay because of the food—fine. If the customers stay because they're watching you—all the better. It saves me on the cost of chips," T finished as he pulled a box out from under the prep table and began to line up bowls. "However, I think you need the night to recover, so go use Charlie's dressing room to get changed and cleaned up. There's a small bathroom behind the screen. Xander turned to leave, but he didn't get far before a sound stopped him.

"Xander?" Xander froze at the sound of his name, and when he turned, he found Carlos right behind him, smiling. Carlos held out a stack of money he had been holding for him. "Thanks for sticking up for me," he said quietly enough that T wouldn't hear. Without another word, Carlos turned and followed the path Charlie had taken toward the main club.

"Xander?" This time T called his name, and he silently
turned to his boss. "Normally the strippers and food carriers put 10% of their tips in the jar for all the bouncers to split," T nodded toward a jar half full of money that sat on a shelf across from the ovens. "However, Carlos guarded just you tonight. You give your 10% to him and the others will split that pot," T finished.

"But won't that be less money for Carlos?" Xander asked, concerned about losing Carlos part of his income for the night. T only laughed.

"When he was back here changing, he showed me what you got when you dropped the first tray. Trust me, he's better off taking his share from you," T said confidently. "Take advantage while you can, the customers can smell virgin meat, and you'll only get those tips as long as you blush the color of that shirt every time someone calls you cute," T finished as he emptied the bags of corn chips into the waiting bowls.

Xander felt his face warm once again as he proved the accuracy of T's words and quietly crept down the hall toward the end room where he could hopefully have privacy. T's laughter followed him down the hall.
Xander woke with only the light from the hallway showing and a strange quiet throughout the building. He sat up and quickly checked his surroundings. The silk shirt lay folded and draped over the arm of the wooden chair. The newly washed and still damp jeans were draped over the metal partition screen between the bathroom and bedroom. He now wore his baggy jeans and Hawaiian shirt and lay on the floor half on, half off a bean bag chair. He remembered sitting down, but he didn't remember falling asleep. With a surge of panic, Xander leapt up and stepped into the bathroom. Two stacks of money still waited for him: one had mostly fives and tens to make $60, the other had everything from dirty ones to damp tens to a single fifty dollar bill, that stack made up the other $510 Xander had earned. Xander looked at the money in awe, and pocketed the two stacks separately. Stretching his neck which had stiffened in the uncomfortable sleeping position, Xander walked in the silent hall wondering about the time and what had woken him. Usually he didn't wake without serious yelling, cover-pulling, and direct sunlight involved.

"..do more," he heard the tail-end of T's comment as he quietly padded down the hallway. He didn't want to
bother T if he were on the phone, but he needed to give T the money for Carlos since the other employees had clearly left.

"Help Xander, and it's even." Xander recognized Gunn's voice. Gunn must have rung the employee buzzer and come in the back, Xander mused. The buzzer was loud enough to be heard over the bustle of rush hour as Xander had discovered when a load of alcohol was delivered and the trucker had rung the buzzer causing Xander to drop a tray. Luckily, that one had been empty.

"How'd he do?" Gunn asked, and Xander froze. He didn't want T to be nice just because he was there, and he really needed to know whether T would tell Gunn about the whole 'obviously homosexual' thing.

"Let's see," T began, and Xander felt his heart tighten. "He dropped three trays—two of them full of food and of course the full ones he dropped on the club floor. He dumped potato skins down the front of one of the bouncers, pissed off a stripper, panicked and humiliated himself when one customer got overly friendly, and had to be rescued by a bouncer when he couldn't get by another rather friendly group," T chuckled and Xander could hear Gunn's open laugh.
"Yeah, that sounds like my boy. Lost his last job when he dropped a crate of glasses on the floor," Gunn agreed. Xander felt the warmth at his eyes, and he struggled to even out his breathing and not cry. When others were around, he could do the whole manly 'don't cry' thing, but when he knew no one was watching, Xander sometimes just couldn't stop the tears. Now, in the privacy of the hallway where the two men couldn't see him, he felt the tears fill his eyes and threaten to fall. The $500 would be enough for the month, he decided. Hell, it was as much as he normally earned in two or three months. He wasn't going to stay when the job and the kind words were obviously just part of some sort of "payment" T felt that he owed Gunn. He hadn't yet slowed his breathing down enough to confront the two men before he heard T continue.

"He has also endeared himself to my security chief, Carlos, and my headline stripper, entertained the entire club with his ability to blush, charmed the bartenders, and caused half my customers to fall completely in love with him, not that he noticed," T finished with a chuckle. "I don't think that boy even noticed that one of my strippers spent the entire time on the catwalk trying to catch Xander's eye, or so Carlos told me. I was too
busy back here to watch the fun, but apparently Xander
did make for an interesting evening; he has real charm
about him, doesn't he." T commented quietly. "I'm glad
you sent him."

Xander's breath caught as his emotions swung back once
again. He couldn't believe that T had not only kept his
secret but expressed an honest desire to have him
back. He never felt like he belonged anywhere, not in his
LA high school where he was one of the only white kids,
not in his Sunnydale junior high where he was the class
loser, not in Gunn's crew, not even in his house where he
seemed pushed to the side by his parents' fights. Even
after the divorce, one screaming match caused both of
his parents to completely forget about him. The kind of
acceptance T quietly offered seemed entirely foreign to
Xander.

"Know what ya mean," Gunn agreed. "Even Luther who
hates all white guys can't manage more than a few half-
hearted insults when it comes to Xander. Boy's got
heart, he'll jump into any fight if it means helping his
friends or doing the right thing."

"Yeah, that's what worries me. He's got more heart than
common sense," T commented in a voice so quiet Xander
had to strain to hear it.

"What happened?" Gunn asked, his voice instantly hard like steel.

"Nothing. I wasn't there, but one of the strippers said that the guy who hassled Xander had a real look to him."

"Look as in..." Gunn let his voice trail off, inviting T to provide more information.

"Don't know," T confessed. "Xander said that he was small, that he could have pushed right by him, but he didn't. Xander stood there until the guy moved on. And the dancer who was on the catwalk said the guy had a real fierce look in his eye." T fell silent again.

"Xander’s got good instincts," Gunn confessed. "He knows when he needs to stay back and when we need the extra help. I've seen Xander go up against vamps, course he got his ass kicked, but he still went in swinging and gave us the extra edge. If Xander froze then something about this guy made him freeze." Silence fell again, and Xander leaned forward to try and hear any words they might whisper, but he didn't hear anything until Gunn gave a sigh. "Maybe he shouldn't come back,"
Gunn finished. At that, Xander felt his anger rise up. How dare Gunn make that decision for him!

"Guy probably won't come back; he wasn't a regular," T hurried to say. "I wouldn't want to lose Xander; I really need him for the weekend shifts."

"I just don't want to see Xander get..."

"Get hurt?" Xander finished as he walked briskly into the kitchen, trying to make it seem like he had just woken. "Why? What do you have planned that would lead to Xander-hurtage?" Xander asked with his patented naïve smile determined to cut this conversation off. These two men were not going to stand in a kitchen and decide his future for him. The two men in question turned to face him, their elbows rested on the tall metal prep table and each nursed an amber colored drink in a short glass. Xander raised his eyebrows; it wasn't like Gunn to drink before patrol or escort duty. If Xander wanted to get home, they had to go through some pretty active vamp territory.

"No plans, you just seem to find trouble on your own," Gunn laughed as he lifted his drink to his lips.
"Gunn?" Xander asked in a long, drawn out tone. Gunn cocked his head to one side and looked at Xander.

"Yeah?" Gunn replied in the same exaggerated tone.

"Are you planning to get drunk before walking me home? If so, maybe we should save the vamps some trouble and just tie ourselves to a lamp-post as sacrificial victims." Xander gestured toward the nearly empty glass and the half-full bottle of booze between the two men. Xander could see T's lip's twitch.

"I can see your point, but I don't think we really need to worry," Gunn said confidently as he quickly downed the rest of his drink in one gulp.

"Worried? I'm not worried, I'd just like to stay breathing. So, unless you have some super weapon that we can use to get home, maybe you should stop drinking," Xander gestured toward the bottle that Gunn uncorked as he began to pour himself another drink.

"Super weapon—that's a good word for it because it will certainly 100% guarantee that no vampire is going to bother us on the walk home. I could be falling down drunk, and I still know we'd be safe with our super-
weapon." Gunn threw back another drink with alarming speed.

"Super weapon?" Xander repeated slowly, and T began to laugh.

"Oh yeah," T agreed. "That big ball of light in the sky does wonders at keeping the vampires at bay."

"Ball of light?" Xander repeated dumbly, only dimly grasping their meaning, and both men burst out laughing.

"It's 11 o'clock in the morning, Xander," Gunn finally explained. "I don't think you need an escort home, and you certainly don't need me to be sober." Gunn sipped this drink more slowly, but he clearly intended on drinking more.

"Damn," Xander quietly whispered. He knew that he felt more rested than he had in days, possibly weeks, but Xander had no idea he had slept so long. With his free hand, Xander reached up to rub the tension out of his shoulder, but in doing so he pushed hard on his scar, a scar left by the vampire who had nearly killed him on the day he met Gunn. A scar Spike had played with the night
before. As he pushed, he could feel the warmth in his stomach grow and his cock struggle to react. For years he carried that scar, but until Spike came, he had no idea of its power. Now he dropped his hand awkwardly as the two men looked at him curiously.

For a moment, he worried that they knew of his arousal, but he quickly realized their amused faces came from his confusion over time. "Morning," he squeaked as he concentrated on calming his arousal and his disobedient cock which remained at half-mast. Both men laughed again as Xander rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up you hyenas," Xander snarked. "You wanna unlock the back door for me, boss man?" Xander asked as he stuffed his hands in his pockets and fingered his two piles of money.

"Can do," T replied as he draped his arm over Xander's shoulders and gently pushed him down a new hallway, one that passed a couple of locked storage rooms and a giant freezer before turning at a 90° angle and revealing an EXIT sign. When they turned the corner, Xander pulled out his hand with the $60.

"Give this to Carlos, huh?" Xander asked as he pushed the money into T's hand. T quickly counted. He gave a
soft whistle.

"$60?" He cocked one eyebrow. "Is this 10% or are you being a little overly generous?" T asked in a serious tone.

"I brought in $570," Xander admitted. As the door opened and the sunlight flooded the small hallway, Xander suddenly felt embarrassed by the large pile of bills in his pocket.

"Knew you'd be good, but I had no idea," T slapped Xander's butt gently to push him out the door. "Get yourself three shirts and two pairs of tight jeans: you're on the Thursday, Friday and Saturday shifts," T announced. You can keep the one pair you used last night. Mike said that if you came in them, you keep them. You owe him $90 for a new pair." T finished as he pulled the heavy door closed. "See you tonight, cutie." Xander barely heard T say as the door clicked shut and Xander found himself blushing in a wide alley. With a sigh, Xander started the thirty minute walk home wondering what he would tell his mother about his new source of income.
As it happened, Xander didn't have to tell her much of anything; Gunn had called the night before and told her all the good news about Xander getting a job as a night assistant manager at a club because of all his experience. Yeah, Xander thought with a snort as his mother congratulated him over and over. Experience at getting fired from every grocery store, fast food place, and check cashing company in the neighborhood. Despite his mother's excitement, he couldn't help looking at the woman with an unfamiliar horror. She didn't even know him. She didn't know how often he'd been fired. He doubted that she even knew how close he came to never graduating.

He felt a moment of rising resentment, and he stomped on it—hard. Looking at his mother again, Xander watched the wrinkles at her eye deepen with her smile and her gray hair bob as she practically danced around
the living room doing her regular chores. She worked her ass off to keep him in food and clothes and a home, and he stood in her living room and resented her for not doing more. He felt the guilt rise up and drown the resentment and anger out of his body. Taking his mother's dry, warm hand, he pressed $100 into her palm as he tried really hard not to think about where those bills had been a few hours earlier.

"What's this?" his mother asked in a voice much softer than the one she usually used. Of course, she was usually yelling at him...yelling about not being late, about coming home to late, about going to technical school or automotive school or computer school.

"My rent for the last two months," Xander said. When he had graduated, he had promised his mother that he would pay for the difference in price between a one bedroom apartment and a two bedroom--$50 per month. Of course, those months when he didn't have the money, she never commented and never complained—okay she rarely commented and her many complaints never included the missing rent, so close enough. Certainly his mother was better than his father whose best feature was that he usually stuck to verbal and emotional abuse. "I know that I'm behind, and I'm
going to get caught up," Xander promised as he also promised himself that he would start buying more of the groceries.

"Honey, you don't have to pay right now, I can wait until the end of the month," his mother offered with a small smile, leaving her hand and the $100 still extended. Xander gave her a quick hug and pushed her hand toward her body.

"Nope, I'm paying my bills like a real-live grown up, and now I'm going to go buy clothes that don't clash with the club's décor—T seems to think I have bad taste in clothing," Xander admitted with a wink.

"Well, honey," Xander's mother contracted her brow in an obvious sign of concentration before it smoothed out again. "I wish I could find a nice way of saying it, but you have atrocious taste in clothing," she finally finished.

"Now you're just ganging up on me," he gave a mock whine. "Fine, tell me where to shop for solid colors in nice fabrics without having to rob a bank."

"Well, what budget are you talking about?" she asked hesitantly.
"Boss gave me an advance just to get me to stop wearing Hawaiian shirts," He laughed even as he crossed his fingers behind his back. "$200 is burning a hole here." Yeah, he knew the whole crossing fingers thing was about as mature and sticking out his tongue, but he didn't feel like explaining the benefits of tips over a weekly paycheck, and he *really* didn't want to explain $500 in tips.

"Head over to the Garment District, between 8th and 11th," his mother suggested. "Try the Cooper building."

"Thanks mom," Xander yelled from his bedroom where he was already stripping out of his clothes and grabbing new ones for the bus ride down to the garment district. He hoped to finish his shopping and meet Gunn and crew for the late afternoon shift. He could help check out the abandoned buildings that so often turned into vampire nests without constant monitoring, and then while the guys split up to patrol the area once the sun set, he would head over to the club.

Entering the bathroom, Xander dropped the clean clothes on the bathroom counter, dropped his robe and stood under the hot shower feeling water cascade down
his skin. For the first time in a long time, he felt excited. He felt like he had somewhere to be. Usually his life was a couple of hours of boring job and many hours of waiting around for Gunn to start the afternoon patrol. Now he felt like he had to get moving—like he had a purpose. Okay, that just didn't jive. The only purpose he had found included letting men touch him in ways that he still wasn't sure he liked getting touched. A face flashed across his memory as he realized that he had enjoyed at least one customer's attention.

He stood under the shower fingering his scar. He wasn't sure whether it was the feeling of his own fingers pushing into the marred flesh, pushing until he felt a pressure that seemed to reach from his head all the way down through his legs, or the memory of Spike's face as Spike leaned in with long, cool fingers caressing the scar. Either way, Xander was half-aroused before he even realized that his body had hijacked the controls. With a small yip, he turned the knob toward cold. Even so, Xander ended up taking a longer than normal shower and exited the bathroom shivering with his arms covered in goose-bumps.
Luckily the shopping trip had proved so annoying that Xander had escaped without any more interruptions from Xander Jr. He deposited a couple of outfits in a small locker at the club, left the rest at home, and then went to find Gunn wearing his least favorite purple and green Hawaiian shirt.

"Damn boy, I thought you were going to stop offending the eyes," Gunn complained as Xander came through the basement door. Casey, Trey, and Fredrick took up the dusty couch, Gunn leaned against the wall, and various other young men draped themselves over low bunks, milk crates, and even an upturned shopping cart someone had hauled down. From the variety of stakes and crossbows in evidence, Xander guessed that Gunn had something planned. Fredrick was certainly fingering his beloved crossbow with more enthusiasm that usual even if his face did have that bored, I'm-too-cool-to-listen-to-anyone expression.

"Nothing's gonna make that less offensive," Luther snorted from his spot on a bunk as he waved a dismissive hand in Xander's direction.

"In which case, my choice in clothing shouldn't matter. Besides," Xander said with a shrug and a smile,
"you guys bleed on my shirts with such regularity that I don't really want to wear anything nice—not like I'm trying to impress the vamps," Xander continued as he settled himself cross-legged on the floor. "Not really into dating demons, thanks."

"Can't imagine who else would have you," Luther returned quickly. "Of course, the retard school has a few possibilities for you."

"Okay, that's just ew. I don't know what worse, you calling them 'retards' or suggesting that I hit on them." Xander watched as Luther's face suddenly turned dark. Oh shit, pissed off Luther does not a healthy Xander make. "Of course," he hurried to add, "I don't really have to go that far now that they're opening that school for blind. I bet I could impress a blind girl with my manliness." Xander tried hard not to think about the one person he wanted to impress with manliness.

"Yeah, she'd have to be blind," Luther snort-laughed even as his shoulders relaxed.

"Oh, I don't know, a studly guy like me has one or two options," Xander gave a quick wink toward Alonna, Gunn's sister. He and Alonna had been in the same
grade in school and were the only two in the room who had actually finished high school.

"You better not be making eyes at my sister," Gunn warned, but when Xander looked over, he could see the corner of Gunn's eyes wrinkling as Gunn attempted not to laugh. "You two are definitely on different teams tonight." That comment made Xander sit up. When the group invaded abandoned buildings looking to break up nests, Gunn usually kept the group together. If he planned to split the group into two or more teams, he was worried about something big. Xander felt the familiar fear start to uncurl in his stomach, but he clamped his mouth shut and waited for Gunn's game plan.

"Okay, Casey, Luis, Trey, Chuck, and Schilly—you're with Luther. You guys are going to the work the back of that gray tenement between the check cashing place and the Catholic church. Alonna, you're going to run back up for them. Fredrick, Pedro, Dan, Lou—you're with me. Xander's running back up for us. We're going to work the old theater on the north side."

"Didn't we just clean out the theater?" Xander asked. If he remembered right, that night had cost him a couple of
bruises and a pair of jeans. He had gotten his jeans' pocket caught on the ticket booth and ripped a chunk out of them. Xander realized that if he hadn't found a new job, he shortly would have been fighting vampires naked.

"I spotted a couple of vamps right before first light," Gunn explained. "They didn't look like our typical vamps from around here—little too clean, little too put together. They had a third vamp I think I recognized from the Chinese grocer. The guy was human last week, so we may have some vamps intent on something other than just feeding. We certainly have more nest sites if the neighborhood gossips are right, so we need to clean these out now."

"If something's up, maybe we should ask around first, maybe during daylight tomorrow," Xander commented. Most vamps around the neighborhood were vicious, mindless killers, and 'put together' vamps making little vampire families out of neighborhood guys sounded pretty strange. Xander had reached the point that he could pretty much predict a vampire's next move, but these guys sounded like they were changing the rules. Definitely not of the good, Xander decided.
"I think vamp bait's got a point," Dan agreed, nodding his head toward Xander even while he used the group's favorite nickname.

"We do what we gotta do, whether vamp bait's balls are too small to do the job or not," Luther insisted as he pushed himself to his feet. "Can't have them breeding up." Xander watched as a fine tremor made Luther's large frame shiver. He could sympathize. As the only member of the group to actually experience a vampire bite, he didn't look forward to a repeat performance, and the thought of being turned made his stomach ache. He still remembered the feeling as Gunn swung the baseball bat into the face of the vampire who had attached himself to Xander's neck. Xander shivered as he recalled his torn neck with his blood and the vampire's blood running down his shoulder. Luther had shot at the vamp, but the bloodsucker had disappeared into the night leaving Xander confused, scared, and "in the know" about vampires for the first time in his life.

"Some of us just have bigger brains than balls, that's all" is what Xander said, despite his sympathetic thoughts. Showing sympathy for Luther wasn't a smart move; Xander had already learned that lesson. "And I'm really hoping that came out in a 'I have really big brains
way' and not a 'I have really small balls way.'"

"Listen vamp bait, it ain't your fight," Luther took a step forward and Xander quickly stood up, despite the fact that he knew Luther wouldn't actually hit him...well...he was fairly sure at least.

"Back off, both of you," Gunn interjected as he stepped away from the wall and took a position in the middle of the group. "We have a job here." Without another word, Gunn turned and left the abandoned basement, leaving his crew to follow him into the afternoon sun.

When Gunn and his half of the crew reached the theater with the late afternoon sun still bright, Xander felt the familiar fear start to uncurl in his stomach. He was back up, meaning he didn't have a place at the front line; he held back and pulled any injured to safety and yelled his head off if vamps grabbed someone: two jobs at which he excelled. The building was beyond decrepit with peeling paint, and in several places, boards so warped they appeared to be peeling off the building along with the paint. The once-proud sign now had two corners broken off and an entire display of broken light bulbs. Inside, Xander knew it would smell of dust and rot and something vague but putrid, but when Xander
slipped in under a broken board, the smell that hit him wasn't nearly as nice as that.

"What the..." Fredrick choked before his voice cut off. Vamps during the day were sluggish, but still able to put up quite a fight with enough warning. Xander could hear the other four ahead of him, their short staccato breaths sounding their displeasure at the smell even as he heard small gagging noises from Fredrick behind him. Xander couldn't place the smell, but if pushed he thought he would probably compare it to fifty dead and decomposing cats lying next to a pool of ammonia.

He struggled to take shallow breaths in through the collar of his shirt which he had pulled up around his nose. If there weren't vamps in here, there sure as hell was something else. His backpack with various supplies hit his butt with each step and he reached back to steady it before something clinked together and alerted the nest. The lobby had pools of sunlight that only highlighted the worn carpet and layers of dirt, but the hall into which they traveled only allowed in tiny slits and slivers of light through the worn roof, which did little more than illuminate the dust floating through the air. Xander kept his eyes focused on Gunn, worried about losing sight of him.
When Gunn froze, Xander moved to the side of the hall they were traveling through so that he wouldn't be in the way when the fight started. Slowly, he lowered himself to one knee so that he made a smaller target—despite their human appearance, vamps hunted like animals, going for the large or quickly moving targets first and sometimes even passing by Xander without even giving him a second glance. Xander had developed a technique where he waited for a vamp to rush by him and then staked him in the back. At least that's how it worked in his mind. In reality it included having the vamp rush by and right before Xander staked him in a leg or dropped his stake. He really couldn't blame Gunn for leaving him on permanent back-up duty.

Gunn's plans usually included covering him while he helped the wounded and shoved ammunition or replacement stakes into the fighters' hands. Xander could count his kills on one hand. Xander clutched his stake tighter as he saw a vamp come around the door that led to the main auditorium. Within seconds, he could hear the growl as the yellowed eyes caught the little available light and shone it back like cat's eyes. Gunn abandoned stealth and leapt toward the vampire. Xander's breath caught in fear as the vamp's
hands rose to fight off the attack, but Gunn had moved more quickly than the unsuspecting vamp couldn't counter and the eyes disappeared into a cloud of ash that Xander could hardly see.

"Lights!" Gunn shouted, and Xander scrambled for his heavy duty, yellow and black flashlight. Now the dark hid just the monsters, and Xander rushed to flick on the light, and other hands had flicked on their flashlights before dropping them to the ground. No one could afford to hold the lights, so Xander just scooted around and turned the flashlights to better illuminate the door, so he didn't actually see the first wave attack. When he scooted back to the wall with his stake clutched, Xander quickly looked for each man. Was everyone alright?

Pedro and Dan were fighting in the middle of a cloud of ash that spoke of their success; Lou had his back up against the wall, but he held his own since he had his back to a slight indent where a water fountain once stood, so the vamps had to come at him one by one, which meant they turned to dust one to one when confronted with a giant crucifix hanging from Lou's neck, the holy water gun in his left hand and the stake in his right. However, when Xander looked for Fredrick, who should have been at his side, the small man with his
crossbow was missing.

"Where's Fredrick?" Xander yelled as he alerted the team to the missing member. Nearly at the door, Gunn started edging back, keeping the wall of the hall to his back as he fought two vamps at once. One vamp disintegrated, but a hard backhand sent Gunn flying, and Xander rushed in, throwing a towel soaked in holy water with one hand while he held his stake high in the other. Gunn recovered almost immediately and lunged forward with the stake to dust the offending vamp.

"Where'd you last see him?" Gunn gasped as he stood up.

"I lost him when I moved the lights—almost immediately," Xander felt panic pushing reason right out of his mind as he felt a desire to start screaming Fredrick's name.

"He pass you?" Gunn asked.

"No"

"Then he got pulled into the main room," Gunn said as he started forward. Xander looked around for backup;
vamps had pushed Dan and Pedro back toward the lobby where the two of them used the pools of sunlight from the broken boards to their advantage. Lou had three vamps still trying to get at him, but his system was working well, so Xander hated to call for him and force him to leave the safety of the alcove to take on all three vamps at once. In a heartbeat, Xander made up his mind and grabbed a flashlight before following Gunn down the hall and toward the main auditorium. He wanted to point out that if Gunn helped Lou then Lou could back up Gunn, but he doubted Gunn would take the time. The last member of the crew lost to a vampire had died seconds before rescue, and Xander worried that Gunn wasn't thinking straight now that another member of the crew had disappeared.

Xander crossed the threshold and a cold hand immediately grabbed the wrist holding the light. A sharp twist sent the light flying back out into the hallway, and Xander could only hear the scuffles as someone—either Gunn or Fredrick—fought for his life.

"What the..." a strange voice inquired as the hand quickly released Xander. Before Xander had time to wonder why, he had plunged his hand into the darkness and felt the wood sink into flesh before that flesh turned to
dust. The sudden change in resistance sent Xander stumbling forward, away from the door and the flashlight. His outstretched hand jammed into an old theater seat, and Xander spun around as he felt the hairs on his neck rise. Even though he couldn't see, he felt the air move around him and he smelled cologne that did not belong in this room that reeked of decay and rot. Xander stuck the stake into the darkness again, but encountered nothing. Pulling back toward the seat, Xander tried to convince himself that he only imagined a demon stalking him from the shadows.

He strained to hear something useful, but he could only hear the sounds of struggle to his right. He didn't dare interfere or Gunn might stake him or he might stake Gunn or maybe he would just trip Gunn and then the vampire would eat him. Xander realized too late that his small curling fear had turned into out and out panic and mental babbling. It still beat out-loud babbling, Xander justified mentally as he tried to squint enough to see something.

His eyes obliged him by adjusting to the dark enough to vaguely make out two figures struggling four or five feet away. Xander still couldn't tell who was who. He turned, and quickly decided he had more immediate
problems. A vampire stood three feet from him, slowly circling with his eyes invisible in the dark, so probably using his human face. Xander continued to move his head as if he was scanning the room even though he had spotted his opponent. While appearing to aimlessly turn from side to side, Xander turned his body and his stake-arm to the vamp, and then without warning, plunged his stake straight at the vampire's body.

For a fraction of a second, Xander felt pride and fight-lust and anger all surge up, but the sound of struggling precluded any drawn out victory dances. He sped back out to the hallway and grabbed his flashlight. He heard Lou ask something, but he didn't even take the time to actually decode the words, he simply dashed back into the auditorium and pointed the flashlight toward the fighting couple. Immediately Xander could tell the vampire from Gunn, and just as immediately, Gunn shied away from the light, blinded by the sudden beam.

"Fuck," Gunn swore and Xander felt a body move past him and Lou leaped in and plunged his stake deep into the last vampire.

"God, Gunn, I'm sorry," Xander started.
"It's alright. You couldn't tell who to help without some light," Gunn waved Xander off even as Xander tried to push closer. "Find Fredrick," Gunn ordered Lou who quickly took off down the aisle with his own retrieved flashlight.

"But I caught you right in the eyes. I'm really sorry," Xander continued.

"Stop it," Gunn ordered sharply. Xander froze for a moment, unsure about whether Gunn was actually mad or not. "Stop apologizing," Gunn amended after glancing at Xander's face. "You get yourself any vamps?" Gunn asked with more enthusiasm. Gunn looked at Xander strangely, rubbing his head in obvious distress, probably over Fredrick.

"Two," Xander revealed, grateful that he hadn't totally embarrassed himself. "One when I first came through the door and one right before the light." Xander knew in his head that Gunn's approval shouldn't change how he felt about himself. More importantly, more episodes of Oprah than he was willing to admit to having watched meant that he knew he shouldn't look to Gunn's approval to make him happy. But damn it, Gunn's approval changed Xander's opinion of himself, and Gunn's
approval made him happy.

"God, you got two of them in this dark?" Gunn asked in a quiet, gravelly voice.

"The first one was more accident than on purpose," Xander admitted sheepishly. Oh well, there went that bit of approval. "But the second one, I kept calm and just waited for my eyes to adjust enough for me to see his outline," Xander continued, mentally cataloguing the number of things he had done right. He waited for the expected praise, but Gunn simply stood there in the glow of the flashlight looking at Xander strangely. Seconds passed and then more seconds. "What?" Xander finally asked fearfully.

"Nothing," Gunn quickly replied. "Just listening for Lou and Fredrick." Xander studied the deep lines around Gunn's mouth. Sure enough, Gunn's hand moved to rub his bald head nervously again—an ominous portent. Xander considered the man, but then it dawned on him that they hadn't heard either Lou or Fredrick, which couldn't mean anything good.

"Lou?" Gunn called out.
"Here. Nothing yet." After hearing Lou's reply from the back projection room, Gunn took the flashlight from Xander's hand and started walking toward the front. Xander knew there was a room that could double as a stage if the screen was lifted, so he started to follow Gunn. "No, just head back to the others and let them know what's up," Gunn ordered as he continued down the aisle toward the front. Xander stood there near the door, confused and tilting between hurt and anger, but he finally simply followed orders and went to find Dan and Pedro.

When Gunn and Lou followed a few minutes later, no one had to ask about Fredrick. Gunn pressed his lips so tightly that they were little more than thin lines, and Lou had an uncharacteristic shine in his eyes. Gunn blew by the group of men waiting in the dusty old lobby amid broken counters and dirty burgundy carpeting. He practically charged at the gap in the boards and pushed himself out into the alley. The sun still had a good hour left in the day, and normally the group would be celebrating, drinking, and maybe making a quick "supply run" during which Xander would excuse himself, but today Gunn led the group wordlessly back to home base.

Xander tried to get close enough to Lou to ask, but the
man kept moving away. Of course he did, Xander told himself. He was supposed to keep an eye on everyone, shout a warning at the first sign of trouble. Instead, he was caught with his back turned and Fredrick had died. Xander's eyes dropped to the chipped and cracked sidewalk as he allowed himself to slowly gravitate to the back of the group which was now short one man.

He remembered Fredrick teaching him how to shoot a crossbow—the two of them had stood in an empty lot covered in half-collapsed cardboard boxes and weeds and broken needles. Over and over he shot and missed the red circles Fredrick had painted on the side of the large piece of cardboard he had propped up against the side of a convenience store. Fredrick had stood behind him, moving his foot into a better position, showing him how to hold the crossbow, helping him pull back the string. For hours they worked until his shoulders ached and his fingers threatened to never unbend again, but Fredrick never complained. The only comments Fredrick made all day were words of encouragement and an enthusiastic congratulations when his arrow finally nicked the corner of the target.

The memory of those words caused the corners of his lips begin to curl into a small smile, but then an image
entered his mind: the image of Fredrick lying on the cold, dirty floor of the theatre with his neck torn open. Or even worse, maybe the vamps had turned him so that Gunn had to stake him before Fredrick even woke. Or maybe Gunn had arrived in time to see Fredrick die with his breath gurgling out of his bloody mouth. Xander shuddered. Not knowing made it even worse, and he couldn't believe that a few seconds of his carelessness had killed Fredrick. He shouldn't have gone. He knew that he just wasn't focused today with thoughts of a certain blonde filling his thoughts. He should have begged off, then Fredrick would have survived.

He continued to put one foot in front of the other as he followed the survivors, but he desperately wanted to just go home and forget the evening. The only thing that kept him moving was the knowledge that he deserved everything the rest of them were going to say when they found out. The crew had lost men before, but no one had ever been snatched during a fight; Gunn's system made sure of that. Out of all the nests they had invaded and all the street fights, they always came home together because the back up always yelled the warning in time. He had done it right himself a dozen times; after all, he only had to yell for help before the vamp pulled Fredrick away. Gunn had been close enough to save him
as had Lou. The system had always worked before; at least Gunn's system made sure of that when the person playing back-up wasn't a complete fuck-up.

Before he realized he had even reached the building, he found himself mindlessly entering the familiar basement. Xander spared the couch a quick glance, but he could only see Fredrick sitting back with a familiar half-bored look on his face—the expression Fredrick had worn as the Gunn had given the assignments for the evening just an hour or two earlier. In fact, the other team hadn't even arrived back.

He saw the confused faces on the few members of the group who hadn't gone hunting: Tomas had stayed home on the injured reserve list and Gilly and Gwen mostly just acted like den mothers—the sisters had sort of moved in on the group after losing their apartment. One of them knew Alonna. Now, the three of them looked from one face to another until the widening of the eyes and the quick gasps told Xander that they noticed the missing member. He waited for someone to point out the obvious, but the other members each found a quiet corner without commenting on Fredrick's absence or his own guilt.
He looked around for either Gunn or Lou, needing to know how Fredrick had died, but the two men were sitting together in the far corner, and the stiff backs and cold stares made it clear that they wanted no interruptions as they whispered to each other. He moved into the opposite corner and lowered himself to the cold concrete with his back against the cinderblock wall. He pulled his knees up under him, lowered his forehead to rest on the kneecaps, folded his arms around his head, and allowed the silent tears to fall in the relative privacy of his own limbs.

6

Return of the Blonde

Xander knew nothing else until the sound of raised voices woke him from the half sleep, half daze he had entered. Someone had slipped a blanket over his shoulders, and he pushed it off as he stood, determined to face the group on his feet. Luther's group had obviously returned because he now sat with Lou and
Gunn in the far corner and Casey and Trey stood a foot or so away, their own confusion and pain written on their faces.

"Man, what went down?" Trey asked him.

"Nothing good," Xander finally choked out. He knew it was cowardly, but he couldn't bring himself to tell them how he had failed Fredrick.

"Not dead," Trey asked in a tone that existed somewhere between hopeful denial and pained sob. Xander studied the floor carefully, unable to even look at Trey, unwilling to be the one who destroyed the last shred of hope that Fredrick simply needed them to get him out of jail or the county hospital. Xander was saved from having to reply when Gunn rose to his feet and started moving toward their end of the large room.

"Need to talk," Gunn began, and every voice, every shuffle, every breath instantly stopped. Gunn sighed deeply into the silence, and Xander waited to find out just how much Fredrick had suffered for his mistake.

"Lost Fredrick tonight," Gunn said in a rushed tone as if he forced the words out. "More vamps than we
expected, a lot more. Had a couple of real clever ones in back, harder to kill, and we think one or two may have got away. Openings to the sewers back there." Gunn took a deep breath and rubbed his head as he looked around the room. Xander waited in near panic. He had never seen Gunn so...Xander searched for a word to label Gunn's expression. Nervous? Scared? Horrified?

"Vamps had some sort of set up in there—had strange letters on the walls." Gunn stopped again, and Xander could feel the whole group begin to react to Gunn's nervousness. "Letters in blood. Vamps used organs and such—made some sort of pattern," Gunn almost whispered, but in the silence every word sounded like a shout. Xander's brain couldn't even process for a moment, and then the thought of Fredrick split open with his guts decorating a floor and his blood used as paint rose to the surface. Oh god, had he seen that before he died? Had he known? Xander felt his stomach twist as he reached out to steady himself against the wall. Somewhere deep down, he registered the warm hand holding him steady, but he couldn't even see who had offered him that comfort. He silently accepted the help for as long as it was offered.

"They're doing something, and it's not your normal vamp
activity," Gunn's voice pulled Xander back to consciousness, and now Xander could hear a variety of soft sobs and angry curses and threats and promises.

"We'll gut the sons of bitches before we stake them," Luther promised darkly, and a chorus of voices passionately agreed.

"We can't go rushing into this; these vamps were ready and all our training didn't save Fredrick," Gunn replied when the voices finally dropped off into an angry murmur. "We need some intel and some bigger ammo. We're going to get them, but I won't have any more of us lost. I won't make the mistake of walking into another nest of these new vamps," Gunn continued. Xander knew that Gunn was taking the blame to save him, but Xander couldn't listen. He also couldn't admit his own guilt, so he took the only option open. Without a word, Xander pushed himself away from the supporting wall and supportive hand and he headed toward the door. Once out on the street, Xander looked at the quickly darkening sky, and began his long walk toward Safari. He couldn't decide if he was going to the club to work his shift or going to tell T that he couldn't work; he just knew that he had to keep moving, and so, with only a stake in the waistband of his jeans, he
started off into the twilight.

Xander wandered down the street, passing old men sitting on steps and couples holding hands and mothers trying to herd entire flocks of children and he didn’t actually see any of them. Instead, Fredrick’ face floated through his memory as he wandered in the general direction of the club. Xander only looked up when a pair of black boots connected to a pair of black jeans suddenly blocked his forward progress. Xander looked up into the face of Blue Eyes—Spike.

“Hello pet,” Spike said with a quick flicker of his eyebrows making him appear like a man on the prowl, which he probably was, Xander realized. However, Xander just could not deal with another round of grope and kiss, so he simply turned to detour around the man. What should have been an easy maneuver on the wide sidewalk of the club district turned into a dance with Spike blocking Xander’s various attempts to evade. In fact, Xander found himself growing increasingly irritated after he attempted to use an oblivious couple to block Spike while he slipped by on the right. The attempt ended with Xander face to face with Spike again, only this time, Spike wore an expression that bordered between a smile and a smirk.
“Please move,” Xander finally asked in the most polite voice he could muster.

“Don’t wanna,” Spike announced with a shrug. “Havin’ fun here. Besides, I’m not a patient man, so the whole following you around plan—I’m revising it.”

“Really not interested today, blondie.” Xander felt his anger transform into a weariness and emptiness that threatened to make him sit down and cry in the middle of the sidewalk. “Now please, I have to get to work.” Xander tried to move around Spike once again, and once again Spike moved to intercept so that the pair of them simply moved two feet to the right.

“Like I said, not patient,” Spike repeated. “So you give me an answer and I’ll let you pass.” Xander waited for the request for a date, for dinner, for a quick fuck in a hotel room, whatever. He would say yes to anything and then just not show up later, he decided. It really was the quickest way to get rid of the man and be alone with his thoughts again.

“Tell me ‘bout Cassidy—where he’s hidin’,” Spike whispered in a hiss as he leaned forward into Xander’s
personal space. Xander was still nodding his head to his own internal thoughts when the words finally penetrated.

“Oh, Cassidy? I don’t know a Cassidy,” Xander protested as he now began to shake his head. Spike had mentioned him last night too, Xander now recalled. Maybe the blonde had him confused with someone else.

“Pet, I wouldn’t take that route with me, I tend to be an unforgivin’ sort,” Spike made direct eye contact with Xander and for a moment, Xander thought he had lost his mind because the blue eyes slowly started showing flecks of gold, and then a ring of gold, and then Xander stopped breathing because he knew who he was facing. Or more precisely, he knew what he was facing. As the vampire’s eyes turned pure gold and then faded back into blue, Spike smiled again. “Care to revise you answer, then?” Spike asked.

“I...” Xander managed before his throat closed. “I...um...I...” he got out the second time. Xander tried to casually reach his hand back to the waistband of his jeans, but long before his fingers found the wood of his stake, Spike’s cool fingers closed around his wrist.
“Let’s take this conversation somewhere more private-like,” Spike said in a friendly tone as Xander felt a cool hand at the back of his jeans removing his stake without releasing his right wrist. Once the weapon had been tossed into the gutter, Spike threw his arm around Xander’s waist and started walking back the way Xander had come as if the two of them were best friends wandering down the street together.

Xander looked around at the crowds. He had been on plenty of vampire hunts, but he had always played back-up to Gunn, Luther and the others. Hell, even Alonna kicked his ass on a fairly regular basis. He didn’t know what to do without even a stake. He considered calling out for help, but he didn’t know how Spike would react, whether he would kill any hapless Good Samaritan who tried to come to Xander’s aid. Huh. Spike. Xander never knew vampires had names much less personalities. Always before they were mindless monsters stalking the night. Xander wondered whether it was better to be killed by a monster whose name you knew or by an anonymous demon who chose you because you happened to be there.

Even more, Xander wondered who the hell Cassidy was and just how long it would take Spike to kill him if he
couldn’t tell Spike where to find the man. Obviously he deserved anything that Spike might do to him. In fact, Xander thought it had a sort of elegant symmetry. His stupidity had caused Fredrick’s death, and now his stupidity would cause his own death. Making up his mind to die without taking anyone else with him, Xander followed Spike’s lead without complaint.

Spike soon turned the corner, and Xander watched as the buildings became larger—the businesses gave way to warehouses and shipping yards. On one lot giant semi trucks squatted with their square headlights silently watching the couple. Xander felt Spike push at him, and he silently pressed his body through a gap between the fence and the huge rolling gate. The ends of the chain link scratched against his skin as he forced his way through the narrow space, and a cool grasp on his wrist held him in place as Spike gracefully followed with far less effort.

“Can we stop with the whole hand-holding thing here?” Xander asked testily. “Feel like we’re going steady,” he muttered as Spike continued to hold his hand even as they continued their journey deeper into the truck lot.

“And I thought you already had a steady,” Spike snapped
back in a sharp enough tone that he lost a step, forcing Spike to give his arm a yank. As Xander gave a quick step to catch up, he finally decided that if he was going to die, he wasn’t going to be quiet about it.

“Since we both know what you are now, can we just stop with the sexual innuendo? Ya know, the thought of sex with a dead guy—kinda ew.”

“Didn’t seem to be a problem before,” Spike snarked back without turning to look.

“Kinda didn’t know you were dead then. So let’s skip the intro and go straight to the main event.”

“And what event would that be, luv?” Now Spike stopped at a metal door set into the side of a small, windowless concrete shed. He turned and Xander watched as Spike’s lowered his head and raised his eyebrows in the same expression that the night before caused him to come in the middle of Safari.

“Ok, just ewwwwww,” Xander complained. “Dead guy sex. I’m thinking not.” The minute the words came out of Xander’s mouth it occurred to him that he really didn’t have a choice in the matter. If Spike wanted to go there,
Xander didn’t have the strength or speed to stop him. The horror of his situation settled around him like a heavy cloak that made it difficult just to keep himself upright.

“Wot? Not good enough for ya’?” Spike demanded in a voice that suddenly dripped with both English accent and a dark menace that made Xander wish for a hole to open up under him. Damn it, he wasn't going to play the good little sacrificial victim.

“You mean other than the dead guy thing? Oh, there's the you being a killer thing, and the demon thing, and I really had my heart set on a church wedding, so I don't think the romance will work. After that, there's always the drinking blood thing, definitely designed to make romantic dinners instantly disgusting, and I always thought I'd take my first love sunbathing in Europe what with the naked beaches an all. However, I'd be glad to escort you into the sun any time you'd like.” Spike simply stood looking at Xander, their hands still connected even as Spike used his free hand to dig in a pocket.

When the key appeared, he realized that this was it. If he let this monster drag him into his lair, he would never see daylight again. He waited until Spike had his
attention on unlocking the door, and then he wrenched his hand away. He stumbled back a couple of steps, still surprised the maneuver worked, but when he turned to run, to find a stake, to scream for help, to do something, he felt Spike barrel into him from behind. As his head and chest hit the hard ground of the parking lot, Xander felt the warm stickiness he always associated with blood loss. He would have reached up to feel the damage, but Spike had both hands pinned to the ground. Actually, Spike seemed to be sitting on Xander with his legs keeping Xander’s arms pinned close to his body. He could hear Spike’s soft cursing as Spike squirmed, but he barely had time to wonder what the vampire was doing before he felt his arms being pulled behind his back and leather lashing his wrists together. No one had ever accused Xander of being a genius, but then it didn’t take a genius to figure out that Spike had just used his belt to tie Xander’s hands.

“Bloody wanker. Try that again and I’ll decorate my floor with your guts,” Spike snapped as he slapped Xander across the back of the head far more gently than Xander expected. Of course anything less than a broken neck was actually less than Xander expected.

“Yeah, like that’s not going to happen anyway,” Xander
immediately replied. He knew the score, and he somehow doubted that he actually could make anything worse.

“Probably, but there’s always a chance.” Xander felt strong fingers grab his upper arms and pull him to his feet. “Move,” Spike commanded as he pushed Xander toward the now open door. Realizing that the vampire could just as easily throw him down the stairs he could now see in the harsh glow of a bare bulb, Xander decided to play cooperative hostage—at least until he died, which right now, Xander was betting would be in a few hours. Unless he got lucky. If he got lucky, he could hope to die within the next few minutes.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Xander realized just how different Spike actually was. The vampire lairs he had raided with the crew were dirty holes with rats and stained mattresses strewn about the floor. Usually three, five, or even ten lived together in dark, dusty mildew and filth. Luckily, vampires usually cleaned up the bodies after eating, so Xander had never encountered the kind of stench they found the theater. However, Spike clearly didn't fit this stereotype. The room was a huge rectangle with gray cinderblock walls and four bare light bulbs hanging near
the stairs. A large bed with shiny black sheets stood on one wall, and a large brown recliner sat nearby. On the wall by the stairs, Spike had even set up a stereo system and tiny television on a bookshelf with a poster of some strangely dressed rock stars somehow fastened to the cinder block wall above. The opposite wall hosted a huge metal storage cabinet. And the room's far end disappeared into darkness, leaving him with an impression of some huge space beyond the light. He felt as if he had entered some strange adolescent secret clubhouse. Spike gave him very little time to think, though. Spike shoved him toward the chair, and he barely had time to twist his body so that he landed on his butt instead of his face.

"Hey! Human here!" He struggled to get his legs untangled and get comfortable in the chair with his hands still tied.

"That's just too damn bad, innit?" Spike asked as he walked over to the bed and pulled out a bottle of whiskey from the far side. "All I need is some information, and you go all silent on me. So, how are we gonna handle this?"

"You're asking me?" he stared at Spike, who seemed to
be intent on breaking every rule Xander knew about vampires. "I'm the guy who's tied up; I think that leaves it up to you."

"Could go the torture route, but you're already scared shitless and still not talkin'. Could take a while to break ya, and like I said, I'm not a patient man." Xander sucked in a breath of air, suddenly realizing that he hadn't been breathing for a moment. He would accept any excuse for avoiding torture, so he found himself blessing Spike's lack of patience.

"Suppose that leaves getting you drunk or shaggin' you to try and turn your demon."

"My what?!" Xander practically screamed. He may not know what shagging meant, but he sure as hell didn't have a demon, meaning Spike really did have the wrong person. He couldn't decide what he felt about that because a tiny little voice in the back of his head screamed that being here felt right. Okay, where the hell did that thought come from?

"Your demon, pet. Didn't Cassidy tell ya' that your demon can be turned?" Spike calmly took a drink from his bottle and settled back on the bed. "So, is it going be
shaggin'?" Spike patting the bed.

"Oh shit," Xander said as he finally figured out what shagging meant. "You really don't want me; I know dozens of guys that are a whole lot better looking than me, and I eat so many donuts in a day that I'll probably just give you this whole sugar rush and then you'll get a headache and be really cranky, 'cause those sugar highs can really make your head, well, ache..." Xander's words trailed off as he realized three things. One: he was babbling, again. Two: his babble seemed to amuse Spike if the smile was any indication. Three: Xander Jr. didn't object to the thought of shagging nearly as much as Xander thought he should.

"Almost like having my Dru back," Spike said in a voice that sounded strangely sad and quiet for a monster about to commit rape; however, Xander knew a choice diversion when he spotted one.

"Dru?" he asked, praying Spike would take the bait. On one hand he didn't know why he was trying to put off the inevitable, but on the other hand he just wanted a few more minutes to pray for a miracle.

"My dark princess. We were together better part of a
century." Spike closed his eyes tightly and his demon form rippled to the surface for a moment as he took a deeper drink from the bottle. Xander felt a small stirring of sympathy in his own heart. Then Spike's face suddenly turned hard and gold eyes pinned Xander to the chair. "Your master killed her, and I'm gonna kill him."

"No master here. No master, no demon, apparently no common sense either based on today's track record."

"What are you up to?" Spike said, standing up and walking over to loom over him with his eyes still showing more gold than blue. He shivered at the sight.

"Up to? I seem to be up to getting kidnapped by a hyperactive vampire who may be suffering delusions and probably is suffering multiple personality disorder."

"Don't taunt the vampire, pet." Spike said without rancor as he reached down and grabbed the lapel of Xander's Hawaiian shirt. Xander flinched as the hand descended, but Spike simply grabbed the fabric and ripped it. Xander yelped as the fabric dug into his armpit, but then the shirt tore leaving his shoulder bare. "And what is this, then?" Spike asked as he began to rub the reddish scar on his neck.
"Oh shit," Xander once again exclaimed, only this time the words were flavored with desire rather than panic.

"Pet?" Spike asked hesitantly. He opened his eyes when Spike stopped his gentle rubbing and found Spike looking down at him in full game face: bumps, ridges, fangs, and all. What caused the hysterical laughter, however, was the look of utter confusion on that face. Xander laughed so hard his stomach hurt, but then he felt a hand around his throat that slammed him back against the chair so hard that Xander had no doubt that he would have died if Spike pushed him equally hard into a solid surface instead of the soft, bumpy fabric of the chair. Now the hand tightened, and Xander struggled to breathe, his feet involuntarily kicking as he started to truly panic. Just as soon as Xander realized that he had reached the end of his short and rather unproductive life, he also realized that Spike had let him go and that air could flow into his abused lungs.

"Laugh at me again, and I'll strip every piece of skin from your back before I kill you," Spike announced in a voice so cold that he didn't even recognize it. He looked up into Spike's face and realized that the vampire meant every word of his threat. For that moment, the
personality disappeared and all that was left was raw fury and aggression.

"I just didn't...I mean...I never thought of a vampire as ever getting confused," Xander tried to explain. When the face remained hard and angry, Xander tried another approach. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again," he promised, and he found himself meaning it. At those words, Spike's features slowly retreated into human curves and angles, but the way Spike quickly turned his back reminded Xander of himself. Xander suspected that this vampire liked being laughed at as much as he liked it when others always laughed at his cheap clothes, clumsiness, or inability to keep a job. Of course Xander had learned to laugh with the tormenters, to befriend them and take the sting out of the insults by insulting himself; however, Spike was a beautiful, powerful hunter. Insult him, and you could find yourself spread out across several acres before he actually allowed you to die. Part of Xander envied that strength, but only part. The larger part of Xander screamed in terror that a mentally unstable vampire had him tied up in a secret lair. Great plot for a bad T.V. movie of the week; bad situation for real life.

"What's wrong with your mark?" Spike finally demanded after a silence so long that Xander was beginning to
believe it was a new form of torture.

"What mark? You mean my scar?" he asked, this time ready to truly listen to Spike instead of just issuing general denials. If Spike had human emotions like shame or love, maybe he had enough sympathy for Xander to talk his way out of this.

"Yeah, mate. Your scar, why do you respond to me?" Xander noticed that the "pet" had been replaced by "mate" and for a brief moment, he felt offended. Then he just felt confused at his own reaction.

"Since yesterday, I just get a little..." he searched for a polite word for his reactions, "a little excited when anyone touches it...even myself," he finally finished in a whisper.

"It only happened starting yesterday?" Spike turned back around, and he sighed in relief when he saw ice-blue eyes.

"Well, yeah," Xander agreed as he squirmed to try and ease the pressure on his arms which had begun to ache.

"Sit still," Spike ordered brusquely, but he also walked
over and pushed Xander's torso forward so that he could reach the belt and undo the clasp. "Does it react to Cassidy too?"

"Spike, I am telling you the honest truth here," Xander said, and then he waited for Spike to finish freeing his arms so that he could look Spike in the eye when he finished his sentence. When Spike finally pulled back with the belt in his hand, Xander pulled his arms in front of him and struggled to not rub them as he deliberately made eye contact and tried to simply will Spike to believe him, "I. Do. Not. Know. Cassidy." For a moment, the two men looked at each other and Xander felt a rising desperation at Spike's lack of reaction. If Spike didn't believe this, he had no hope left.

"Cassidy left that mark," Spike finally said.

"You mean you're looking for a *vampire*?" Xander asked. The emphasis on the last word made his incredulity clear.

"I *am* a vampire, pet, who did you think I'd be looking for?" Spike words were spoken softly, but the eyes once again flickered gold.
"No, I mean why come to me if you're looking for a vampire? I haven't seen the guy who did this for about four years. And when I do see vampires, I tend to run and hide behind someone with a really big stake, so I don’t really take names."

"You mean he took you as a pet and then left you?" Spike asked as he now crouched down and started that same nervous bounce he had the first time Xander had seen him in the club. Xander didn't realize he had been rubbing his sore arms until Spike took his left arm in his hands and began vigorously rubbing to help circulation return. "What did ya call him if he didn't give you his name?"

"Who Cassidy?" Oh yeah, the rubbing of the arms felt wonderful, so wonderful he hadn't quite caught all the question.

"Bloody hell, pet, is there any other vampire we've been talking about?" Spike stopped, and he had to curb the urge to whine at Spike to start again.

"I didn't call him anything except maybe, 'Who the hell' when he bit me. After he bit me I tended to call him things like 'that asshole bloodsucker who bit
"Pet, I'm still confused as hell here, so you tell me every minute of your relationship with that wanker." Spike still paced, but now the confusion had been replaced with an expression that frightened him even more. As Spike paced, he flipped his leather coat and pursed his lips in a way that suggested either deep thought or constipation.

"Well, the whole thing took less than a minute, so it's a pretty short story. I was walking; it was about two weeks before the start of sophomore year, and I had a pretty big fight with my best friend over the phone..."

"Xander, I need the vampire bits. I love a good soap, but it'll have to wait for later." Spike interrupted, and Xander bit down on his desire to tell Spike exactly where to shove his vampire bits.

"Fine," is what he said more sharply than he intended, but Spike only gave him one of those looks with one eyebrow raised higher than the other. "I was walking. I got bit. The vampire ran away," Xander said with his
arms crossed. Spike only sighed deeply and sat on the side of the bed facing Xander.

"It really is like trying to get a story out of Dru," Spike mumbled as he scanned the room. When he walked over to the shelf where he had deposited the whiskey some time during the earlier drama, Xander realized that the vampire had probably reached the end of his patience.

"I was walking out late when a vampire grabbed me, pulled me into an alley and bit me," Xander began again before the vampire went back to the earlier three options of torture, rape, or forced drunkenness. "I thought I was dead, but these two black guys came into the alley and ran toward us. The one, Luther, held up a crossbow, but the second one, Gunn signaled Luther to not shoot with me in the way. Gunn ran right up to the vamp who was still feeding and hit him in the face with a bat. Then Gunn pulled me down to the ground with him while Luther let loose with his crossbow. The crossbow didn't hit the heart, so the vampire ran away." Xander finished and waited for Spike to respond since the blonde was now smiling and nodding his head happily.

"He bled on you," Spike said confidently as he returned
and sat on the bed.

"Well, yeah," he agreed, still confused about the source of Spike's amusement. The 'no laughing' rule obviously only worked one way because Spike now softly laughed to himself.

"Bloody wanker made a pet by accident," Spike finally announced before he broke out laughing and fell back onto the bed. "Only that git could manage to fuck up making a pet." Spike wheezed after the laughter finally subsided.

"Hey! Pet is definitely added to my list of no's. No master, no demon, no pet and no common sense," he repeated his list from earlier with the new addition.

"Wait one minute," Spike said and all laughter disappeared immediately. He really was beginning to wonder whether a vampire could get multiple personality disorder from his host. "How did you know those hunters' names? How'd you know their signals?" Spike demanded suspiciously.

"Cause I joined their crew?" Xander returned uncertainly. He didn't want another trip to the land of no
air, but he realized that he had trapped himself by giving away so many details.

"*You're* a vampire hunter?" Spike asked, the humor returning as laugh lines appeared in the corners of his eyes.

"Sort of. I mostly help the injured and call for backup if there's trouble. I have a bit of a reputation for getting in trouble when I try to take on a vamp myself," he admitted. "I once dropped my stake as I was bringing it up to dust a vampire. Even tripped on my own toe during a fight, so don't expect me to put on any demonstrations of physical prowess," Xander looked at his own shoes, ratty old sneakers. He had hoped to replace them with tonight's tips, but he clearly wasn't working tonight. He wasn't even sure if he would survive the night, so shoes really should be the least of his worries, but he still studied them intently.

"Pet, that was probably the demon in you," Spike said in a soft voice. Xander didn't move, but Spike continued. "A pet only has a small part of a demon, so it will always seek a stronger leader to follow. Demon didn't want those vampires dead, it wanted to be claimed by one. That's what I meant when I told you a
pet can be turned to serve a new master. If a master vampire can dominate a pet—prove that he is stronger than the pet's old master, then the pet may change allegiance."

"I'm not a pet," Xander insisted as he looked up, expecting to see Spike laughing at him, at his situation which was beginning to sound entirely too possible; however, Spike simply returned his gaze calmly and with an expression that he might have described as sympathy on any other face.

"Actually, I'm not sure what you are, but the closest name would probably be a pet," Spike calmly replied as he went to the metal storage cabinet and opened it. "Sometimes a vampire wants control over a human, and so he forces some of his own blood and with it some of his demon into the bite. Then all he has to do is dominate the demon, and the demon will force the human to act. It's kind of a shortcut for brainwashing, like a thrall."

"So I'm a demon?" Xander asked as he fought not to hyperventilate.

"No, pets only have a bit of demon in them, but that bit
will push. You have to be strong to hold your own against the demon's desires, but it can be done."

"And the problem is my demon was never...dominated?" Xander practically squeaked out the last word.

"Yep, you have the demon, but the demon has never had a master either beat or frighten or fuck him into submission, so it's left with just you to contend with. Give him a strong master, and you may find your desires and fears basically hijacked by a demon desperate to please his master." Spike confirmed his worst fear without pulling his head out of the storage cabinet.

"But why would a vampire do that?" Xander asked in a near panic as he thought back over the last four years: the feelings that sometimes floated to the surface, the desires he shoved into the part of his brain he labeled "sick fantasies" and then tried to forget.

"Sometimes a vampire wants to keep a human close, either to use as a pet or to give the human time to grow a bit before taking him as a childe..."

"A childe?" Xander asked curiously.
"Bloody hell, don't you know anything about vampires?" Spike gently chided, and Xander could almost hear him roll his eyes. However, the next sound sent Xander's heart racing, and the moment of sharing disappeared as he returned to the tried and true sarcastic approach to life that served him when everything seemed to get out of control.

"If you stick a stake in their hearts, they turn into little floaty bits of ash. That's all I ever needed to know," he snapped sardonically even as Spike turned around with the chains in his hands. He knew that fighting was useless, but he gripped the arms of the chair in an attempt to keep himself from doing something stupid when he seemed so close to actually surviving this encounter.

"Pet," Spike said softly, and Xander was reminded of the way people on TV sometimes talked to spooked animals. "I just need to make sure you stay here while I do a bit of research." Spike inched forward as if he expected Xander to go crazy on him at any minute.

"Oh for god's sake, just do it," Xander sighed as he held his trembling arms out. Before he had a chance to
reconsider, cold metal closed around his wrists, and Spike crouched in front of him with one hand holding the metal chain connecting the two manacles and the other hand running over Xander's hair.

"Beautiful curls," Spike said as Xander sat there fighting the tears. "Dru used to have me curl her hair; she'd love your curls. Probably keep your body around for weeks until I made her throw it out," he finished and Xander's eyes, which had begun to fall closed at the petting, flew open.

"Um, thanks?" he replied uncertainly. "I think. That was a compliment, right?" Spike only chuckled.

"Come on," Spike used the connecting chain as a leash as he pulled Xander to his feet. Once standing, Xander's shirt started falling off his shoulders, and he realized he had to pee. Spike solved the first by simply tearing the rest of the shirt off his back, but when Spike began pulling him toward the bed, he planted his feet. As soon as the chain went taut, Spike gave a small growl, "Pet," his voice carried a clear warning as he turned to look.

"I really have to go to the bathroom," Xander admitted. "Maybe we could just go up into the parking
"You have a bathroom?" Xander asked, confused.

"This place came with one—it's a bomb shelter, you idiot." This time Xander actually saw Spike roll his eyes. He also watched as Spike dropped the chain leash, and dug around in his duster's pockets until he found a cigarette and lighter. "Get in and get out within five minutes because I will not be happy if I have to break down that door to get you out again," Spike warned as Xander started to walk away.

"Got it," Xander replied before opening the door and finding himself in a hallway. The door at the end was barred and padlocked as were the two doors on the left, which meant the bathroom must be the door on the right. Xander opened the door to find what he considered to be a pretty standard locker room bathroom minus the urinals. Four sinks each had a mirror, three yellow bathroom stalls, and an open
doorway into a shower area. Xander scooted into one of the stalls, noticing as he passed the shower room that someone had set a giant old-fashioned tub in the middle and run pipes from the fixtures on the wall to the bathtub taps.

Xander spent only one or two minutes in the stall, so he had time to check out the damage to his face when he went to wash up. He had been right earlier; Spike's tackle had left a gash on the left side of his forehead. Taking a hand towel from the floor and praying it was fairly clean, Xander wet the cloth and began to awkwardly wash the wound with his chained hands. It didn't look too bad and even the rough towel had only caused a small trickle, so Xander assumed it would be fine and returned to Spike before his time was over.

When he reached the main room, the cigarette had disappeared, but the smoke lingered in the air. Spike went to reach for the chain, but when Spike looked up, he could see vampire eyes go to the still bleeding cut. Spike reached out and ran a finger along the length of the wound and then brought it to his mouth.

"Bloody hell, pet. You're not local." Spike exclaimed as
his eyes went wide.

"What do you mean? I grew up in California," Xander protested as he went to reach up to touch the wound, but Spike's hold on the chain stopped him.

"You grew up in Sunnyhell," Spike corrected him.

"You mean Sunnydale?" When Spike nodded, he laughed. "Sunnydale *is* in California. Hell, it's only about two hours away, so I think I still count as a native."

"Sunnyhell is the home of the hellmouth, pet, and your blood fairly sings with the taste of hellmouth. No wonder Cassidy got too distracted to notice your vampire hunters." Spike took a step back and pulled Xander with him to the bed. This time Xander didn't protest. Whatever Spike planned, Xander knew he didn't really have a choice in the matter. "Vampires from all over go to the hellmouth to eat a couple of humans—best tasting blood around, except Slayer blood of course," Spike had now pulled Xander over to the wall and padlocked the leash to a ring set into the wall. Xander realized that he would never pull that loose, so he simply sat himself on the side of the bed. Suddenly something occurred to him.
"There are vampires in Sunnydale?" he asked in a near panic.

"More demons in Sunnydale than humans by some accounts. Never been there myself," Spike confirmed. "Why?"

"Willow," he whispered. "What if she's not okay?"

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes," Xander quickly replied, but then he revised himself in a much softer voice, "No, not really. Just somebody I used to know."

"Yeah, well if she's survived this long, she can take care of herself," Spike pointed out before he gave Xander's leg a pat and started walking away. "Sleep tight."

"What? You're leaving?" Xander asked in confusion. Somehow the chains and the bed had suggested to him that Spike had decided to take advantage of Xander's little uninvited guest.

"What? Want my company now?" Spike asked with a
prurient leer. "Sorry luv, but if I want to use you as bait, I have to make sure you keep smelling like Cassidy, which means I don't get to bite or fuck you," Spike laughed as he climbed the stairs. "Be good now," he called from the top as he locked the door. Xander leaned back on the bed. Most of him breathed with relief at the thought of escaping certain death or rape...so far. A small part of him howled in outrage at not being taken, and Xander could now feel the alien nature of the small voice that had lived with him for so long. The logical part of his brain finally recovered from the hours of panic to register Spike's last words.

"Bait?" Xander howled as he jerked at the chains that held him. "Shit."

7

Getting to Know You

Xander didn't remember drifting off to sleep; his next memory included laying on his back with a cool body draped over his half-naked frame and his hands still chained with about twelve inches of chain between the manacles and a couple of feet of chain giving him just enough movement to prevent his arms from becoming sore.
He shifted, and a cool hand reached out and gently smoothed his hair back, and a sleepy British voice mumbled, "'S'all right luv."

In those moments of partial consciousness before thought fully engages and only half-understood messages reach the sleep-addled brain, Xander found happiness. He felt content, the little voice in his head felt protected, and Xander Jr. was rapidly moving toward ecstatic. However, as the sleep slowly fell from his mind, he rediscovered his anger, even if the little voice and Xander Jr. insisted on remaining happy.

"Wake up, bleach boy." He looked down and found Spike's head on his bare chest with one leg thrown over both his legs. Since he couldn't reach down and push Spike off, he bucked his body. "Wake up," he shouted louder.

"What the..." Spike woke up, in full game face with a growl already rumbling from his chest and gold eyes staring into Xander's frightened brown ones. As Spike crouched above, he froze in fear at the image of the powerful beast that lived within Spike, but then the face faded back into human features and he could see the look of confusion. He wondered if he had woken Spike in
the middle of a dream because Spike didn't seem to recognize him for that moment. "Why?" Spike started again, his voice still blurry with fatigue.

"I need to get up," he said quietly once Spike seemed fully in control again.

"Bloody hell, I'm warm; no you don't. You're comfortable," Spike lowered his head to Xander's chest again. For a moment he wondered whether Spike was ordering him to be comfortable—you know that whole dominate the inner demon thing—or whether Spike was trying to compliment him on making a nice pillow. Either way, it didn't really matter.

"You aren't going to be comfortable in about five seconds when your bed is wet and smelly."

"Why would..." Spike began, but then the voice stopped as Spike started rolling himself toward the opposite side of the bed. Xander told himself not to notice that the vampire was naked and damn sexy with his leg muscles clearly defined all the way up to his firm ass. Nope, not noticing at all.

"Bloody inconvenient humans with your bleedin' bodily
functions," Spike complained as he retrieved a key from the floor on the far side of the bed. He crawled back and reached up for the padlock that fastened the chain to the wall. With a quick click, Xander found himself free, or at least relatively free. His hands were still shacked and he was half-naked since both his shirt and now his shoes had disappeared and he was still locked in a vampire's lair, but at least he could walk around that lair.

Yeah, he thought to himself, really making progress here. Not only was he going to die in this place, he really did deserve it after all the stupid mistakes he had made in the last 24 hours. He gathered up the chain so that it wouldn't make a lot of noise as he walked, and when he stood, Spike slid forward into his old spot in the bed. Had he taken Spike's side of the bed or was the vampire finding the warmth left behind by his body? Did vampires care about being warm?

Xander thought about his strange situation as he walked to the bathroom. If asked a week ago, he would have told people that he knew all about vampires, but the longer he spent with Spike, the less he seemed to understand. Yes, Spike was clearly a predator. A couple of times Xander had thought himself dead, but Spike was also a person. He stopped and thought about that one
for a moment; okay, Spike was at least a person-shaped being. He didn't like getting laughed at, he was impatient, he joked around, he hurt over the loss of his 'dark princess,' he wanted revenge: these were not the actions of a mindless monster. He sat on the toilet taking care of his morning business and he wondered just how many other things he didn't know.

The whole pet business for example. Yes, on the one hand that had a real ewwww factor, but it also implied that the vamps fed and cared for their humans, at least cared for them enough to keep them alive. And what about the whole child thing? Spike said vampires keep humans around until they could turn the humans into their children. Did vampires have family feelings? Did they have and care for their children? The only vamps he had ever seen were barely able to take care of themselves; they certainly didn't engage in any sort of activity that suggested intelligence. Xander suddenly came up with a counter-example. The thought of Fredrick's body being laid out in a pattern, and his blood being used to write...that did indicate a sick sort of intelligence. Xander shivered, finding himself suddenly cold. He hurried to finish and then walked back to the main room, once again clutching the chain so he didn't wake Spike. He didn't especially like the way Spike
reacted when woken unexpectedly.

Xander quickly glanced toward the stairs, but he remembered a clicking sound when Spike had first led him in, and so he assumed that the door was locked. Besides, Spike knew where he worked and could probably find where he lived. Xander decided to finish it one way or the other himself. If Spike planned to use him as bait, that meant that Spike intended to keep him alive, hopefully long enough for Xander to find a nice sharp piece of wood.

Ignoring the howling in his mind at the very thought of staking Spike, he wandered over to the shelf. The CD player was old and one speaker was cracked, but the very lack of dust on the buttons in contrast with the thick coat of dust on the top suggested that Spike liked his music. Eyes swept the CD's. He didn't know any of the names on the CD spines: The Clash, the Sex Pistols, Screeching Weasel. The title on the last one made him pull out the green CD, and sure enough a white weasel sneered at him on the cover. He looked closer at the title, Boogada Boogadabooogada! Some sort of demon language, maybe? Ah, here's a name he knew, Kennedy. Even his inadequate, inner-city education covered the Kennedys. Xander pulled out the CD labeled
Dead Kennedys: Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables. Flipping it over, he started reading the tracks and couldn't quite stifle a hysterical giggle. The tracks included "Kill the Poor," "Stealing People's Mail," and "I Kill Children."

"Go on then," a voice said behind him, and Xander nearly jumped out of his own skin. The CD flew out of his shackled hands and clattered to the cement floor.

"Oi," Spike complained as he got up from the bed and retrieved the CD. "That's no way to treat great music." He had put on a pair of black jeans, but his chest showed his wiry muscles and well defined shoulders, and Xander couldn't help but think that Spike was lithe and compact and just plain sexy.

"If it's so great, why I haven't I ever heard of any of it?"

"'Cause you're an uneducated git?" Spike asked with a laugh-snort as he pushed him to one side and inserted the CD. Xander had two seconds of being surprised by the thought of a musically-inclined vampire before his ears were assaulted by the punk music blasting at full volume.
"Gah," he yelped as he backed away from the speakers. Spike must have translated that correctly because the volume dropped dramatically with a quick adjustment the knobs.

"Bloody great music." Spike returned to the bed and began searching the pockets of the leather duster. When he came up with a package of cigarettes, he smiled in triumph.

"That's great? Are you insane?" The same four chords played loudly over and over as someone crashed some drums. He couldn't understand the words of the singer until the chorus came on and he heard, "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill the poor," over and over.

"Not hardly. Dru cornered the market on insanity in our little family, and *that* is bloody wonderful," The vampire insisted as he lit his cigarette and leaned back against the wall with his body spread out on the bed.

"Do they know more than four notes?"

"Oi! Don't go insulting the music, pet."

"That's not music, Spike," Xander insisted and he went
over to the brown chair and sat down—he couldn't quite figure out what else he was supposed to do with himself. "That's someone screaming to kill the poor, which is mildly disturbing,"

"Git," Spike repeated, and Xander resolved to look that word up as soon as he could find a dictionary. "That's social commentary." A blonde head nodded to the heavy beat.

"Yeah, right."

"It's protestin' the bomb and the upper classes throwin' the poor away like yesterday's trash, you ponce." Spike pulled on his cigarette, making the end glow red and his cheekbones become even more prominent. "You just have no taste—take your shirt, for example. What happened to the kit you were wearing at the club?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna wear silk to hunt vampires," Xander sarcastically snapped and rolled his eyes before it occurred to him that he was running the risk of appearing to insult Spike's intelligence. He froze, hoping that he hadn't just set Spike off. Nice job, he thought to himself. As if things weren't bad enough you had to go and piss off the nice...okay, less homicidal than
normal...vampire. In the long silence, he waited for the explosion.

"What you smellin' all fearful for?" Spike asked after a long pause.

"Um, I'm being held by a hyperactive vampire who plans to use me as human bait?"

"That's not what I smelled when you woke up. When you woke up, you were smellin' of something far more interesting. So what set you off?" Spike walked over to the cabinet, opened it, and let the cigarette ash fall into a bowl. Xander remained quiet as he tried to figure out a story that wouldn't get him in trouble, but the silence must have gone on too long.

"Pet, answer me," Spike commanded, and Xander found himself blurting before he realized it.

"I thought you might take that as an insult and get mad." For a moment, Spike stood there and stared at him with emotionless eyes until Xander finally listened to the little voice in his head and dropped his own eyes to the floor. Xander heard soft cursing and the sound of Spike walking over, but he didn't look up—Spike's face
had gone so blank at that little confession that he feared he had said the wrong thing, so he continued to focus on the floor.

"Let me tell you a story, pet." Spike started as he sat on the arm of the chair so that his leg pushed into Xander's arm. "Dru, my princess," Xander looked up as he heard Spike's voice break. The vampire had gotten rid of the cigarette and now he took a deep breath as he clearly struggled for control. Ridges on his forehead appeared and disappeared so quickly that he wouldn't have believed his eyes if he hadn't already known Spike was a vampire.

"She was a pet for a good long time. Vampire named Angelus took her, made her watch all sorts of things a young lady of the day wasn't prepared to see. She'd been a right good little girl until Angelus made her bleed and scream and beg for him to take her at the same time she begged for death. Angelus left her a pet, with a soul, even as he used the demon he put in her to make her beg for the touch of the man who killed her family in front of her face." Xander shuddered violently. If this was supposed to be Spike's version of comfort, he was failing miserably, but then this is a man whose idea of complimenting Xander's hair had been to point out that
this Dru would have kept his body around to play with after killing him.

Spike reached down and put his hand under Xander's chin and pulled it up. "I am what I am luv, and I meant what I said last night," he said as Xander looked into bright blue eyes and a face that seemed incongruously compassionate. His voice became even softer, "but I'm not Angelus. For nearly a hundred years, I held Dru through her nightmares and listened to her confused ramblings because the demon and the soul managed to right wreck her mind before Angelus ever turned her. Won't do that to you. You do something wrong, you'll be punished. You try to escape—I'll break your neck. Might even turn you. But I won't do to ya what was done to Dru, and I control my demon well enough that I won't go bashing ya around."

"But last night," Xander protested before the higher order thinking part of his brain pointed out that he probably shouldn't argue with a demon who had just promised to...what? What had Spike just promised? Xander hadn't yet come to a clear decision before Spike started speaking.

"Last night I was a mite upset. Thought you might be
lying, might be one of Cassidy's lot. Had a hard time not tearin' you to bits a time or two," Spike admitted even as he stood up and started pacing. Were all vampires so fidgety? "Went out last night and saw someone. Asked him about making pets, about how much a pet could fake, about whether a pet could desire one vamp while bound to another."

"And? Who'd you go to? What'd they tell you?"

"Told me that if you smelled of lust for me, if you could bloody *come* for me, you weren't bound to Cassidy."

"Does that mean I'm bound to you after all?" Xander asked even though he suspected that he already knew answer.

"Nope, Peaches said the demon can't bond without either blood or semen." Xander froze for a moment at the unexpected answer. He knew that a voice in his head howled for Spike; he had assumed that the lust came from the demon. Since the moment Xander had first seen Spike, Xander had wanted nothing else. If it wasn't the demon, what was going on? He couldn't face this little dilemma just yet. Please, could the universe just sent him one fucking disaster at a time, please.
"Wait...Peaches?" Xander asked. "What kind of person goes by Peaches?"

"Angelus," Spike admitted, and Xander gasped audibly. As much as Spike clearly loved and missed Dru, how could he even talk to the vampire who had hurt her?

"But don't you want to... I mean, after what he did..."

"Not quite so easy luv. Angelus was Dru's sire, her maker and master. He had the right, even if I didn't like it one bit. And Dru was my sire. She made me. For decades Angelus and his sire, Darla, ruled our family. For vampires it's about status and position in the clan. I can hate Angelus all I want, even hurt him a bit if I can get away with it without him hurting me back, but I can't do something like kill him."

"So you just call him Peaches to annoy him to death?" Xander smiled. He had the image of a sharp-fanged vampire about to tear into someone's throat when Spike waltzes in calling him 'Peaches' in a falsetto voice. He couldn't contain a giggle.

"Somethin' like that. I'm a master in my own right
now. Have more status than him in some ways since he went and got himself a soul." Xander was quickly developing the kind of headache he got in history class when he tried to keep too many ideas in his mind at all.

"So, Darla made Angelus who made Dru who made you?" A blonde head nodded in confirmation. "And now that you're older, you don't have to listen to everything they say, but you can't do anything really big against them because they're higher than you in the clan." Again, the confirming nod. "So vampires live in clans with clan rulers. And while most vampires don't have a soul—including you, Angelus does which means he's lost some respect in the community, and so you call him 'Peaches' to kinda rub that in cause you hate what he did to Dru?"

"That's my boy," Spike returned to the arm of the chair and patted him on the back. "'Cept being a master isn't about just age—it's about control. When I was first turned, the demon's hunger and lust controlled everything I did. Now I have enough control that I can enjoy good music," at this Spike waved toward the still playing CD, "or I can walk through a crowd of humans when I'm hungry and not vamp out and start feasting."
"So the vampires I fought were still 'children'?" Xander tried to think of the bloodthirsty monsters who tore into the necks of the homeless as little vampire babies. It didn't work.

"Childer. Well, childer or minions. Minions are never loved or protected or generally even disciplined by their masters. A minion who displeases the head of the clan will find himself on the end of a stake, and without someone to help them learn to control the demon's hunger, they can never become more than mindless beasts. Minions are just thrown out there as cannon fodder in a fight because their demon has to obey the head of the clan. Childer are different. Childer are kept at their master's side and forced to control themselves or suffer terrible punishments. The older a childe gets, the more control he has over himself and the less often his master has to beat or threaten him into controlling himself. Eventually, a childe has enough control to go out on his own, and then he's called a master."

"So you became a master when Dru died?"

"Not hardly," Spike snorted. "Dru never became a master because she had no control. Anything she thought about, she did. Dru turned me, so she was my
sire in a technical sense, and my demon certainly always felt loyalty to her. But Angelus and Darla are the ones who kept me by their sides as we hunted. First Angelus because he enjoyed the whole punishment aspect of siring. After Angelus got his soul and turned into Angel—the fangless wonder who couldn't kill his own meal unless it ran on four legs and scuttled through the trash—Darla became my sire because she wanted someone to essentially baby-sit Dru. Dru may have been mad, but she had visions that saved us more than once."

"So you became a master when you left Darla." Xander corrected himself.

"Yep. Took my dark princess and disappeared so that the bitch would never find us. Now she's dead and souled-up Peaches is embarrassed to even think about what he did to me, so I don't have anyone in the line to answer to." Spike's hand still rested on Xander's back from the early pat. Now Spike started moving it in circles. "And you're not smelling of fear any more, pet." Spike announced as his hand moved in ever larger circles. When fingers brushed the edges of the scar on his neck, Xander jumped so suddenly that the chain hanging from his wrists rattled.
"Shit," he softly cursed as he felt a shiver run the whole length of his body and his heart beat faster. He let his eyes fall closed as the fingers traced the edges of the scar.

"Responsive, like that," Spike whispered into Xander's ear. Xander felt the pull on his wrists and opened his eyes to find Spike standing in front of him, pulling him toward the bed.

"Why?" he managed to mumble as he followed Spike's lead, which led, inevitably to the bed. "I mean, if you can't ..." The words broke off when Spike pushed him back onto the bed and pulled the chain up to fasten it to the ring once again. This time, there was far less slack leaving Xander's arms pulled above his head, his body, his half-dressed body stretched across the bed. Oh, the universe had just let him down because this was definitely a fucking disaster. And he didn't even mean the chains part, he meant the growing erection he could feel struggling to rise in his jeans. Bad enough to get captured by the enemy, but now he couldn't even deny the raging lust. Please god, just don't ever let Gunn find out. Xander had an image of his dead body with two fang marks in his shoulder and a raging erection. Yeah, that would be the final humiliation.
"I can play," Spike said with that same head tilt that he was learning to associate with sexual Spike. "Been years since I've played," Spike undid the button at Xander's waste and quickly unzipped and pulled down the baggy jeans. The underwear disappeared even faster leaving that traitorous and engorged body part fully exposed. "Been years since I wanted to." Xander felt an entirely new set of emotions at that. Three girlfriends and a number of rude comments had convinced him of his total lack of desirability, and now this creature couldn't resist him. This creature who had survived years of celibacy couldn't resist him.

"What do..." Xander half-heartedly tried to protest, but then Spike lowered his weight onto him and the contact with his cock against the denim of Spike's jeans nearly caused him to come.

"Not yet, luv" whispered a voice as Spike braced his knees on either side and bodily shifted him toward the wall so that his arms had a little more slack. Spike then nuzzled his head between Xander's cheek and arm in order to reach the scar. When the pleasantly tepid and wet tongue touched the sensitive skin, Xander's whole body arched up off the bed as he made an incoherent
noise. Spike lowered his weight again, and he rolled his head to one side to give Spike more room to work. Spike obliged by sucking the scar and running his delicate fingers down the muscles right side. For several minutes, they lay locked in this position while Xander felt every skin cell come alive and Spike shifted slightly so that fingertips could explore more skin.

"Oh god," Xander gasped as fingers finally darted in to touch the crease on the inside of his hip. He tried to turn into the touch; he tried to get those fingers to touch his cock, but they simply slipped away to stroke the outside of a thigh.

"Bad boy," Spike chided as he stopped sucking for a moment to run blunt teeth over the mark. This time Xander did scream and he bucked and he pulled his hands as hard as he could, desperate to touch in return. "Lay still and don't come, or I just may have to find some leg irons in that closet," Spike threatened softly, and Xander felt the tightening in his balls that always preceded release.

"Don't come." Xander wanted to ask him if he was kidding; he wanted to say that he couldn't physically prevent it if he tried. He wanted to point out that he had
a right to do whatever the hell he wanted and Spike could fuck off, except Xander could already feel the impending orgasm retreat, and he groaned in frustration. He wanted to come!

Spike began his attack again, this time using his mouth to suck to and nip at one nipple, while his fingers pinched and pulled at the second. As the busy tongue slid down his chest one agonizingly slow millimeter at a time, Xander spread his legs, and Spike's smooth chest pressed against his cock. Xander was in a place equal parts heaven and hell. He knew he was babbling, but even he couldn't make out his words as Spike's tongue now worked around his belly button, first a tongue circled and then the mouth closed over the skin and a warm pressure began to build.

Spike's hands, meanwhile, were exploring Xander's thighs, and Xander could feel the cool satiny fingers run back and forth along his inner thighs. An eternity later, he whined as Spike unexpectedly closed his blunt teeth over a piece of skin near the belly button. Xander would have expected such an act to cause pain, but instead it simply sharpened everything: the feel of Spike's hands on his legs, the movement of air across those patches of his skin still damp from Spike's tongue, the tingling in his
scar, the weight of the chains, and the increasing ache in his genitals. If he didn't come soon, he thought he might actually damage something.

"Flip over...and don't come."

"Huh?"

"Flip. Over," Spike repeated deliberately as if speaking to a slow child. He felt hands at his hips, guiding him, and he started to roll. The minute his leaking cock touched the satin, He groaned and tried to rub, it would just take a bit of friction, but he just couldn't move fast enough. Spike must have realized his intentions because strong hands soon pulled him up so that his forearms supported his upper body while his butt stuck up in the air. Hands easily arranged him, pushing his knees apart and forcing his head down to rest on his forearms.

"Stay." Spike now ordered. Xander considered protesting, arguing, refusing, something; however, Spike had disappeared so quickly that he didn't have time, besides he realized that one wrong move and he was going to ejaculate all over Spike's bed. Xander wondered if that would annoy the vampire more or less than peeing the bed. So, instead of protesting, he stayed and tried to
calm his breathing.

Long before he had calmed his breathing, a familiar hand ran down his back. This time the fingers explored more firmly, first running up to the shoulders and then following the line of the arm all the way out to the fingers, and then running down the length of the backbone, over the hips, and down the legs one at a time. Both hands encircled and ran down his right thigh and calf and then his left. Finally he felt arms slip around to the front and one held his waist while the other firmly grabbed his cock. Xander screamed once again and desperately tried to hump, to get just enough movement to come since he was so damn close and the erection was really starting to ache now.

"Don't come," Spike simply warned as he continued to hold the throbbing cock. Spike slowly tightened his grip until pain overrode the pleasure evoking a sharp gasp, and then the pressure disappeared almost immediately. The hand then encircled the overly sensitive balls, and he winced before Spike started pressing at all, but Spike only gave each one a small squeeze before releasing them. Xander was beginning to get angry, even through all the sexual haze and the happy noises he could now clearly hear in his own
mind. What had begun as a lover's caress had become something that felt vaguely like an inspection.

"What exactly are you looking for?" He could feel Spike freeze in place.

"Oh, after 120 years, I know where to look," Spike assured him as both hands disappeared. He started to lower himself, but a sharp voice stopped him. "Stay."

"I’m not some stupid dog," Xander complained, but he stayed.

"You were happy enough a few minutes ago, what happened?" Spike as ran a hand up and down Xander's back before moving up to the left shoulder and the traitorous scar. Almost immediately Xander felt all his doubts disappear in a cloud of longing and hunger. He moaned as one cool hand massaged the shoulder as the second hand pressed something cold and slimy between his cheeks. That cleared the head in record time, and he tried to sit up on the bed.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? You said you weren't going to rape me, or have you changed your plans again?" Xander knelt up on the bed even though he
had to lean forward slightly because of the shortness of the chain connected to the thick manacles around his wrists.

"Shhh, you're fine luv," came a deep, quiet, rumbling voice from behind and a mouth descended on the scar, sucking and teasing with both tongue and teeth. Xander shuddered and felt his resolve dissolving under the rush of lust. A hand eased him back down, and he couldn't find the will to fight. After all, he told himself, hadn't he already decided that he wasn't really in a position to fight? When he got back in position with his head resting on his forearms, Spike continued to rub his scar and murmur vague soothing noises. The wet finger returned, and this time he didn't argue. He could feel the trail as silent tears left wet tracks for the air to cool, but even as he cried, he wanted more. Shit, he really did need to find a therapist, maybe even two or three. If Spike did this, he knew that he was lost; he could barely fight the desire to throw himself at Spike without the "bond," so he could never fight an even stronger connection fed by the vampire's blood or semen. Xander trembled with the realization that chains far stronger than steel would soon trap him.

"Relax, pet. Relax and don't come." The quiet voice
ordered, and for the first time Xander realized that Xander Jr. had never once complained or stopped wanting to come. The finger slipped in without more than a little discomfort, and Xander could feel the unfamiliar movement inside his own body. "Ready pet?" Spike asked. He was trying to form the words to ask 'Ready for what?' but the answer came as Xander discovered the spot called the prostate. Xander, in his sexual confusion, had checked out a couple of websites from the public library, so he had theoretically known what the prostate did. This theoretical knowledge meant nothing when compared to the pleasure that washed through his body. Xander Jr. begged to come, and Xander soon found himself begging on Jr.'s behalf.

"Oh god," he gasped as Spike rubbed the spot again. "Please touch me Spike. Please. Oh god I have to come," he moaned as Spike continued on his unhurried way. "Please Spike," Xander begged. The pressure had long since become painful, and now that pain transformed into an all-consuming fire that left nothing in his world except a need to come that couldn't be denied. The hand disappeared from the scar, and Xander felt a single finger moved up the underside of his cock. It was enough.
Xander's limbs stiffened, and with a wail, he came in waves that started as painful and then transformed into pleasure and a release from pain and a release from pressure all synthesized into one earth-shattering moment. Xander's shaking legs mutinied, and Xander found himself stomach down in the impressive wet spot. However, he noticed in a distant haze, Spike hadn't entered him with more than a finger. He couldn't decide how he felt about that as relief battled with agony in a psyche so fragmented that Xander decided that he might need a whole damn team of therapists.

"Planning on sleepin' in the wet spot, pet?" Spike asked from above, and Xander had to coax words to from in his newly-rearranged mind.

"Never moving again," he announced foggily. "Fuck off." That earned a laugh and a slap on the butt.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Spike chuckled. "I assume that means we can sleep the rest of the day 'til sunset?"

"This was about getting me to go back to bed?" He turned his head so that he could look at Spike out of at least one half-open eye.
"Not quite luv, but we'll talk this evening," Xander would have been mortified at the thought of this meaning nothing, at Spike feeling nothing, except Spike had gotten off the bed which put his crotch at eye level, and he could see an impressive bulge in Spike jeans.

"I've got to go clean up," Spike said before throwing a tube of something to the floor and leaving. Xander decided that he didn't have the energy or spare brain cells to figure it all out, so he did exactly what Spike wanted. He fell asleep.

8

The Big Plan

The second time Xander awoke, he found himself alone in bed. The chains had disappeared, but when Xander rolled over, he found that the wet spot hadn't entirely.

"Ew" he quickly rolled back and started slipping out of
bed. He froze when he realized something was missing.

"You made the mess," Came the comment from the brown chair where Spike sat wearing headphones and reading a thick book with a faded green cover.

"Doesn't mean I want to lie in it. Uh, Spike, where are my clothes?" he held the black sheet in front of him since his jeans and underwear had now totally disappeared.

"Burned 'em."

"What?! I am so not walking around naked!"

"Well that is a thought," Spike leered over his book with an expression suggesting that Spike was having a naughty idea. For just a moment it frightened him that he knew Spike so well after just one full night and two sexual encounters.

"What?" Xander asked suspiciously.

"We're actually going out later, and I'm just picturing leading you through all those people with you lookin' so well-shagged and starkers."
"You know, you should probably learn English if you're going to stay here."

"We invented the bloody language, so you can just sod off," Spike returned quickly. "And I mean that literally."

"And if I knew what that meant, I could come up with an appropriate place for you to put your sod."

"Means 'go away.' And if you want clothes, go to the bathroom, and you'll find some new ones. I am not going to dangle you like bait wearin' kit that makes you look homeless."

"Um, yeah. Spike, can we talk about this whole bait thing?" When Spike sighed, he hurried before the vampire could interrupt him. "I totally get that I'm kind of choiceless here, but you are driving me to seek serious, expensive professional help of the mental health variety, and I don't have that kind of money." Pausing for a moment, he whispered the last part, "Just tell me where I fit here so I can figure out how to deal," he pleaded. He just couldn't reconcile the same man giving him so much pleasure and then sending him to his death.
"Go get in the bath, and we'll talk," Spike promised as he stood and put the book on a dry part of the bed. He waited for Spike to leave or turn his back or do anything other than leer. "Go on," Spike finally demanded, and Xander realized that he was not going to escape without giving Spike a show. With a sigh of his own, he dropped the sheet, glared at the smirking vampire and went to the bathroom.

While he made a detour to the toilet, Xander heard the water start pouring into the bathtub, so he wasn't surprised to see Spike sitting on a stool next to the tub. The surprise came from the range of bath products on the floor next to the bath.

"Bathe much?" Xander asked as he gestured toward the half-used bottles of shampoo and body wash and, god help him, bubble bath.

"Wot? Not allowed to bathe now?" Spike's accent deepened, and Xander saw the beginnings of a smile.

"Better than stinking, I suppose," he agreed as he walked up and had to practically climb into the tub.

"Not a minion, pet. Don't live for feedin' and
shaggin'." Xander just nodded and settled back in the tub all the while thanking god that Spike had added bubble bath because it afforded him some privacy as the water slowly rose in the huge tub. He used to hide in a corner when he had to change in front of other people during gym class; hell, he even skipped showers whenever the teacher left too early to notice. Now he found himself walking around naked. Why did his life always have to be so damn strange? He just knew that if he had just stayed back in Sunnydale his life would have been more normal. His sex life definitely would have been more normal because having sex with a demon—that just about topped the list of strange kinks.

"Now, what's your problem. One minute you're enjoyin' yourself and squirmin' like a virgin, next you're going all wonky on me."

"ME?!" Xander sat up at that. "One minute you're treating me like...well, like a human being, and that's actually better than how a lot of people treat me. Then the next minute you're treating me like a piece of furniture. I'm not the one with some sort of multiple personality thing going on."

"I'm a vampire, pet."
"Well, yeah. Kinda got that with you going all bumpy on me," He made a waving gesture toward Spike's face, and Spike smiled.

"Love that about you, absolutely fearless. Stupidly fearless, but bloody absolutely fearless."

"And playing the trembling, sobbing victim would have gotten me farther?"

"Playing victim would have gotten you eaten, luv." Spike handed him a washcloth and bottle of soap.

"My point exactly," he announced as he started washing. "However, that still leaves you doing the whole bipolar vamp thing. I can't figure out if you're seducing me or throwing me to the wolves here."

"Not throwin' ya to any wolves," Spike offered. "Bloody hell, it's not the same for vamps. You're trying to figure me out using human terms."

"Until last night, all the people I knew were human. But I'm willing to listen if you want to explain another way of thinking." At that Spike stood up and turned his back,
and Xander used the temporary privacy to wash a few of his more shy body parts. That done, he reached for a new bottle.

"It's like trying to explain why you have a soul, you just do. " Spike finally answered as he turned back around and plucked the shampoo from Xander's hand and squeezed some out into his own hand. He pulled the stool around to the end of the tub and sat down to wash Xander's hair.

"When I saw you in the club, I could smell vamp on you, and I wanted you. I've been alone and living for revenge for a long time. Figured you were some master's pet, and I was goin' to take ya and turn ya—make ya mine. Then I smelled Cassidy and changed the plan." Xander leaned back into the sensual feeling of having someone wash his hair for him. He could hear Spike's accent thicken with each additional sentence, a trait he realized revealed Spike's emotional state. "Now I still want ya, but I need to draw Cassidy out, so I gotta keep my distance, and that's killin' me. I want to shag ya' so hard that ya' feel me for days. I want to feel my fangs sink into your neck." Whoa now. Oh shit, he just had to know, didn't he? Xander struggled to sit forward even as iron hands held him still.
"Not going to bite you, pet. Relax." Spike ordered as he finally withdrew his hands and splashed them around in the tub before drying them on a towel he retrieved from the floor. "Besides, bitin' and killin' aren't the same thing when you have a master involved. Plenty of masters prefer to slip in and take a little from several humans, leaving them alive. Makes for less mess to clean up. But I can't do anything fun without havin' my smell mask Cassidy's."

"Can't do it, so I'm not goin' to think about it," Spike reiterated. "But it's a vampire thing, luv. You're looking for me to be human and treat you like a lover or a hostage taker or a psychopath. I'm not any of those things." Xander nodded slowly even though he could argue that Spike had shown definite signs of being all three. For a long time, they sat in silence and Xander finished the shampoo job Spike had begun before the reference to biting had caused the panic. Just how much could Spike smell? Was he just getting the general odor of fear or could he smell more? Could he tell why a person was afraid? He stirred the water and watched the dying bubbles trail along in the wake of his hand. He wanted to say so much, to ask so much, but he didn't really know what to ask. His silence must have convinced
Spike that he still didn't understand because the vampire sighed deeply and tried again.

"I'm a *vampire*," Spike stated, and Xander suppressed an urge to smack the blonde repeated while yelling 'no duh.' He resisted. However, he did roll his eyes. "You're a human, and that means that we'll never be equal—we'll never be lovers. I'll always think of you as a pet, which in vampire terms means that you're cared for and protected but also property, property whose job it is to please and obey your master." Spike explained, and Xander felt his stomach knot up at the realization that he would always rank somewhere around 'family dog.' Fuck. He had to fall for someone who saw him as a freaking lower life form. He had thought that when he stopped chasing girls that he would find someone who didn't treat him like a doormat, but it seems that he had only graduated from doormat to dog. He really needed to learn to fall for a better class of psychopath.

"Doesn't mean I don't care." Spike hurried to say, and Xander wondered how much of his disappointment had showed on his face. "Be a lot bleedin' simpler if I was your master." Spike said in a nearly wistful tone of voice.

"And the bait thing? Are you gonna give me to Cassidy?"
"No." Spike denied, and Xander found himself anxiously trying to believe that. Why he didn't know since the answer still left him a vampire's prisoner. Well, actually he did know why he preferred to be chained in Spike's lair rather than Cassidy's, but he had already promised himself to ignore and sublimate that thought. "Goin' to tempt him out is all." Spike explained.

"If he didn't mean to make me, why would he care? I'm not worth walking into a trap for."

"Bollocks! He'll come out because he'll remember the taste of a hellmouth boy, he'll come out because you're going to look delicious in the kit I picked up for you, and he'll come out because I'll humiliate him by showing everyone that I have one of his pets."

"Okay, could you have chosen a more disturbing word than 'delicious'?" Xander asked with a shiver.

"You have no idea," Spike retorted with a quick quirk of his eyebrow.

"And again with the disturbing moment. Every compliment I get from you is giving my future therapist
more material. But where exactly are we going to do this 'showing off' and what exactly do I have to do." After he finished, he took a moment to duck his head under the water and shake his head so most of the shampoo rinsed out. When he surfaced again, Spike had a bottle of conditioner in his hand.

"You've got to be kidding. Vampires condition?"

"You have no bloody idea how much damage bleaching does," Spike defended himself as he tossed the bottle to Xander rather than repeat the hair washing. Xander found himself vaguely disappointed.

"So, where and what?"

"Where—a couple of demon bars and a couple of human bars where demons tend to go looking for a quick snack or a quick shag. What—that depends. At the human bars, you'll stay by my side and keep quiet unless I tell you otherwise. Just remember that I'm in charge and you'll be fine. Demon bars are a little different. Humans don't normally go into demon bars unless they are pets, so the demons are going to expect you to act like a pet."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"
"Kneel at my feet, keep your trap shut, do what I tell ya." Spike ticked off the rules on his fingers.

"Oh yeah, so not with the liking," Xander confirmed as he pulled the plug on the tub. "I honestly have to kneel at your feet?"

"Yeah. And if you get hungry, I'll feed you."

"Feed me what?" Xander asked suspiciously

"Human food, you git. Pets are supposed to rely on their owners, so they don't touch food with their hands. They either eat food that's been thrown on the floor to remind them of their place or they eat from their master's fingers if their master's pleased with them."

"Okay, ew. We damn well better stop somewhere for food before we go to any demon bars. I am so not eating out of your hand." By now the water had disappeared. Xander turned on the water and stuck his head directly under the tap to rinse out the last of the shampoo and conditioner. When he reappeared out from under the water, Spike handed him a towel.
"Get changed, and we'll stop somewhere for food before we hit Pavidosi," Spike said as he left the bathroom. Xander looked around. He gave a small smile when he saw the clothes, where else, on the floor. Spike really needed to invest in a few tables, he thought to himself as he got out and padded over to the clothing.

When Xander appeared in the main room, he didn't see Spike right away. When the heavy metal door crashed above him, he jumped and looked up in time to see Spike jump from half way up the stairs to the floor.

"Ready?" Spike asked as he wondered whether he could find a way to slip Ritalin into Spike's blood. "You do clean up nice, pet," Spike drawled as he lowered his head and looked. Xander self-consciously pulled at the front of the front of his black shirt. The fabric was smooth as silk, but almost fuzzy. It was as thin like a t-shirt, but it clung to him like a sweater, and the v-neck was low enough to show the edge of his scar, which looked far more fresh now that Spike had spent the afternoon sucking and biting at it. The gray jeans fit slightly looser than Mike's had two evenings earlier, but not significantly so. They still constricted and rubbed with every move—not Xander's ideal choice in clothing. The lack of underwear especially annoyed him, but considering the
embarrassing things Spike could have forced him to wear, he didn't feel like complaining.

"Not exactly my taste."

"Considering what I've seen you wear, you aren't getting a choice, pet," Spike pointed out as he picked up a small leather bag. "Hold on to this, and don't you lose it," Spike pushed the bag into Xander's hands, and the weight surprised him.

"What do you have in here?" Xander complained as he followed Spike who had now started up the narrow, steep stairs. Spike didn't answer, he simply waited for Xander in the truck yard. When Xander finally made it to the top, he realized that he had never expected to see the outside again. The florescent lot lights on the dirty trucks and the stench of the city seemed suddenly beautiful, and Xander took a deep breath. But the return to the real world also reminded him of real world issues. Fredrick. Xander sighed as he waited patiently for Spike to lock the door behind them before slipping the key into one of his many pockets.

"This is what I have," Spike replied as he unzipped the leather bag and Xander could see the chains inside. He
stared at them blankly.

"Why am I carrying these?"

"If you even think of doing a runner, I'll chain you up in some back room and leave ya there 'til Cassidy hears 'bout you. Got it?" Spike asked as he reached over and took Xander's chin in his hand and forced him to make eye contact.

"Got it," Xander answered wearily.

"Well, that got less argument than I expected. Not that I'm complainin' mind you." Spike let go of Xander and started walked toward the gate. Xander took a couple of seconds to zip up the bag before he followed.

"So what's eating you?" Spike asked as they walked. Spike preceded Xander through the gate, and then used his strength to pull the gate back the extra quarter inch Xander needed to slip through without scratching himself or ripping his clothes.

"Just life, Spike. I did have one, you know." Xander resented the vampire's intrusions into his thoughts; it seemed so wrong to even think about Spike and Fredrick
at the same time.

"Yeah, I know. Vampire hunter, professional crawler, soon to be stripper."

"You," Xander lost the words to even reply for a moment he felt so much aggravation, but then he felt his emotions just collapsed under the weight of so much pain and confusion. "Whatever." He finally said as he walked beside Spike down the sidewalk. He wondered if he shouldn't be walking behind or something, but he decided that he wouldn't give Spike one concession that Spike didn't have to specifically demand.

"No, go on. I'm interested in what could make such a well-rounded person so unhappy," Spike returned. Xander looked over in shock. Spike had threatened him and hit him, made him come and played with his body, talked to him and teased him, but he had never before used this hard-edged sarcasm.

"Spike?" Xander asked quietly.

"No, go on. Tell what makes the big bad vampire hunter so damn unhappy. Someone dull the points on your stakes?" Spike continued in a cold voice.
Okay, Xander thought to himself, Spike told you to not use human standards, so find another standard. Spike thought of Xander as property, and whether he admitted it or not, Xander suspected that Spike thought of him as Spike's property—not Cassidy's. Spike's property is unhappy, so maybe Spike doesn't like the thought of his pet being distracted from the job. Maybe Spike just didn't like the smell of unhappiness, Xander realized as he remembered Spike complaining about him smelling fearful.

"It's nothing. I'll get the job done and help you take out Cassidy. After all, like you said, big bad vampire hunter here," Xander tried for a lighter tone, hoping that either the assurance that he would focus or the tone would assuage Spike. "Able to trip in a single bound; faster than a limping turtle." Spike simply snorted. From the frozen expression on his face, Xander's comments had made the problem worse. Damn, Xander thought to himself, I've had girlfriends who required less effort.

Okay, Spike's property is unhappy. Spike isn't worried about getting the job done, so what is he worried about? Xander thought back to a collie named Sergeant he had owned when he was seven or eight. Think pet, he
ordered himself even though the concept made his empty stomach threaten to revolt. They had kept Sergeant for two years before Xander's father had given him way to punish Xander for not cleaning up the back yard. He still thought his father should have just looked down and walked around the dog shit. Okay, if Sergeant had been unhappy and I found away to talk to him...Xander's thoughts suddenly skipped onto a new track. He remembered mashing his thumbs trying to build a doghouse the summer he grew obsessed with the fear that Sergeant would get sunburned in the back yard, and he almost heard his own thoughts click.

"I got someone killed last night," Xander admitted. If he was right, Spike would respond to that.

"What? Don't seem the killin' sort to me, luv." Spike turned a concerned face to Xander, and Xander had to stop himself from cheering. Of course the thought of Fredrick stopped that thought rather quickly.

"I was back-up; I was supposed to call for help if someone got separated. One of the guys got pulled off, and by the time I noticed, it was too late," Xander confessed his guilt. He couldn't have said as much to Luther or Trey, but Spike had killed hundreds if not
thousands of people, so he didn't have any room to condemn Xander for one.

"That's not you getting' someone killed. That a bunch of wankers all trying to get themselves killed by goin' up against something they don't understand." Spike assured him.

"Hey, we were armed. We had stakes and holy water and enough crosses to start a Catholic church."

"Yeah, and they had superhuman senses, speed, and strength."

"You're forgetting my secret weapon," Xander pointed out with a shrug. "I have an superhuman ability to distract vampires through running away screaming and profusely bleeding," he joked. Spike didn't laugh; he simply stopped and looked with a strange expression.

"Pet, if you survived this long, you're either the luckiest bloke this side of the globe or you have knackers you keep hidden. How many of you went in?"

"Six."
"And the other four, you played back up for them too?"

"Yeah."

"And you do this how often, playing back-up as you gits take on supernatural creatures with superhuman strength?"

"Four or five times a week," Xander said as he mentally averaged the good weeks against those weeks when work had him too tired to help at all. "Ever since I got bit and started following Gunn around, trying to force him into letting me help."

"And that bite was four years ago?"

"Pretty much."

"So last night you saved four bleedin' idiots and over the last three years you've saved..." Spike paused for a moment, "Three or four thousand wankers, depending on how many people go on each raid. I'd say it balances it out with you comin' out slightly to the side of the angels." Spike shook his head after a minute. "That's a hell of a lot of vampires, pet. Where do you hunt?"
"In the neighborhood south of Safari. Gunn said that the vamps have only been bad like this for four or five years. Before that, the older people in the neighborhood talked about the Obayifo or La Llorona—spirits who killed in the night—but no one believed them. Lots still don't believe, but the more active the vamps get, the more believers we have in the neighborhood." Most of Xander's information came second-hand from Gunn since the vamps had been active longer than he had lived in L.A.

"That's not right," Spike said after a minute. He turned a corner, and Xander followed him in the new direction. "How many vamps you dust in a night?"

"When I first started, we'd find two or three in a lair. Sometimes we'd go a day or two between kills, but lately we've found a couple big nests and found individual vamps hunting nearly ever night," Xander admitted. The change in hunting had happened slowly, but when Xander thought back, he could see a clear difference between the early years of hunting and the last few months.

"A master might get dusted, but most of his minions will go to the winner," Spike said absent-mindedly. "A
master could turn one or two minions out for displeasin' him, but not a whole legion of 'em. Too many vamps around attracts vampire hunters, slayers, and official attention, not to mention making huntin' even harder." Xander followed Spike in silence. He clearly didn't know enough about vampire habits to have an opinion on the matter, but if Spike was right, something was really wrong in the neighborhood. Now Xander worried about Gunn and the others. He had to find a way to warn them.

"Stop feelin' guilty," Spike ordered with a sigh.

"I'm not," Xander protested. "Okay, I'm not much," Xander amended that when Spike looked at him with both eyebrows fully raised. "You're right about me helping more than not even though I still feel guilty about Fredrick." Spike put out an arm and herded Xander into a restaurant. While Xander had been expecting fast food, the trendy steakhouse made his stomach rumble so loud that Spike laughed out loud. Spike held the door, and Xander preceded him into the lobby. Once the hostess had seated them and flirted with both of them enough to embarrass Xander, the two were left with glasses of water and a promise the waitress would appear soon.
"So, what's botherin' you now?" Spike asked over the table. Xander bit his lip, wondering how much leeway he could expect from Spike. If he didn't say anything he would have a better chance of sneaking off to find a payphone and just paying the price for it later. If he said something, Spike could help him or prevent him from ever being able to contact Gunn. Xander glanced toward the black bag which now sat on a spare chair.

"Pet?" Spike asked with just a touch of growl in his voice. Xander made up his mind.

"I'm not liking this whole bait thing," Xander said in a low voice so that neighboring tables couldn't hear him. "If it works, I'm caught between two vampires, and if it doesn't, you don't have a lot of reason to keep me alive." Xander half-expected Spike to catch him in the lie, to have some sort of supernatural lie detector. Instead Spike just suddenly looked tired.

"Been huntin' Cassidy for bloody months. I'm not patient, and I'm about ready to just burn the whole city. This is the first time I've even felt close." Spike looked directly into Xander's eyes. "I need this to work. But if it don't, well, I don't believe in eatin'
someone I know, that was Angelus' game. I prefer to keep playin' and eatin' separate, so I won't drain you, even if Cassidy never shows. But if he doesn't show..." Spike let his words trail off, and Xander could hear the pain. He felt the guilt of Fredrick's death in his gut like a knife. What must Spike feel for failing Dru? She was his lover and his sire and Cassidy killed her. Xander understood the anguish that motivated Spike.

"And if he does show?" Xander asked.

"If he shows, he'll be dust before he gets within 100 feet of you," Spike promised, and Xander could feel the hatred for Cassidy in that promise. Suddenly a young redhead with a huge smile and even bigger braces appeared looking for orders. They spent the rest of dinner talking about absolutely meaningless topics that had nothing to do with homicidal vampires, vendettas, or kidnapped humans.
"So, 'bout time for my dinner," Spike announced as they left the restaurant. Xander found himself suddenly fighting to keep his dinner down as he watched the faces of people walking by them. What the hell was he doing? He was calmly walking by the side of a monster who would pick one of these innocent people and eat them. Would it be that mother, Xander wondered as he watched a yuppie mother pulling a five or six year old child down the street. What about the shopper? A woman with a suit, track shoes, and an ungodly number of department store packages in the back seat of her car locked her car door and joined the stream of people on the sidewalk. The whole while, they walked closer to the shops and bars.

"You're going to kill someone."

"It's how I feed, pet. If I leave them alive, they might go natterin' to someone about the big bad monster."

"Other vamps..." Xander started, but Spike stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and trapped him with a golden stare that made his stomach drop a good two inches
even as his heart sped out of control. The look of a hungry predator about to devour prey. The look of one seriously pissed off vamp.

"Don't ever compare me, pet. Not if you intend to live." Spike stepped forward, leaving Xander to press his back into the brick of the building behind him, his legs shaking when he faced Spike's demon for the umpteenth time. Just how many sore spots could one vampire have? Xander wondered idly if Dr. Phil would take Spike on as a client and work on some of these issues.

"I just... I didn't..." He struggled just to breathe and to keep his heart beating under the glare of those gold eyes.

"Just say it, pet. Course, it might help if you breathed a bit first." Spike resumed his casual saunter down the sidewalk, and Xander had to trot to catch up. For one moment, he had glanced down the street in the opposite direction, but he knew that the feeling of freedom was an illusion. The vampire could easily catch him, and, he thought glancing down at the bag he still held, find much more unpleasant things to do than just haul him from one bar to another.

"I don't know if I can..." Xander began when he caught
"Can what? Not asking you to kill 'em for me."

"I can't just stand by while you kill someone," Xander finally hissed as he walked beside Spike.

"Don't have much choice on that. You either stand by, or I'll chain you up and you'll still stand by." Spike now detoured into an alley and leaned on a huge metal dumpster. "I'll feed tonight one way or the other." Xander turned and watched the people go past the mouth of the alley. So many innocent lives, which one would end tonight?

"Spike? Does everyone taste the same?" Xander finally asked, the seeds of an idea forming in his mind. "I mean, anyone not raised on the mouth of hell?"

"Pretty much. Emotion changes the blood quite a bit, but one scared victim tastes pretty much like another."

"So it doesn't matter to you what type of person you take?"

"Generally avoid drunks. You'd be amazed at how much
drugs and alcohol survives in the blood. Once spend an entire week stoned when I fed off this group of hippies. Not doin' that again." Spike gave a small shudder of his own, and Xander had to smile at how human-like Spike truly seemed. Well, most of the time anyway. Sometimes he was totally human with reactions that Xander could identify with entirely too much: the guilt, the desire to not have others laugh at him, the hatred of being compared and always found lacking. Oh yeah, too many similarities. But then the predator would appear with his gold eyes and cold stare.

"But you don't care if your victims are good people or bad, do you?"

"Not especially, luv. I'm not in the judgment business." At this, Spike stood up straight and walked forward with a curious expression. "What are you thinkin'?"

"Would you mind if we went over to the west side? We'd have to get some sort of transportation, but we could do that, right? Maybe the bus?"

"And why would I want to go to the west side?"
"I can't stand by and let you kill some bystander," he whispered, afraid that Spike would reject his idea or not care enough about his feelings to go so far for a simple meal, or even that the vampire might enjoy torturing him by having him watch another human die while he did nothing.

"Pet, you have got to learn to put sentences together so they make sense." Spike reached out and put his hand on Xander's left shoulder, squeezing the scar gently before pulling Xander closer. "Now, what are you thinkin'?"

"If we go west, you could find a member of Sotel 13 over there—find someone who tries to hurt you, and then it wouldn't really be murder." Xander whispered into Spike's shoulder. The fear of having his idea rejected, the smell in the alley, and the thought of helplessly watching someone die allied in an assault on his stomach so that Xander could feel the muscle spasms as he tried not to vomit.

"Oi, not on the leather," Spike protested as he pushed Xander out of the alley and back into the direction they had come from. "Don't mind goin' for a bit of take-out, so west it is," Spike agreed. "We'll go back for the bike."
"You have a bike? Okay, never mind, you obviously have a bike or we couldn't go back for it." Xander blurted out in one breath even though all he wanted to do was thank Spike for listening to him, for not making him watch some college student die. Okay, that also meant that he had to watch a gang member die, and how disturbing was it that watching that made his happy-list for the day? Xander considered that last thought the entire walk back to the truck yard and to a side lot where a Honda motorcycle in black waited. Before he had a chance to even compliment Spike on the bike, Spike had taken the leather bag, secured it to the back of the bike, and swung into his place at the front.

"Comin' mate?" Spike asked as he held out a hand.

"Thanks," Xander replied quietly as he took Spike hand and quickly settled in behind the vampire. He only hoped that Spike knew that his gratitude covered the whole side trip to the west side. A little voice in the back of Xander's mind told him that *master* must value him if *master* listened to him, but Xander forcefully stuffed that back into his rapidly growing denial pit in the back of his mind as he reviewed his current goals. He leaned into Spike's strong body as he reflected.
Okay, Goal One: Warn Gunn that something was up. Maybe he could tell Gunn that he had hooked up with a more experienced vampire hunter—which was technically true since they were hunting a vampire. He didn't have to mention that he was the bait in this little hunt. Goal Two: Not get killed. Possible as long as he didn't make fun of, laugh at, compare, or insult the vampire and as long as vampire number one didn't accidentally lose him to vampire number two. Goal Three: Get Free. Xander knew that he should probably amend that to "kill vampire," but for all the vampires he had seen turn to dust, he didn't want to see that happen to Spike. He was too human for that. Maybe he could sneak away—okay, not likely, at least not without leaving the state. Maybe Spike would let him go if he helped get Cassidy—a chance there, a small chance but a very real chance if Xander could judge character. If not, he knew that killing Spike would be the only option.

By the time Xander had finished mentally reviewing just how much trouble he was in and just how likely Spike was to allow him to go free, the motor of the bike had stopped, and Spike held the bike steady, waiting. It took Xander a minute to realize he was waiting for Xander to get off.
"So, this is your hunt, luv. Where do we go from here?"

"We walk?" Xander answered uncertainly. He had always avoided this part of town, and now he knew why. Graffiti covered the buildings, and Xander guessed that if he spoke Spanish he'd be really embarrassed by what it said, at least if some of the more graphic pieces of graffiti were anything to judge by. He turned his back on a spray-painted outline of a woman with attributes that would have left a real woman unable to walk without help. He stepped closer to Spike, and he felt a cool arm slip around his waist.

"Don't have to stay," whispered a voice.

"Not letting you eat a housewife," Xander replied as he tried to stand up on his own, but Spike hand remained so that Xander simply managed to pull both of them one step away from the bike. A couple of passing pedestrians glared at them, and he even heard an overweight woman with a canvas bag snort in disgust. Normally, that would have sent Xander running for a hiding place, but he had trouble feeling ashamed of his homosexuality and his arm, which had found its way around Spike's waist, when he had brought Spike here to kill. So, he simple rolled his eyes at the woman and snorted back.
"Subtle luv," Spike laughed as he started pulling him down one street.

Xander looked and spotted a graffiti covered payphone not twenty feet away. He stood there staring so long that Spike finally turned a quizzical look his way.

"I need to call my mom."

"And say what? Sorry, mum, but I got kidnapped and don't think I'll be home tonight?"

"Are you going to kill me, Spike?" He needed to hear the answer.

"No. Told you that already."

"Then I need to call her. If I'm never going back, then she can start grieving now, but if I'm going back, I can't worry her like this. I can't just leave her to wonder where I am."

"And what exactly do you plan on tellin' her?"

"I'll think of something, but please, don't make her
worry," Xander turned his best begging eyes towards Spike, the eyes that had gotten his mother to buy him a bike, the eyes that had made his first girlfriend let him touch her boobies.

"Bloody hell, don't look at me like that," the vampire complained before starting toward the phone.

After a brief conversation where he made up lies as fast as he could think them up, he convinced his mother that his new job included riding to San Francisco in one of the trucks in order to check on a problem with the inventory. He even impressed himself with his calm lies, and Spike's half-smile made it clear that Spike approved as well. However, it didn't escape him that he'd had to argue to get the phone call to his mother; Spike would never let him call Gunn.

"Thank you," he whispered after he hung up the phone.

"Had a mother too, once," Spike pointed out. "Now let's hunt." Spike started walking down the street.

"Spike, if we leave that bike, it won't be here when we get back."
"It’s okay. I stole it, so not my loss. 'Course I also don't plan on having to go far." Spike pulled him into another alley.

"Are all you guys this predictable?" Xander tried to count the number of vamps the crew had dusted by setting up a trap in an alley.

"Tried and true, innit?. If you lot didn't build cities with perfect little killin' spots, it wouldn't be an issue." Spike agreed amiably as he pulled Xander closer. Xander wondered if he could go to hell for feeling so good during such a disturbing moment, but he had saved some innocent shopper from being dinner.

"Cabron" hissed a voice from the other end of the alley. Xander physically jumped and tried to turn, but Spike simply chuckled in his ear and continued to hold on. Obviously, the vampire had heard the speaker before he had spoken.

"Listen chilito, you're on our ground," came a second voice, and now Xander tensed as he heard multiple footsteps coming up from the back of the alley.

"Yeah, joto."
"Do I want to know what they're saying?"

"Probably not," Spike offered with a grin right before releasing Xander and turning around so that Xander found himself behind Spike's back. Even from that relatively sheltered position, he could see the three boys walking toward them. Boys in age anyway. These three clearly had some experience in fighting from the way they walked and the way they swung heavy chains from fists. At least two swung chains; the third, Xander realized as the group approached, carried a long and wicked-looking knife. He wondered if they had guns that they simply hadn't bothered to pull out faced with two lonely victims in an alley. They were going to need bigger weapons soon because Spike had started that strange half-bounce on the balls of his feet. Spike wanted action.

"I realize it's hard to make good decisions when you're thick as pigshit, but you soddin' gits are in way over your heads. Might want to go home to mummy, boys." Xander watched as Spike's words inspired one of the chain-wielders to swing his weapon. Quicker than Xander could watch, Spike had somehow pushed that boy face first into a building and taken the chain. Spike
now swung the chain in a lazy arc as he paced the alley between Xander and the remaining two attackers.

"Last chance to run, gimboids," Spike offered as the speed of his chain increased until Xander couldn't make out the chain but instead only saw the blur as it moved.

"You and your friend are gonna die, mayate," the taller of the remaining assailants promised darkly. Xander couldn’t restrain a small laugh at that—although he didn't know whether it came from the ridiculousness of these two trying to take out Spike or the bizarre fact that one more person now threatened him. Considering he was only a sidekick, he seemed to attract a lot of attention lately.

"Think not," was Spike's only answer as the chain came down on one boy's head even as the second boy had a near fatal meeting with Spike's elbow. All three now lay unconscious and bleeding. "I take it you're alright with me feeding on them?" Spike asked as he pulled a knife from his own boot and reached down for the tallest boy. Xander looked away when he saw the knife slide into the boy's neck. Perhaps the shock of seeing the boy die slowed him down. Maybe the emotional drain of the last 24 hours had finally taken its toll. Maybe he just
didn't know how to keep himself out of trouble because Xander suddenly found himself face to face with an unfamiliar set of ridges and fangs. Xander felt the new vamp's hands on his shoulders at the same time he felt the air rush by his ear as Spike's fist passed on its way to break the vamp's nose. With a scream, the new vamp fell back toward the street, and Xander felt himself pulled back even as Spike reached forward and yanked the vampire back into the shadows. Xander now watched a second vampire slink into the alley.

"Master?" the second vamp's voice sounded unsure, maybe even hopeful.

"Not soddin' yours," Spike growled in reply as he glared down at the vampire who lay bleeding at his feet. "You touch what's mine and I'll kill you," he calmly announced as he pulled out a stake. With an almost snake-like strike, Spike had plunged the stake into the fallen vampire and then pulled it back before the body could even turn to dust. Now Spike moved and stood between Xander and the new vamp. Xander curled his fingers around Spike's arm in fear, seeking protection.

"Master?" it repeated as it inched closer to one of the fallen fighters. Xander watched in fascination as the
vampire tilted its head even as it crept toward the still-breathing body. He felt like he had front row seats at a National Geographic special on lions, with the problem being that he had nothing between him and two fierce predators acting out some sort of ritual.

"Whose are you?" Spike finally growled, and the new one froze in place.

"My master's gone," he whined quietly as he tilted his head even more. Xander looked at the torn clothes, the dirt caked onto the vampire's skin, the greasy brown hair, and he recognized the type of vampire he knew and fought. However, when he encountered these types of vamps, they usually made a dive straight for his neck, and this one didn't even look at him after Spike's little declaration of ownership.

"If you displeased him, you won't find a place at my side."

"I didn't, master. My master died. The other master killed him." Oh yeah, the whining was really getting annoying now.

"You should’ve followed him, then." Spike declared
coldly even as the brown-haired vamp sunk even lower to the ground.

"I couldn't. I can't find him. He killed my master with magic." Now the brown haired vamp had obsequiously lowered himself all the way to the ground with his forehead touching the cement.

"Then follow your old master," Spike ordered as the stake struck out again and a second pile of dust drifted to the cement.

"Well, that's disturbing," Spike commented as he hurried Xander out of the alley.

"Yeah," Xander agreed quietly. "He was kinda pathetic."

"What?"

"The second vamp. He really seemed a little pathetic—I could see what you meant about them being like kids."

"That was not a childe." Xander looked up at the voice which carried both amusement and steel. "And I am not disturbed by one less mindless minion in the world. What does disturb me is the thought of some master using the
mojo." Spike must have seen the confusion because with a sigh he amended his sentence. "The magic. Some master is using magic."

"Vamps don't normally do that, right?" Xander asked as Spike got on the bike and then waited for Xander to join him. Even the leather bag had survived the thieves, but Xander barely even glanced at it; he had other thoughts circling his consciousness.

"No, vamps usually avoid the mojo—it can backfire when the undead try throwin' it around."

"Writing strange letters in blood; that would be magic, right?"

"Big mojo in blood, pet. What do you know?"

"The vamps who killed Fredrick, they used his blood to write letters," Xander said as he raised his leg over the bike and finally settled in behind the vampire.

"Really?" Spike sat silently on the bike for several second. "We'll check that out after we run you by a few demon noses."
"Um, Spike?"

"What?"

"What was up with that knife?" Xander remembered the knife Spike had used to slice open the gang member's neck.

"Makes it easier to clean up. Knife wound looks like human business and don't attract extra attention. When I'm traveling, I feed and let the locals make up some logical explanation, but when I'm in a place for too long, I like to cover my tracks." Spike reached out a hand to start the engine, and he could see the shaking. He wondered if the desire to not attract attention with messy kills had come before or after Dru's death.

He pushed in behind Spike and wondered just what the hell was going on. Was there some sort of magic revolution going on in the vampire community, or did Fredrick's death connect to a homeless vamp halfway across the city. And the timing of Dru's death to the increased vampire activity didn't escape Xander. He remembered a line out of some book he had read for a book report. Something like, "Once is luck. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action." He wondered
how much enemy action was taking place behind the scenes.

10 Meeting Demons

By the third demon bar, Xander's knees ached, his head pounded, and he was bored. No, more than that; he was BORED. Xander shifted his weight a little to the side to take his weight off the bruised part of his knee, and this left him leaning against Spike's leg. Spike reached down and slid his fingers through curly hair even as he continued his conversation with the two other vamps and the green horned demon that sat at the table with him. Xander resisted the urge to slap the hand away; he knew that Spike was simply showing the others his ownership, but that ownership made Xander squirm, both physically and psychologically. He slid even farther to the side, throwing more weight onto Spike's leg and moving off the bruised part of his knee altogether. He sighed in relief as he found a semi-comfortable or at least non-painful position for the first time in quite a while. He only hoped that Spike planned to leave soon because he desperately needed to stretch his legs.

"Shuman's noth strained well," hissed a voice behind him, and Xander struggled to not turn and look at a
demon that would produce such a snake-like sound. Why did it have to be a snake? He hated snakes, and this one talked worse than Spike although Xander did catch that the demon was insulting his training and not his straining. Well, unless the demon had some bizarre cooking preference that Xander really didn't want to know about.

"Well 'nough," Spike returned as Xander felt cool hands pull him even farther into the lean. Letting Spike's hand guide him, Xander allowed his head to fall to the side and rest against Spike's thigh, and he tried really, really hard not to think about the possibilities if he just turned his head to face the other way. However, Xander Jr. obviously wasn't going along with this non-fantasizing pact if the tightness in his pants were any indication. When he heard Spike's knowing chuckle, he also wished the damn vampire would just stop sniffing him at the exact point when he would suffer the most embarrassment.

"Snoth sithing righth. Disgrassseful." Xander couldn't help gasp when a decidedly snakelike being with a pointed, reptilian snout and lizard-like claws slid into view. Where the hell did these things hide during the day? Yes, this was L.A. and people tended to ignore the
odd...well...oddball, but not even an L.A. native would be able to ignore this thing slinking down the street. Although to be fair, the powerful back legs and thick tail dragging behind did make the creature do more of a march-strut rather than actually slink. Xander ignored the fear crawling up his into his now-nearly empty stomach and he remained nearly lying in Spike's lap. He almost blessed Spike when he felt cool fingers slip under the neck of his shirt to play with the well-bruised scar. For once, he allowed himself to happily fall into the half-daze lust-filled fog that followed.

"Don't know 'bout that. He's done well enough by me, especially since that bond isn't mine." A snaky hiss followed that remark, and Xander didn't even try to interpret that noise. Instead he floated along on his little lust-trip.

"Then whosssse?"

"Take a sniff, mate." Xander didn't even fully decode the meaning behind Spike's words before a brownish snout with two yellow eyes suddenly darted into his personal space—far into his personal space as the mouth dropped open and the creature inhaled deeply mere centimeters from Xander's neck.
"Gah," Xander yelled as he jerked backwards and fell on his butt behind Spike's chair. The vampire merely laughed, but the snake-thing's eyes narrowed and the snout pushed forward towards Xander.

"Ruuuth," it hissed and Xander couldn't tell if the thing was going for 'rude' or talking in some demon language, which Spike had done once or twice tonight. Of course the thing might be calling him Ruth, but he didn't think he looked like a Ruth.

"Back-off rat-breath," Xander barked as he scuttled backwards across the cold tile floor using his hands and still mainly sitting on his butt. God, no wonder his knees hurt, didn't any of these places use carpet? Xander knew he had reached the land of panic and mental babble when it occurred to him that the tile probably made it easier to clean the blood—like the blood he was about to spill if the look on snake-boy's face were a portent of the future.

"Disgrassseful," the head hissed as back legs stepped forward, one rear claw catching at the edge of his gray jeans so that he couldn't move back any farther. Now the panic started to truly build. Xander looked over
toward Spike who sat back with his chin cradled in one hand as he watched the show. Xander felt a genuine burning in his chest and stomach at the expression of amusement and disinterest evident in Spike's face. No rescue there. Well the vampire had warned him not to do anything to disgrace Spike and Xander knew that vampires were unreliable, but the warmth still reached his eyes and Xander fought off the tears that threatened.

"Hey, I think I squashed one of your cousins, yesterday," Xander blurted. If he died, he would die with as much dignity as he could muster considering the whole crowd had seen him groveling at Spike's feet for the last hour or so. "Little guy, four or five inches long, ran on four legs, long tail. He got in my way so I stepped on him and watched his guts come bursting out his back end." Oh yeah, that got a reaction. The open mouth now sported two fangs that had dropped down from the roof of the mouth like some sort of horror-movie monster. Oh shit. Xander could see saliva or poison or something else slimy and juicy sliding down the fangs, and he looked up defiantly. Just let this be quick, he prayed. Either that or let him learn how to shut up for once in his soon to be ended life.

"Shuman thrashhh. Filthhhhy slittle anmalllll."
"You know, you might want to get that lisp taken care of, they teach English classes over at the community college." Okay, not learning how to shut up. Xander expected the strike, he just didn't expect the form it took. Snake boy lifted up a thick leg and held it over his chest.

"See if your guthssss bursths," snake boy hissed as the foot began its descent. Xander felt his stomach muscles contract even though he knew it wouldn't do any good. Very shortly not only his blood but his guts would lie on this floor and someone would thank the owner for having the foresight to put down tile. Before the clawed foot even made contact, Spike stood over him and snake boy lay on his back on the other side of the room. The broken table and scattered chairs suggested that Spike had tossed snake-boy away, but Xander must have closed his eyes or blacked out for the one important second because he had seen and heard nothing. One moment he faced certain death; the next, Spike stood over him with a bored expression and a cigarette hanging from one hand.

"He's mine now; you don't touch what's mine," Spike casually announced to not just the snake-boy but also
the rest of the clients.

"Noth strained," snake-boy complained again as he stood up, a piece of broken wood held in one claw. Xander looked up at Spike in panic, but the vampire simply stood with that look of eternal indifference.

"He minds me. You got problems with his trainin' in general, you go talk to Cassidy. After all, he was Cassidy's for nearly four years and he's been mine for one night." At that, the snake-boy hesitated, obviously unsure.

"Spike's right. Boy smells of Cassidy's mark, so if he offended you, you go see Cassidy about that," the green horned demon added from his place at the table—a place from which he had never moved. The two vamps now stood, obviously nervous at the disruption. For a moment, no one in the bar moved, and Xander felt like he had been transported to some slow-motion reality. Then the snake-boy nodded.

"I'll thelll him," snake boy insisted as he picked his way through the table splinters littering the floor and walked to the door.
"Come on then, pet." Spike held out his hand, and Xander took it, allowing the vampire to pull him upright onto his decidedly shaky legs. Spike walked back to his chair and dropped into it heavily. Xander groaned, but put his hand of the seat back so that he could lower himself to his knees without causing too much more bruising. The two vamps had returned to their places, but Xander could see them darting suspicious looks from him to Spike to the retreating snake-boy.

"Hurt?" Spike asked without turning to face him.

"Yes." Xander waited a moment to see if Spike would relent and offer him a chair or leave the bar, but the vampire remained silent. With a sigh, he lowered himself onto his bruised knees and tried to avoid whimpering when his weight crushed the skin of his knees between the bony knee-cap and the hard tile floor. Xander closed his eyes tightly and tried to concentrate on all the little pains, the aching back, the stiff shoulders, the headache, in order to avoid the big pain that radiated up from his knees and flowed down to make his entire lower leg tingle and twitch. He felt a hand at his neck, and he wanted to argue, he wanted to protest, but he couldn't find the strength. His whole body shook with the knowledge that he had almost died. He allowed Spike to
pull him closer, but this time, the hand pulled him so that he knelt between Spike's knees and now had to hunch over even more since he found himself totally underneath the table.

"Sit," Spike gently ordered, and Xander happily allowed himself to fall to the side, his knees finally released from the burden of holding all his weight. He pulled his knees up and sighed before he felt the fingers in his hair. At first they simply petted, as Spike usually did, but then they closed into a fist and Xander felt his head being gently pulled back toward the vampire. Rather than argue about it, he followed Spike's touches as the vampire used his foot and his hold on Xander's hair to arrange him so that he rested with his back against Spike's left leg and his legs curled Indian style on either side of Spike's right leg. He let his head fall back against Spike's knee and he stretched his back until he felt bones pop.

At that moment, Spike laughed; however, he didn't know whether his popping bones or the conversation at the table had inspired the laugh. He had listened in on the conversation in the first demon bar, but after that Xander had been too distracted by the various aches and pains to really pay attention. Now that the pain had
eased, he found himself listening once again. This conversation proved far more interesting than the first one where Xander had finally stopped listening when Spike and a stone-skinned demon discussed the best ways to keep evisceration victims alive as long as possible. Very disturbing.

"Boy should be better trained."

"He'll get there. Besides, I don't fancy bringin' him to places like this regular-like."

"So you did bring him here just to embarrass Cassidy."

"Not my fault the git can't keep track of his own pets. He lost the boy, I picked 'em up."

"He's going to gut you for this. I don't care what happened between the two of them, he will kill both of you for embarrassing him."

"He'll try." At this, he could almost hear Spike smirk. The two vampires stayed silent as Spike and the demon talked, but from his place under the table, Xander could see them shuffle their feet nervously. What the hell did they have to be nervous about, he was the one sitting
defenseless under a table in a room with lord knows how many demons who considered him part of this nutritious breakfast. Xander amused himself with thoughts of what demon commercials advertising breakfast foods might look like; at least, he amused himself until his memory filled in the image of one of the many vampire victims he had seen lying on the street. Okay, he definitely had slipped round the bend somewhere in the last couple of days.

"Your arrogance is going to get you killed. Hell, arrogance is going to take out the entire Aurelius line, what of it remains," Spike’s demon friend pointed out.

"It can take the rest of the line, don't care. But if Cassidy comes for me, It'll be that wanker's last mistake." Xander's eyes had fallen closed, but coolness on his lips caused him to open his eyes to the sight of a piece of melon pressed against his lips. Oh no. The one thing he had told Spike was that he wouldn't eat out of Spike's hand. For god's sake, leave him some dignity. However, Spike's heavy right boot slid in closer to Xander, pressing on the still engorged cock, and Xander opened his mouth rather than get into an argument he couldn't win. He chewed silently as Spike switched to petting him like the family dog. Just don't
react, Xander kept telling himself, but he didn't know whether his self-commandment applied to not reacting to the pressure against his cock by coming all over himself or not reacting to the humiliation by smacking Spike's hand away. Maybe both.

"How did you do it, anyway?" the deep voice asked in obvious awe. "How can he sit at your feet so happily while the bond holds him to Cassidy?" Xander suppressed the urge to snort at the word happily.

"Cassidy can't control anythin'. He can't hold his pets; he can't protect his territory or his minions. Anyone who follows him is goin' to get taken by a stronger master or left to die." Oh boy, vamp feet really shifted at that, he noticed as he ate another piece of melon from Spike's hand. Yeah, he was going to make the bleached wonder pay for this later.

"Master Spike," started a slightly higher and more nasally voice, "he is powerful."

"Oi, not unless his only competition's minions, he's not. My sire could kick his ass, easy. Me, I'd be more likely to eviscerate him and stake him out to see the sunrise. May do that yet if I can ever find the
"Pet, wake up." Xander sat up and promptly smacked his head into something thin and very solid.

"Shit."

"Hey, no damaging the goods there, luv," Spike ordered with a small laugh, and Xander opened his eyes to find himself curled under Spike's chair. Sound asleep on the floor. Oh yeah, this really did a world of good for his manly self-image, he thought to himself as he slid backwards to free himself from the chair without hitting his head on the rung, again.

"What? How long was I asleep?" Xander looked around the room and realized that the clientele had significantly changed. Before the only three vamps in the room, including Spike, all sat at the one table. Now when he
looked around, he saw game-faced vamps in twos and threes throughout the room. Xander still sat on the floor, but he pushed himself closer to Spike, settling in between his legs and hoping that none of these vamps were Cassidy or Cassidy's minions.

"Long enough," Spike answered his question before pushing back his chair and holding out a hand to help him stand. He had to brace himself on the table until he could work a stiff left leg loose enough to actually walk on, but Spike continued to stand there, seemingly unconcerned even though Xander could see him making regular sweeps of the room with golden eyes. Even more importantly, the vampire leaned on one leg while the other rested on the rung of the now-abandoned chair. And the resting leg bounced. It bounced so hard that Xander expected the rung to break at any time.

Standing firm on both his sore legs, he pushed closer to Spike, his only form of protection in a room full of blood thirsty monsters. It did occur to him that Spike was a monster too, but at least he was a less blood thirsty monster, or maybe just a monster too polite to talk to and chew on the same person. Xander counted on the vampire telling the truth about that as he felt an arm circle a waist and he leaned into Spike's embrace. ‘Better
"Thanks for the drink, mate," Spike said as he nodded toward the green demon that still sat in the same spot. The two vampires had disappeared from the table.

"Any time, Master Spike," the demon replied as Xander felt himself pulled from the room. He followed compliantly as Spike guided him out to the parking lot and then to the waiting bike. In the parking lot, a few people stood under street lights and he wondered if these were more vamps. If so, the number of vamps at this one bar easily equaled the number of vamps he normally saw in a year. He suppressed a shudder and wondered what the hell had gone on while he slept like a dog under its master's chair. Yeah, he really didn't like that image at all.

Spike quickly mounted the bike and Xander followed, willing to do anything to get away from the stares that followed him from those strangely silent watchers. Spike drove several blocks, dodging around cars and changing directions so fast that he just knew he would die before the night ended, and not from a vampire bite either. Finally, Spike pulled the bike into a Wal-Mart parking lot and turned off the engine.
"Right, now where's this place with the mojo?" Spike asked, but Xander found himself still unable to completely regain his breath from the moments of unadulterated panic caused by the short ride.

"What the hell," he finally gasped. Spike only looked back at him over a leather-clad shoulder with impassive blue eyes. "Are you trying to kill me? If so, could you pick a quicker method?" That earned a quick flick of an eyebrow and a half-smile.

"Wot? Don't trust my drivin'? Been drivin' since before you wore nappies."

"Please don't explain that, I've reached my limit for grossness this evening. I just want to go home or back to your lair or wherever I'm going to sleep tonight. I hurt and I'm not feeling very friendly toward you right now."

"Pet," Spike growled, and Xander lowered his head so that his forehead rested against Spike's back in defeat.

"What Spike?"

"I need to know where that place is." Xander didn't look
up, but he could imagine the gold eyes glaring at him from just the tone. Clearly he had reached another of those choiceless moments.

"Straight south of Glitters on the west side of the road, an old theater called Efrian's House."

"Yeah, know the place. Went there a time or two in the thirties; it had sewer access and one of the old masters liked the place." The bike started and Xander found himself alone with his thoughts. The city had slowed and quieted. Lights still shone and cars passed by at illegal speeds, but the pedestrians had disappeared and most of the apartment windows remained dark. It must be about 3 or 4 am, later than Gunn and the others usually hunted, but they might still be on the street.

Having seen Gunn and the crew going up against what he now understood to be minions, and seeing Spike going up against minions, he worried what would happen if Gunn met Spike. Unless Gunn or one of the guys got in a lucky hit, Spike would take them all out without working up a sweat. And even worse, Gunn and the guys fought vamps so often that they wouldn't even hesitate to attack a single vampire. Xander closed his eyes and sent up another prayer for the evening. He wondered
whether his sudden increase in prayer counterbalanced the fact that he had taken up with a soulless killer.

When the bike finally stopped in front of the familiar theater, Xander immediately slid off and looked in the opposite direction. Thoughts of Fredrick assaulted him so suddenly that he wondered for a moment if the man's spirit hadn't returned to harass the loser who had failed him.

"Pet? This it?" Spike asked and when he turned to look, Spike gazed back curiously, his head actually cocked to one side as though trying to hear something.

"Yeah." Another long silence and curious gaze.

"You wait here then," Spike finally announced as he turned to go into the building.

"Don't you want..." Xander suddenly felt vulnerable, exposed in the feeble light of the only streetlight a half block away.

"Wait," the retreating figure ordered without breaking stride. Xander watched Spike disappear, making sure the vampire actually entered before he took off at a dead
run. Two blocks, that's all he had to make. Two blocks. He ran until his breath came in ragged gasps and then he spotted the goal. Please let it work, please let it work. He slid to a stop in front of the booth and considered his options.

The cell phones the crew used were temporaries and could get disconnected at any time. Besides, they probably wouldn't take a collect call. That last part worried Xander. He knew his mother would take a call, but he didn't want to pull her into it, so he called the only other number he could remember. Not easy to forget a number like 555-HARD, especially when that number connected to Glitters. Hopefully T would still be there cleaning up or doing paperwork. Xander picked up the receiver and almost cried when he heard the dial tone. Dialing the operator, he quickly asked for a collect call.

Every ring of the phone left Xander in agony as he watched the sidewalk for signs of either Spike or the motorcycle.

"Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up," he chanted as he listened to each ring. Finally the line picked up and Xander could hear T agree to accept the charges.
"Darlin' are you alright?" came the familiar disembodied voice, and Xander felt his knees shake as he reconnected with his old life. For one minute he just wanted to cry and beg T to come and get him, but inside he knew the consequences. Spike might choose to set him free, but if he tried running Spike would kill him and anyone else who might try to help. Xander couldn't take that chance.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he finally answered in the strongest voice he could muster.

"Where the hell are you? Gunn and the boys have been worried enough they actually brought their paranoid asses into my club. They still refused to eat my food, but one step at a time."

"I'm with a friend," Xander explained as he tried not to choke over the word. "Did they tell you about Fredrick?"

"Hell, honey. Nobody blames you for that, not even that asshole Luther. I hope I never have to talk to that man again. Lord, how do you put up with him?"

"Luther's okay. I just need to get a message to Gunn, and I thought you could get it over there for me."
"If that's what you want, sure. You know, you could come over and we could sit in the kitchen eating stale potato chips while you gave me the message." Xander struggled for a moment with a real desire to just say yes. To run for the club even knowing that he would never make it, and even if he did, the club was open to the public, meaning open invitation for vampires. In the end he decided he valued both his own life and T's life far too much to make such a stupid move at this point.

"No, I'm heading for bed after this, so I'm really not up for the whole potato chip feast. I hooked up with a vampire hunter," Xander began as he carefully constructed his story to neither lie nor completely tell the truth.

"Blondie from the other night?" T asked and Xander nearly dropped the phone.

"How could you..."

"The boys said he had a dangerous look and a real interest in you, so tell me what your hunter told you."

"The vamps that killed Fredrick, they aren't normal
vamps. Most vamps are minions, young and fairly easy to kill." Xander ignored T's snort of disbelief at that comment. "But these might be masters. What's more, it seems like at least one or two of these vamps are using magic, which isn't normal. Gunn's got to be more careful—keep the crew together—because something's happening. Some sort of vampire war has started, and if gang wars can take out neighborhoods, I don't even want to get between two feuding vampires." Xander managed the last part without choking over the irony that whether he wanted it or not, that's exactly where he found himself: between two feuding vampires.

"Xander, maybe you'd better come in."

"I can't T. Spike really does need me, and I need to get the vamps who killed Fredrick."

"Getting yourself killed won't bring him back, darlin'. You get your white ass back to Gunn's place before he tears that neighborhood up looking for you."

"T, I can't" Xander resisted the urge to scream out the whole tale, but he couldn't put someone else in danger, and he knew that T and Gunn and even Carlos and Luther saw him as the weak link, the damsel in distress who
needed saving. That used to bother him a lot more, but now he simply accepted his shortcomings. However, now he had to work his way out of this without pulling his friends in with him, and if he couldn't, he needed to die without taking more of his friends with him. "Look, I'm really sorry about missing work, but I really gotta go."

"Fuck work," T insisted. "Your job and your paycheck are waiting, we discussed this. Of course, quite a few of the customers missed you terribly, but they'll live. Right now I'm worried about you off playing Lone Ranger."

"I'm with Spike. Trust me, I am firmly in sidekick mode. We ran into two vamps, and I hid behind his back the entire time. Didn't even touch a stake." Xander glanced down the street again. Spike hadn't shown yet, but he couldn't count on the vampire's curiosity keeping him in that theater forever. "Look, I gotta get to bed; I'm wiped out."

"Alright, but you promise to come in if you need help."

"I promise, Mom," Xander teased, enjoying the feeling of normalcy no matter how short-lived. "Bye."

"I'll give Gunn the message, you take care." T finished
and Xander put down the phone. For a moment, he leaned his forehead against the sticky plastic and tried to regain his equilibrium. He had made the right choice; he had made the only choice possible. After just a few seconds, he turned to make his dash back to the motorcycle, and he nearly dropped dead of a heart attack in that moment. Standing behind him in full game face, Spike waited.

11

Xander's Punishment

"Aaahhgg," he screamed, his knees giving way as he headed straight for the sidewalk. Spike stood there, unmoving as Xander fell to the ground and held his upper body off the ground only by leaning on the base of the payphone.

"Told you to stay," Spike pointed out in such cold tones that Xander knew he wasn't facing the same snarky Brit with the strange sense of humor. Something primitive
and instinctive drove this creature, and Xander could feel a part of himself respond.

"I just had to warn my friends," Xander began, but the low growl warned him that he had taken the wrong approach. "I'm sorry," he amended his response. The growl continued.

"I told you to stay." This time Spike stepped forward and now Xander could see the chain hanging from his hand.

"Spike?" Xander's eyes remained fixed on the chains as he realized how much damage the vampire could do without actually killing him. After all, as long as he was alive and smelt of Cassidy, it didn't really matter what kind of shape he was in. He could be lying in a coma in the backroom of a demon bar, and Spike's plan would still work. He could feel his heart beat faster as he tried to think of the words that would calm the angry vampire and prevent his possibly imminent mutilation.

"I didn't tell them anything about you. I didn't betray you," he began, but Spike remained unconvinced, his game face forward and a soft growl filling the night. "I shouldn't have done it," Xander tried again and the volume of the growls sharply increased. Suddenly a hand
shot out and encircled his wrist in a painful grip. Xander didn't fight when Spike pulled him to his feet and quickly wrapped several lengths of chain around his hands before adding a padlock. Xander stayed quiet even though the individual links in the chain dug into his skin and he actually found himself wishing for the manacles from the lair. Hadn't Spike brought them? Of course, maybe the vampire used the chain because it caused more pain. Xander didn't know and he didn't stop to debate the point as Spike pulled him down the street toward the bike. Spike quickly swung on and then pulled at the chain so sharply that Xander nearly ended stomach down over the seat. He quickly threw a leg over the seat and settled himself without another word.

The ride home threatened to end Xander's life several times: when Spike played chicken with a truck, when he took a turn so sharply that Xander nearly slid off, and when the vampire pulled the chain sharply enough to throw Xander forward and cause the bike to take several sliding detours as Spike struggled to bring the bike under control. Xander tried not to make noise above the involuntary screams that periodically erupted when his life flashed before his eyes. When Spike finally pulled into the truck yard through a side gate, he found himself grateful to return to the relative safety of the lair. And
yes, the irony of that statement did amuse him; he definitely needed therapy.

When Spike pulled him off the bike, Xander continued with the lamb to the slaughter routine, hoping to break through to the real Spike before the vampire did something that Xander would regret later, even if Spike didn't. Silently they passed the trucks and descended into Spike's home before Spike removed the chain without a word. Xander simply sat on the bottom step while Spike paced the concrete bunker, still showing his game face.

When Spike finally stopped pacing and turned to glare, Xander listened to the little voice in his head and dropped his gaze to the floor. He had disobeyed Spike on so many issues tonight that he couldn't believe that Spike could lose so much control over this one. At the first demon bar, he had tried to sit only to have Spike order him back up on his knees. At the first bar Spike had also told him to stop looking at the other demons, an order which Xander knew full well he had broken at least a dozen times. And then with snake-boy he had really screwed up, screwed up badly enough that Xander had thought Spike might let him die. Why the fury now?
"I've got to make a call," Spike finally announced, and Xander glanced up to see Spike's human face showing. He quickly dropped his eyes back down when a voice wailed in his own mind. Shit, if he had lived anywhere else he wouldn't have to deal with this whole pseudo-possession thing, but no, his parents just had to move to L.A. Why did the universe hate him?

"Get over here, Spike ordered as he walked toward the far end of the room where bare concrete and empty space remained only dark since the lights over this section had either burnt out or Spike had turned them off. Xander followed Spike into the shadows and sat where Spike pointed at the floor. Before he even heard the noise of the chain, Xander felt the cold of steel closing around his throat and then the vampire disappeared back up the stairs and out of the lair.

"Shit." Xander tried to stand so he could stretch out, but he soon discovered that the chain was only about twelve inches long and attached to the wall so that he could neither stand up nor lay down. Instead he sat waiting on the cold concrete until his ass hurt and the cold had soaked into his entire body. How long could a human last like this, he wondered, 'cause Spike had already shown him around the demon bars, so technically Spike
could just leave him here forever. Water would probably be the first problem, but right now, he was more worried about the water that wanted to come out of him.

He tried to distract himself from the fullness of his bladder and the soreness of his butt where the hard concrete dug into his flesh. He tried counting. First he went for vampires. Numero uno had been Cassidy whose bite had nearly killed him. Two nights later he had seen a middle-aged man, or what looked like one anyway, jump Gunn. He had been following and had nearly died of panic, but the whole thing had been a set-up, and Luther merely staked the guy. Several nights after that, a vamp had jumped him while he followed Gunn and company. That led to his "demon magnet" reputation and one serious ass-chewing from Gunn. Then the night he'd seen Alonna walking alone, he almost caught up to her before two demons jumped her, and again, it had been a trap that Xander nearly ruined. This time Luther handled the ass-chewing. Two vamps in the park. The blonde girl vamp outside the theater. The big, black vamp behind the school. The two vamps Xander had seen the first time Gunn let him come along when raiding a nest. That was the first time he had been invited instead of simply following the rest of them around. After that the faces kind of blurred with one set
of ridges and fangs looking like another. Xander couldn't remember whether the nerdy one was next or the really skanky girl-vamp with the Goth makeup.

Xander leaned his head back against the cold wall, feeling so alone that he couldn't stop his miserable thoughts from wandering to a new list: the people who'd abandoned him. His parents had been first, he realized. Even before they moved out of Sunnydale, they had been so busy fighting each other that their son got lost somewhere in the middle. He remembered trying to fix his own supper at seven because they couldn't stop blaming each other long enough to notice their hungry child. His mother had tried to make up for those early years, he really knew that. But she still didn't really see him or know him. After the divorce, his father had simply made the abandonment permanent. Jesse had been next. Wasn't really his fault, but Xander still felt the loss. He had just moved to L.A., and he still kept up his weekly calls to the only two people who had ever really loved him unconditionally: Jesse and Willow. He remembered the night that he had called only to have Willow tell him that Jesse had died in a house fire. He could hear her pain, and he wanted to say something to make it all better, but words had failed him. Unfortunately, words just kept failing him. He had
tried to keep up his conversations with Willow, but she had simply stopped talking to him; he could hear it in her gaps, her pauses as she tried to figure out how to talk to him without telling him what she really thought. His last fight with Willow had sent him walking the night Cassidy had bitten him.

After that, the losses became easier. Tanisha had been his first girl-friend. He had done all the normal sappy crap like carrying her books and one quick grab at the chest, and she had insisted that she didn't want to go farther until she married; she insisted all the way up until the day he found her in the back of the science lab with Alberto Reyes' hand up her skirt. Yeah, that ended well. Gabi had been next with her pony tail and track shorts that clung to her legs until Xander thought he would die from lust. Obviously Xander Jr. had not yet sent the memo about liking guys. Either that or Xander Jr. had trouble telling Gabi's gender because that girl could out-lift, outrun, and outfight him. She had even worked with Gunn and his crew, ordering Xander around until Luther had started calling him "Gabi's white bitch." When he started putting down some limits about what she could say to him, especially in public, that ended that relationship. Pamee had been the last. She treated him more like a walking science model, exploring
the male body whenever she felt like it. She had certainly brought him off a number of times, and she had allowed him, in returned, to do some naughty touching, but he hadn't even blinked when she walked up and announced they were over in the middle of the cafeteria. Yep, he handled abandonment well.

Let's see, that came to seven. He thought about his teachers for a moment, but none of them had even noticed him long enough to make an impression. He had been the below average student who sat in the back of the room and didn't cause trouble. His teachers returned the favor by ignoring him and passing him from one class to the next. His various bosses, and he remembered many, had never seen him as more than another pair of hands, so they couldn't be accused of abandonment either, at least until T; Xander remembered the conversation on the phone, and he felt a physical ache as he thought about how concerned the man had sounded. Of course, it now looked like it was his turn to do the abandoning, not that T would suffer in the long run since Xander had only worked there one night. Funny, but in one night Xander felt closer to T than he did to many people he'd known for months, maybe because the overheard conversation allowed him to know what the man really thought of Xander. Either way,
the words he had overheard between T and Gunn meant a lot to him, and while T seemed to have a pretty unrealistic view of him, he liked that someone else might have stuck with him.

Only Gunn had stayed with him. He could always count on Gunn even if he really screwed up. Gunn's loyalty had taught Xander what it meant to be a man, which is why he couldn't disappear and leave Gunn and the guys in trouble. Oh wait. If vampires had clan leaders, they must follow one leader at a time, so trying to warn Gunn implied that he felt no loyalty to Spike, Xander suddenly realized. But that didn't make sense; even Spike said that the bond connected him to Cassidy, so why did Spike expect loyalty, and why did he get so angry at that phone call when he had already broken a dozen of Spike's other 'rules'?

Xander reconsidered the whole evening. When he hadn't stayed on his knees, he had disobeyed, but he had also leaned into Spike. At the time Xander did it to relieve the pain and help with the whole "infuriate Cassidy" plan, but he could see how Spike might have seen that as a declaration. Looking at other demons had certainly aggravated other demons on more than one occasion, but that didn't hurt Spike any, and during the
whole adventure with snake-boy, he hadn't insulted or turned against Spike. So the demon felt like he had declared some sort of loyalty only to have it snatched back when he ran for the phone. Well shit, no wonder Spike had taken off; he was lucky the vampire hadn't beaten him senseless, not that he had that much sense to start with.

Xander felt better now that he had a plan; he would just wait up for Spike and then explain why Spike couldn't expect him to react like a vampire any more than he could expect Spike to act like a human. Easy. Xander sighed when he considered just how uneasy this could get.

By the time Spike appeared, Xander had given up the pee fight; his wet and smelly jeans stuck to his body, and the cold now had a direct line from the concrete into the skin of his legs. When the door opened, Xander waited patiently for Spike to come get him, but the vampire simply moved around the room as if he didn't have a wet, smelly, and badly cramping human chained to the far wall. First he shrugged the coat onto the chair, and then he took the heavy book from earlier and deposited it on the shelf under the stereo. With a flip, the small
television jumped to life, and Xander could faintly hear the laughter of some sitcom as Spike got a bowl out of the cabinet, pulled out a cigarette, and lay out on the bed in his clothes.

Well fine, if that's the way Spike wanted to play, he could play that way too. Xander pulled up his knees to try and keep some warmth closer to his skin. What felt like decades later, Xander heard the familiar music of an early morning news show, and Spike stood up and flipped off the television. However, just when he thought Spike would come and unlock the chain, he simply unbuttoned his shirt and threw it over the chair as he pulled back the blanket. When the vampire made a disgusted noise and moved to the other side of the bed, Xander realized two things. First, son of a bitch was going to bed, leaving him chained for the remainder of the day. Second, they had never changed the sheets after yesterday's not-so-little deposit.

"Spike, come on," Xander whined. He knew he was whining, but manly pride only went so far when compared to the threat of spending a miserable night in pee-stained jeans chained to a wall. "Let me up and I'll change the sheets," he offered even though he had no idea whether Spike even owned clean sheets. For a long
moment, Spike stood silent and unmoving. He only knew that Spike had heard because gold eyes flashed at him.

"Right then, you did make the mess." Spike walked over, pulling a key out of his pocket, and Xander almost cried in relief.

"Spike, I'm really sorry..." he began, but the growl returned, and Xander took that as a small hint to stop before he ended up being food. "Right, I'll just change the sheets."

"I'll get clean ones." Spike started walking for the door to the hall, presumably for one of the three locked doors since there certainly weren't clean sheets in the bathroom.

"Could you get me some jeans or shorts or something that's not, you know, wet and kinda stinky."

"No."

"What? Spike, in case you didn't notice, I'm kinda gross here." Xander took a step forward and quickly realized that he would also be exceptionally sore if he walked for any length of time. His wet, soft skin wouldn't survive
the acidic urine and the rough denim.

"Get 'em off and drop 'em in the hall. Shirt too," Spike ordered as he continued walking.

For one second, Xander considered rebelling, but then he thought about his options. Option one, Spike could just kill him. Yeah, not of the good. Option two, he could stay dressed and Spike might ignore him. That just left his legs rubbed raw and a definite lack of sleep. Option three, he could stay dressed and Spike could pull the clothes off him. Okay, most of him really didn't like that idea, and he was rapidly wishing he could just vote Xander Jr. off the island. Okay, think unsexy thoughts until that problem went away. Option four, he might piss off Spike enough to end up chained to the wall again. That would be a 'no.' Option five, Spike could just beat him senseless. Okay, enough options, he obviously just had to strip.

He walked into the hallway, no sign of Spike, and slipped out of his clothes. Leaving the pile in the hall, he went into the bathroom to clean up and found a towel thrown across the sinks. Wondering who Spike had left it for, he grabbed it up and headed into the shower. After all, he could smell the stench himself, so he was simply saving
the vampire from having to put up with human stink all day. Xander showered as quickly as possible and came out still wearing the towel around his hips. The clothes had disappeared. Spike stood leaning against the cabinet in the main room, the ever-present cigarette hanging from one hand and a stack of sheets sitting on the end of the bed.

"Toss the towel by that first door," Spike directed without moving, and he only hesitated a fraction of a second before he turned and opened the hallway door so he could toss the towel as instructed. Trying to concentrate on the task and not the fact he had to walk around naked, he quickly pulled the blanket off and dropped it on the floor before pulling the sheets loose so he could take them to the hall. As he tugged, the far corner refused to give, leaving him the choice of either crawling across the bed to pull at the corner or walking around the bed and passing within inches of a still unmoving Spike. Looking at the strangely motionless form, Xander decided that the lack of bounce meant he wasn't going to get hit, so he took a chance and slid by the vampire, turning his back so that Spike got as little of a view as possible.

What really got him angry, though, was the fact that
Spike was doing this just to put him in his place. The vampire watched him, proving to him that he was weak and inferior and couldn't fight back, like he needed one more person showing him that. A feeling of helplessness and rage simmered just below the surface as Xander did his work.

The stripping done, he turned to making the bed. This time he had to walk within inches of Spike several times as he tucked elastic corners around the mattress before tucking in the top sheet. He even had to bend over with Spike mere centimeters away from his raised butt as he pushed the bottom end of the sheet and blanket between the mattress and box spring. Bed made, he stood awkwardly, not knowing how far to push this new Spike. He crossed his arms self consciously before switching to covering his genitals with his hands before switching back to a crossed arm stance after deciding the whole hiding his genitals thing probably looked pretty stupid considering Spike had touched every part of him, even parts that he himself had never touched.

"Um, Spike?"

"Up in bed, then." Xander quickly got in the bed and slipped under the covers. Okay, try to find a way to
explain human loyalties to the vampire, that's all he had to do.

"Are you going to, you know," Xander asked as he gestured with his two wrists held out together in front of him. Was there a polite way to ask if a bed partner wanted to use the chains? Hey, there could be a whole new career in advice columns for him if he survived this. Spike simply looked back impassively, one eyebrow now raised in either surprise or confusion.

"You enjoy those, do ya'?" he asked, and Xander felt the immediate response in Xander Jr., who jerked to a sort of half-mast almost immediately. He watched as both Spike's eyebrows made a run for the hairline.

"Can't say I like what your last chain did." Xander fingered the tiny sore spots caused by the chain links digging into his wrists.

"Didn't mean ya' to enjoy it."

"Yeah, I got that." He watched as Spike walked over to the leather bag that he had just now noticed sitting by the wall. When Spike stood up again, the familiar manacles with the wide wrist cuffs hung from one
hand. He never thought that he would be so happy to see manacles. Spike walked over, and he offered his wrists without complaint or looking up. The heavy cuff closed comfortably around his wrists and Spike locked the chain to the wall using the last link, so he would again have quite a bit of room to move.

"Smellin' nice there, luv." He groaned when he realized that Spike meant Xander Jr. who had reached full size. No matter how angry he was with the vampire, his body still reacted to the sight of that agile body moving with the grace of a cat.

"I wasn't this bad in high school. I mean, I used to joke about getting turned on by linoleum, but I didn’t really mean it."

"So I turn ya' on?" Spike walked to the other side of the bed and slipped in under the covers and leaned against the headboard.

"I think you know that."

"More than the wanker you called tonight?"

"T?" He looked over to Spike in surprise, ignoring the
voice that demanded he drop his eyes. "I'm not really attracted to T at all. I mean he's nice, but the thought of the two of us in a bed...together? That's kinda yuck."

"How about that other git you mentioned then. Gunn innit?" Spike's eyes narrowed, and Xander saw his opening.

“Spike, I’m not a vampire.”

“Think I noticed that you git.”

“Are you sure? I mean, calling T didn’t mean the same thing to me that it would have meant to a vampire. I'm not trying to get out of our deal or trying to get away; I just had to tell them what I know. I had to warn them."

“Know that too. If I didn’t, I would’ve strung you up on that wall and stripped the skin off your back.” That made him stop and rethink his strategy. He decided to go with the pathetically honest approach

“Then why are you so angry?”

“I may understand, but that doesn’t stop my demon from wantin' to make ya' hurt.” That made him stop and
worry. He couldn’t exactly explain his way out of this if Spike already understood.

“Spike?”

“What?”

“Damn it!” Now Xander felt the anger rise up. How dare Spike take away the feeling of security he’d felt. He knew he had no business feeling safe around a vampire, but he couldn’t deny the fact that he had, at least until Spike had refused to get over this. “If you’re so damn angry, do something and get it out of your system,” he demanded as he pulled on the chain.

“Don’t tempt me”

“I mean it. I’d rather have you smack me around some and then put up with this pissy fit. I can’t take this.” Xander trembled from the effort of suppressing his tears. “I mean it, Spike,” he finished when he saw Spike’s look of confusion.

“Pet, don’t ever encourage my demon’s violence.” The words sounded like the old Spike, the one who laughed at him in the club and teased him after scaring the shit
out him, but the tone still carried the coldness.

“Spike, it couldn’t hurt worse than this thing you’re doing now. Don’t shut me out.” Even Xander could hear the tremor in his voice, so he knew that vampire ears could hear the pain in his voice.

“If you hadn’t gone and disobeyed me, wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Damn it, I can’t undo that.”

“Would you?” Now Spike stared at him with such an intense gaze that he couldn’t help but feel pressured to give the answer Spike wanted; however, he knew if he did that he might as well sign over a deed to his life. He couldn't give up everything that made him Xander Harris without a fight; he couldn't become a creature who lived only to make Spike happy.

“I don’t know. I think I probably would still call,” Xander said quietly, and he could see the instant fury in the gold rings around Spike’s eyes. “I knew you’d be mad; I thought you might even hurt me, but I had to warn them.” After that announcement, Xander waited for Spike reaction. If Spike was going to hit him, this would
be the time.

“Bloody hell,” Spike softly cursed.

“But I didn’t tell them about you,” Xander pointed out. “They would want to know. Hell, if they find out about you and then figure out that I had a chance to tell them and I didn’t, they’re going to be royally pissed off. They may never trust me again.” Xander whispered the last part, realizing the truth only as he said the words. Gunn and Luther would consider him a traitor, and he would definitely lose the job with T. If any of them found out about his feelings for Spike, he would be lucky if they limited themselves to just beating the shit out of him.

“That your choice then?” Spike asked, and he had to think about what the vampire meant.

“I won’t just let them get killed,” Xander protested, “but yeah, I made my choice.” Xander knew he was telling a half-truth, but he also knew that a certain part of him had chosen this sarcastic, pushy vampire. The rest of him, the parts not on hiatus from common sense, decided to simply remained silent.
“Can’t overlook my demon, pet.” The voice had returned. The voice that had humanity and humor and sarcasm and emotion in every syllable. Xander felt a thread of panic begin to unwind from around his heart.

“If you can’t get over it, I meant what I said before. I’d rather get hit than ignored, Spike. Been ignored long enough.” With those words, Xander knew he had just revealed more of himself than he had even done before. He felt naked and vulnerable. Okay, he actually was naked and vulnerable, but he felt emotionally naked and vulnerable. When he looked up at Spike, the vampire's eyes had calmed into a pure blue and the face had a look of...compassion? ...understanding? Spike stood and dropped his jeans to the ground. After a moment he reached down, retrieved the key and unlocked one manacle. Xander simply watched as naked Spike then slipped back into position in the bed.

Spike held his arm out to one side, and before Xander realized what he was doing, he had slid into Spike's arms and rested his cheek against a thin shoulder. With superhuman ease, Xander felt Spike ease both of their bodies down onto the bed so that Spike lay on his back with Xander's free left arm and head resting on Spike's chest. For a moment, he lay uncomfortably on the
unmoving chest, unsure what to do or how to feel. Then he felt the soft arms close in around his back, the hands joining in the small of his back as Spike settled in.

That morning, or maybe the previous morning, Xander had woken to a feeling of contentment and security. He had felt guilty and angry that a monster could stir feelings that even his own mother had failed to inspire for so long, but this time, he let himself admit what he felt: safe. Ironic that it came from a creature that ate humans, but Spike had fought his own nature to protect him. Spike had listened to him and his ideas. Spike wanted him and found him attractive. He had to admit that, so far, Spike had treated him better than most people ever did. No one, with the possible exception of Gunn, had ever taken so much time to look after him, and he let himself relax into that embrace.

12
Sire's Help
When Xander next woke, he lay alone in the bed with his right arm twisted uncomfortably, the chain tangled with the sheet and pillow. He sat up and worked at getting the chain loose before he noticed that Spike was nowhere to be seen. Thinking back over the previous evening, he felt dirty. How could he for one minute accept Spike's embrace? How sick was he that he would trade in dignity for a hand job and a snarky smile?

He threw himself down on his back and stared at the ceiling. He had to find a way to get away before he completely lost himself in these feelings, especially since he now knew that many of the feelings weren't truly his. Xander considered all his options, but he knew that in the end he had only one real choice: kill Spike. Xander felt his whole body physically jerk and tense at that thought. Okay, so maybe the choice was closer to try and kill Spike because he didn't know if he actually could, but one murder attempt, and someone would die. One way or the other, he would free himself. Being dead had to be better than slowly losing his mind and his self-control.

He squirmed on the bed and prayed for Spike to get back soon; two days in a row of peeing himself wasn't good on the ego. Shit, no wonder he was so damn messed up in the head—he spent his time waiting for and trying to
please the very creature he should kill. The internal howl started again, and Xander forcibly silenced it. He chanted Sesame Street songs and gritted his teeth until the howl had retreated to some far corner.

He was busy singing, "Remember just to whisper softly into my ear, I won't leave and go away, You know I'm gonna be right here," when the voice interrupted him.

"What? And you complain about my music?" Xander jumped at the sound of Spike voice. Opening his eyes, he found a smiling vampire leaning against the open hallway door.

"Spike! Thank god. I have to pee."

"I swear, you humans spend all your time either putting stuff in your body or sendin' it out again." Spike may have complained, but he did walk over while pulling the key out of his pocket. Xander waited for him to pull open the one manacle before pushing Spike out of the way and dashing for the bathroom. He actually found himself grateful for his nudity because he wasn't sure he would have had time to pull down pants.

"What the hell were you singing, pet?" floated in a voice
from the other side of the metal half-wall.

"It's from Sesame Street; it's the llama song."

"Oi, you have to learn some musical taste."

"Hey, I like that second verse," he yelled back over the cubical wall since his bladder was still emptying itself. Only once he had taken care of his 'inconvenient' human needs did he find himself embarrassed by his nudity.

"Spike?" he yelled from inside the bathroom cubicle.

"What?"

"Do you have any clothes I could wear?" Xander barely caught the clothing that sailed over the top of the bathroom stall. The gray jeans were back, cleaned. Xander wondered if that meant the vampires did laundry or if Spike made someone do his laundry for him. This time the shirt was a red silk very similar to the one Carlos had lent him on his one night of running food at Glitters. While he'd lost other jobs after one night, never before had he regretted it so much. With a sigh he slipped into the clothes and left his sanctuary. He found
Spike in the main room sitting in the chair watching the small television. From the show, Xander guessed it must be around 6 or 7, too early for the vampire to have gone out.

"Where were you?"

"Sewers. Needed to do some listenin', pet."

"Listening for what?"

"Rumors. You put on a nice show last night, and now I just need to listen up and catch enough juicy bits to fix that wanker good." Spike leaned back in the chair, but Xander could see the muscles in his arms flex. Spike may have put on a semblance of relaxation, but every muscle was tensed.

"I assume the wanker in question is Cassidy," Xander commented as he leaned against the door frame.

"Yeah."

"And the show was..." Xander allowed his voice to trail off. He felt awkward around Spike now, and he didn't know whether that came from last night's punishment or
this morning's realization that only one of them would survive.

"You. When the other vamps saw that Cassidy couldn't even keep a pet's loyalty, they started to question whether or not to follow him. If I'd dominated your demon—taken over the claim—that'd show I was stronger, but doin' it this way with you still holdin' his claim, it shows that he's so weak that his pet went lookin' for someone strong enough to hold a claim. Worked slightly better than I thought. All sorts of people who wouldn't talk earlier are singin' their hearts out." Xander thought about the silent faces that had watched when they left the bar the previous evening.

"Cassidy has to get me back to prove he's not weak," he said as he leaned heavily against the doorframe since his legs now seemed incapable of carrying his weight.

"He'll try," Spike agreed from the chair.

"Oh shit." Spike hadn't tried to enforce the claim, but he knew that Cassidy wouldn't hold back. Cassidy had to prove that he could, how did Spike once put it, beat or fuck Xander into submission. Shit. He had an irrational desire to beg Spike for protection, but he reminded
himself that Spike had set the situation up in the first place. Spike saw him as a dog, an animal who, even if you care about them, is expendable. Xander repeated that to himself until the urge to crawl into Spike's lap and cry had passed. Besides, he now realized that Spike's own brand of affection probably had little to do caring; he just wanted a way to get back at Cassidy.

"So, more demon bars tonight?" he tried for nonchalant, but he knew that his voice actually came out closer to desperation. He really didn't want to spend more time kneeling at Spike's feet; he was messed up in the head enough already.

"No, we're meetin' Peaches first, then a few human bars."

"Peaches? We're meeting with Angelus?" This time Xander realized his voice had gone up into the squeaking range.

"It’s all right, pet. Got his soul now, won't hurt ya," Spike stood up and started pacing the room. "Course his soul's a pretty impermanent thing, but we won't be 'round long."
"Impermanent?" Xander asked, unsure how that worked. 

"Yeah. He fell for some bint, and when the Master killed her, he tried to save her. Tried to use bloody CPR only he managed to put her in a coma instead of bringin' her back. He got his broody guilt up so high, some magic-type in Sunnydale tried to make him happy. Turns out that if he gets happy enough, the soul just sort of floats away."

"What exactly do you mean 'floats away'?"

"Just that, pet. His soul left, and Sunnydale got to meet the soulless Angelus or rather an angry version of Angelus that had been trapped behind a soul for a century or so. From the stories I heard all the way in Europe, it wasn't pretty. He did a lot of damage before they could magic his soul back into him."

"And we're meeting him....why?!"

"Cause he knows mojo, and that place last night reeked of it. Mojo and somethin' else that just don't feel right." Xander was so distracted by the thought of a soul doing a disappearing act that the second comment slipped by him for a moment so that Spike had actually
started for the stairs before he could respond.

"Wait," Xander frantically cried. "We can't go to the neighborhood now."

"My sire's waitin', and while annoying the pouf isn't a problem, we need to meet him." Xander felt cool hands at his arms, pushing him up the stairs.

"But…but Gunn…th-the guys, they'll be out now," Xander stuttered. Panic reached new levels as the fear from last night flared into outright horror.

"I won't kill your mates," Spike sighed, and Xander felt one hand tighten as Spike stopped him at the top of the stairs so he could open the padlock with his free hand.

"But what if they...I mean, they could start something."

"Worried about me, pet?" Spike asked as they stepped out into the night, the sky still grey from last dregs of the sunset. Spike's pleased tone make Xander shrink into himself. For a moment he wished that Spike would just be a little more vampire-like so he didn't have to feel so damn bad about trying to kill him.
"I just don't want to end up Cassidy-kibble," he finally complained.

"Won't happen, luv." By now they had reached the bike, and Spike quickly slipped on and held out a hand for Xander. God, he was back to charming. Xander gave up trying to understand the annoying vampire and settled for wrapping his arms around the slim waist and closing his eyes in an attempt to ignore the questionable driving skills. Of course, if Spike liked him, that only made it easier to kill him when the time came. This time the wail in his head felt more distant—almost muffled.

When they stopped outside the theater this time, Xander saw the big black convertible, but he didn't see either Gunn or Gunn's truck. He just prayed that the guys wouldn't show up. Xander scooted off the bike and waited for Spike nervously. He had to grit his teeth to avoid chanting 'hurry up, hurry up, hurry up.'

"Oi, stop broodin'. If I gotta deal with Peaches, I can't take you too." Xander flinched when Spike threw an arm around his waist to guide him to the now-open front door causing Spike to quirk an eyebrow in silent query.

"It's nothing. I just want to get this over with and leave
before anyone sees us. We aren't exactly inconspicuous here," Xander complained with a wave toward the vehicles in front the open front door with boards thrown about on the sidewalk.

"Yeah, not subtle, but Peaches never was." Spike nodded toward a figure now coming out of the newly opened front door, and Xander watched as a tall hunk of a man came out of the theater. Where Spike was all angles and sharpness, this man was curves. His arm muscles curved with one muscle disappearing into another. His chest curved in a manly broad-chested sort of way, his walk even seemed to roll in gentle curves where Spike had a brisk, energetic stride. If this was the famous "Peaches," vampire families obviously didn't share many traits. The man dropped a crowbar into the back of the black convertible before picking up a long-sleeved shirt and putting it on over the t-shirt he wore.

"William," came a deep, calm voice, and Xander glanced behind them to see who the man had addressed.

"He means me, ya git." Spike tightened the arm around his waist while Xander nodded knowingly and made a small "oh" gesture with his mouth.
"What have you gotten into this time?" Xander heard the tone and couldn't help think of his own father; the disapproval and disrespect dripped from Angelus' mouth. He wondered how Angelus would take it if he managed to kill Spike. He knew his own father wouldn't do more than show up at the funeral for the sake of presenting a respectable front. No, if he failed, his mother would be the only one crying. He felt Spike's arm tighten.

"Me? Not done anythin', and I won't 'til I can find that wanker. Just thought you'd like a look is all." Spike nodded toward the theater. He sounded calm, but Xander could feel the muscles twitch, and he knew the infinite variations of Spike's eyebrows well enough to see the tension rolling off.

"And him?" This time Xander jumped as Angelus gestured toward him.

"I'm just, you know, riding along," he blurted quickly, but Angelus didn't respond or even look at him.

"What kind of game are you playing with his life, William? I told you before that if you continue this nonsense I will take your play toy away." Angelus took a
step forward, but Spike didn't move, leaving Xander unable to back away from the impending fight; however, he wasn't going to go down without some sort of objection. If he had little to no chance with Spike, his chances of surviving Spike's older, larger, more powerful sire were somewhere between zero and not a chance in hell.

"Hey now," he began in his strongest voice, "I am not a play toy, and no one gets to take me anywhere."

"Boy," Angelus began.

"No, not boy, 'Xander.' Alexander if you must, but not 'boy'." And that got the tall vampire's attention. Angelus turned and looked at him as though seeing him for the first time.

"I didn't mean to insult you, but you must admit that compared to me, you are young."

"Yeah, that still doesn't make me a boy, it just makes you old," he snapped back, and he could feel Spike twitch with suppressed laughter.

"You tell 'em, pet."
"William," Angelus' tone carried a warning of future pain; Xander knew that tone.

"Bloody hell, you're the one what started this," Spike pointed out and Xander found himself agreeing.

"Xander," Angelus began, now obviously ignoring Spike to the point of turning so that Angelus' body faced him and not Spike, "Spike cannot hurt you while I'm here. Just tell me where you live, and I'll take you home before I head back to the office." Of all the things he had expected, this hadn't even made the list. He narrowed his eyes as he tried to figure out the game that Angelus was playing. Did the vampire want to get him alone and away from Spike? Did the soul mean that he was offended by Cassidy's claim? He might just be offended by Spike's obvious affection and intimate embrace. Maybe Angelus didn't see him as good enough for the family—he would hardly be the first to voice that opinion. Then again, the whole man-on-man love thing was rather unpopular way back when, so maybe Spike's proprietary arm made Angelus angry. Were vampires homophobic? Xander considered a whole new possible depth of gay-bashing.
"Uh, thanks Angelus, but I think I'll stick it out here," he finally answered after several awkward seconds. He couldn't miss the flinch at the name.

"I go by Angel," the vampire corrected him.

"And I go by Spike, simple name really, innit? Fewer syllables than William, but you never do seem to remember." Xander couldn't believe that they were standing on the street having this argument when each passing minute increased the odds of Gunn or the crew showing up.

"Angelus, Angel, Spike, William, whatever. Does this really matter right now?" Angel's eyebrows rose to comical heights and the large vampire took a step back.

"Are you sure he's not yours? He sounds a lot like you," Angel dryly commented to Spike, and from the corner of his eye, Xander could see Spike smirk.

"Nope, the whelp came like that. Anyway, Xander's right. I called you to look at that mojo—think it might be related to that wanker Cassidy. Lots of minions around, claiming their masters were killed by mojo, and Cassidy's the only new master in town." Angel sighed so loudly
that Xander could clearly hear it and see the wide chest rise and fall. Damn, when did vampires get so damn cute? And unless he was mistaken, Spike had just used his name for the first time. Did that mean something? With a start, he suddenly realized that the vampire had never asked for his name; the bastard felt him up and didn't even know his name. Xander felt a hot flash of anger, and within a second, Spike turned a confused look toward him.

"Pet?"

"It's just this place," Xander waved toward the building vaguely even though he felt like he could stake Spike right there on the sidewalk.

"Yeah, that's why I brought ya'. You need to tell Peaches everything that happened the other night."

"You were here?" Angel turned a surprised look toward him.

"Yeah. I was here when Fredrick died." Xander thought he had edited out the guilt, but obviously not because Spike had that "I told you not to do that" look, and Angel had the strangest expression on his face—nearly
emotionless but still distant and cold in a way. Yeah, definitely not going anywhere with that vampire. At least not if anyone gave him a choice.

"Tell me what happened," Angel commanded in a voice that expected an immediate answer. Angel held out his arm in an obvious invitation for Xander to go first. Catching a quick look at Spike, he realized that Spike expected him to do exactly that.

"We came because Gunn had seen some vamps—better dressed than usual. Six of us came in through the broken boards there," Xander walked in the front door and then gestured toward the side where light came in through the lopsided boards. Once in the lobby, he could almost feel his backpack and hear the crew members steps even though the two vampires walked silently. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "We smelled this horrible stink, but we started walking toward the back."

"Day or night?" Angel interrupted him.

"Late afternoon. The roof has lots of holes in the front, so we had pretty good light in here." Angel just nodded and made vague gesture that he should continue even as Angel started looking around behind counters.
"We started walking down the hall toward the main theater; every time we have to clean this place out, the vamps always nest in there."

"Sewer access is in there," Angel offered as he continued to open drawers and cabinet doors behind the now ruined snack counter.

"We never found a sewer access, but we do always find them back there, so we started back with Gunn in the lead. When a vampire came out the main doors, Gunn attacked. We all turned on our lights and when I went to move the lights into position, Fredrick disappeared. I called for Gunn who charged into the main room, and then I went in after him."

"How many vampires in there?"

"I don't know. I barely got in the door when a vamp grabbed my light and threw it out; the whole room got really dark. I caught one vampire by accident when I first lost my light. The second vamp didn't realize my eyes had adjusted to the dark, so I staked him after a minute or so later." All this time he had wandered down the fateful hall and now his hand rested on the handle. He
knew the two vampires stood behind him, but he still couldn't contain a shudder when he opened the door. Where he had expected darkness and memory, two flood lights with car batteries lighted the space behind the screen and a diffuse light flooded the whole auditorium.

"Your eyes adjusted?" Angel asked as he followed behind Spike who, Xander now noticed, worked very hard to stay between him and his sire.

"Eyes do that in the dark."

"Cordelia?" Angel yelled, and a giant shadow figure appeared on the screen as a woman stepped between it and the light.

"I hope you know you're paying me overtime for this, mister."

"Of course. Can you shut the two lights off for a few minutes?"

"No, I can't. It'll be dark in here."

"I'm aware of that. Please, Cordelia."
"Double overtime," a petulant voice floated back as first one light and then the other switched off. Xander waited in the dark, but nothing happened.

"And the point of this is?" he asked the featureless darkness.

"My point exactly," came the female voice from behind the screen. "Can I turn it back on now?"

"Just wait a minute," Angel asked. "Xander, can you see Spike?" He squinted and struggled to make out the shadowy forms he knew stood nearby.

"No," he finally admitted.

"Try harder."

"Bloody hell, he said 'no.'" Spike snapped, and Xander had to laugh at the frustration he could hear in the tone.

"Xander, you said you could see the vampire in here."

"Maybe there was some sort of dim light somewhere; I don't know."
"Lay off, Peaches."

"Don't tell me what to do, Childe. I am your sire."

"Bleedin' hell you are, you walked on me, me and Dru, so don't you start using that sire bollocks on me now."

"Watch your tongue if you intent to keep it," warned a growling voice, and now Xander knew terror. What if the soul was gone? What would this vampire do to him, to Spike?

"Angel?" came a confused feminine voice from behind the screen. At the sound of muffled impacts, Xander turned to his right and peered into the darkness until he could see two forms struggling. Fortunately, their different shapes made it possible to tell which was which. Unfortunately, Angel obviously had Spike bent over backwards and pinned to a row of molding chairs.

"Look at him," Angel demanded and suddenly he could see not only Angel's gold eyes but also Spike's.

"Bloody hell." The two shadows separated, and Xander looked in confusion from one to the other as the shapes
moved toward him, one on the right and one on the left.

"What?" he finally asked when the shapes took positions several feet from him and waited.

"Pet, how much can you see?" Spike finally asked.


"Cordelia," Angel called out.

"Can I turn the lights on now?" she demanded in a very aggravated tone.

"In a second. First, tell me how much you can see."

"You know I can't see anything. It's totally dark in here." Xander watched the Angel-shadow walk down the aisle and up the stairs, and Spike's hand gently guided him to follow.

"Can you see me?" Angel asked, when he reached the top of the stairs and stood at the corner of the screen. Spike stopped him a couple of feet behind Angel.

"Okay, that's just creepy, mister. Floating gold eyes,
"And now?" Xander could see the gold eyes blink out; the vampire must have returned to his human face.

"And we're back to pointing out the obvious—it's too dark to see in here, at least for those of us who still shop for tanning lotion."

"Okay, one last question," Xander saw the two yellow eyes blink back into existence inside the Angel-shadow. Angel made a gesture and Spike and Xander joined him behind the curtain. "Cordelia, how many gold eyes do you see?" A sharp gasp filled the silence.

"Six. Good god, you brought vampires back here; I am so going to stake you." With that, the lights flipped back on, and Xander blinked uncomfortably as a beautiful brunet waved a large stake in Angel's face even as Angel held up his hands in surrender.

"It was an experiment; you're safe," Angel insisted even as he backed up a couple of steps. He took a closer look at the small woman who had an ancient master vampire backing up, but she just appeared to be a normal human. A very determined normal human waving a large
stake, but even he could see that the point only marginally pointed in Angel's direction.

"Are you sure you didn't get happy out there?" Cordelia asked, and he remembered Spike's comment about a soulless Angel causing real problems back in Sunnydale. So this woman knew about Angel, and she still worked with him. Nervy. Xander could see himself going for her if he wasn't gay; he found strength sexy, and she seemed to have it in spades.

"Believe me, I was with Spike; I did not even approach happy."

"Oh yeah, and you're the life of the party," Spike snorted. "Trust me, Peaches here needs magical help to get happy; his life is one giant brood."

"You noticed," Cordelia responded with a small smile. "However, you're still vampires and I'm definitely a stake-first kind of girl." The point of the stake wobbled over in their general direction.

"Cordelia," Angel said, but this time his voice carried only a tired sort of frustration, not the threat it carried when he spoke Spike's name. Xander wondered how much
that had to hurt. He remembered how his father would be nice to other kids and how that made him feel even more worthless each time he heard it. "Spike is my childe, and Xander is not a vampire." Xander wondered what would make her even think that, but then his brain finally processed her commented. Six.

"I go all glowy in the eyes?" Xander asked in amazement as he looked from one person to another.

"Yeah, pet. You do."

"Cool. I guess the whole unwanted visitor is good for something. God, no wonder Gunn looked at me so strange that night. He must have freaked."

"Xander, this isn't part of your claim mark," Angel said softly.

"Angel, this has to be part of my claim mark. Glowing eyes do not run in my family," Xander pointed out as he rolled his eyes. Angel sighed again.

"No, the demon doesn't show in a claimed human. Something is seriously wrong here." Angel looked like he had a serious case of constipation, and Xander felt like he
had missed all the notes and someone was asking him to take a test.

"Human eyes don't glow; demon eyes do. It seems pretty clear that the demon is showing in *this* claimed human."

"Xander, the demon in a claim responds to its master, not its host. Your master isn't here, so the demon should be dormant."

"Should be, could be, might be," he shrugged, "but clearly isn't." He suspected that Spike had called up his demon when threatened, but he had no intention of sharing that particular theory.

"Is someone going to explain this to me or do I have to start torturing people?" Cordelia asked, and he turned to really look at her. She certainly seemed familiar, but he couldn't place her. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail that made her seem young, but the pencil stuck behind one ear and the laptop sitting in her lap now that she had returned to the floor and the scattered drawings reminded him more of Willow than anyone else.

"It's a long story," Angel sighed.
"That you'll tell me all about on our way back to the office," Cordelia assumed with a smile as she started collecting the various drawings and shutting down the computer. "Starting with who the blonde is and why you two were fighting." Spike had made an offended noise when called "blonde," but Cordelia ignored it as if he didn't even exist.

"We weren't fighting; I was just trying to make a point about Xander," Angel explained as she finished her gathering.

"And by the way, the next time you're trying to make a point, you keep your bloody hands off me," Spike spoke up as Xander felt the arm slip back into its familiar place around his waist. Cordelia's eyes widened, but she didn't comment as she thrust the laptop at Angel and took the portfolio with the drawings in her own arms. Angel ignored both the arm and the complaint.

"I sketched and Cordelia scanned all the symbols," Angel explained as he gestured toward the reddish-brown figures that Xander had avoided looking at. "Xander, I need you to help me figure out the smell."
"Uh, a really gross cross between industrial ammonia and dead stuff?"

"I need to know what potion they might have used. If we could head over to Thopis, we might be able to narrow that down more."

"Oi, I don't want him anywhere near that place. There's mojo enough there to poison an elephant." Xander had thought that the previous evening had been bad, but he was quickly learning to hate the way these two argued. He was tired enough to sleep for a week.

"I can't be more specific, Angel," he explained earnestly.

"We can pull out a few ingredients, see if any of the smells are familiar," Angel explained in a hopeful tone. "This looks like a big spell and a dangerous one at that. We need information." Angel gestured toward the strange, ragged figures decorating the walls.

"No bloody chance. Got places to go, people to eat."

"William, I catch you killing and I'll stake you myself."

"Right," Spike drawled. "I figured you'd be more the type
to stand back and critique my performance. You know, 'Kill 'em slower, Spike,' 'Can't you cause more pain than that, Spike?'" Shit, after a couple centuries you'd think they'd grow up. This sounded like him and his father before dear old dad had just stopped showing up.

"Spike," Xander used a warning tone of his own as he almost felt the room grow colder.

"William," Angel growled as the gold reappeared in his eyes.

"Oh for god's sake, dump some testosterone and get a life," Cordelia insisted as she walked between the two and grabbed the strap of the computer, pulling Angel along after her. "Come on, you can follow us to Thopis."

"Never said I'd go," Spike shouted to Cordelia's and Angel's backs, but the two figures just left without a reply.

"She's interesting," Xander commented. "And Angel's a stud; you never said he was such a stud." He waited for the reaction, and three...two...one...

"Bloody hell, you go lookin' at him, and you won't have
to worry about havin' eyes—glowin' or not."

"What?" Xander asked with his best innocent voice. Spike narrowed his eyes and stared while he simply blinked back with wide, naïve blinks. It was one of his best looks, and he knew it.

"Bloody little shit," Spike complained as he let go and started up the aisle where the other two had disappeared. "Still never agreed to go."

"Yeah," he agreed as he trotted after Spike. "But you're the one who said that something's wrong, and you're the one who called Peaches because you thought he could fix it. I say we go along."

"Hate it when you do the bloody logical bit."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," he shot back, suddenly feeling more cheerful than he had since the whole mess had started. He wasn't the demon-magnet loser; he was Xan-man the glowy eyed...man. Okay, he really needed to find a better rhyme before he said that one out loud.

13

A Spot of Torture
After two hours of sniffing one disgusting concoction after another, he had identified five things that might smell familiar from that evening and developed a raging headache. The pain could have come from having to smell so many disgusting potions ranging from ground chaos demon horn to burning dried elephant gonads. It also might have come from the endless bickering the two vampires had engaged in ever since they had reached the magic shop. Spike had called his sire a wanker, a poof, a nancy-boy, mighty gel-hair boy, the great poof, a ninny, and a good number of names that he just didn't understand. From Angel's reaction, he guessed none were of the good. In return, Angel had threatened to stake Spike, rolled his eyes, sighed, and growled so often that Cordelia had taken to randomly backhanding him across the arm. Yes, a lovely evening.

"Familiar?" Angel asked as he gestured toward the blue bottle currently sitting on the table.

"Only in that it smells like my laundry after I haven't washed it in two or three months." Xander put the cork back in and pushed the bottle away. "Don't think it was that."

"Oi, he's had enough. It’s not like he paid attention to
the smell that night," Spike complained from the other side of a shelf full of strange artifacts, bones, statues and rocks.

"Yeah, too busy trying not to die." Xander stood and cracked his back after sitting for the whole two hours.

"If they were using Org root and ground pa'alash, we need more information. We could be looking at some sort of thrall spell."

"Well he's helped you as much as he can; I'm taking him and leavin' now." Spike walked up and got into his sire's personal space, and the larger vampire instantly stood and squared his shoulders. Xander sighed.

"You have no right to order him around and drag him all over town for your personal feud." Angel snarled as he obviously struggled not to slip into game face.

"Bloody hell, not like you have a vote here. He already told you off, Peaches."

"William, you are not taking him anywhere, I swear if..."

Xander could still hear them argue, but he intentionally
tuned it out as he walked out of the back room and started browsing the shelves in the front of the shop. He had just spotted an interesting shelf when a female voice interrupted an internal argument on how to handle the whole attracted-to-an-evil-vampire that he had every intention of killing dilemma. When had he lost his mind?

"Those two are going to stake each other at this rate," Cordelia sighed as she nodded toward the back.

"Oh, yeah. I thought me and my dad got into some fights, but those two have us beat."

"Nice work—that." Cordelia gestured toward Xander's hand, which had continued on its pre-Cordelia mission and closed around a stake.

"Yeah, well I just like having some protection. Well, not protection as in protection," Xander stumbled to correct himself as he realized the sexual implications of his statement. "Not that I don't do things that require protection...I'm just going to stop now," he finally announced as he studied the lightly carved stake in his hand.

"Well I'm just glad to know you take the whole vampire
thing seriously. Thought you might be one of those idiots who think they can shack up with a demon without suffering any consequences.

"Oh, I know the consequences," he agreed as he thought about Spike's body dissolving into dust. The earlier screams in his head had reduced to a sort of grumbling complaint, but he did know how hard this would be. Unfortunately, he couldn't fool himself. Cordelia was right about not trusting demons, and any concern Spike had shown made sense in a totally selfish, no-problem-killing-the-human-later sort of way. He had to admit that his own pathetic need for affection had blinded him at first.

"So why work with him?" Cordelia asked with such an honest curiosity that he had to wonder what kind of life she had lived to take the whole situation in stride.

"I could ask you the same thing," he returned.

"Yeah, but it isn't the same thing. I mean, Angel gets all strange and broody, and he so totally needs to learn how to wear colors other than black, but he isn't a killer. He's got the soul."
"Are you sure you aren't the one in denial?" he asked as he fingered the spiral pattern on the dark wood. He tried to sink a fingernail into the wood, but he couldn't even scratch the surface—nice hard wood.

"I've known both Angel and Angelus, and I know the difference. Of course, I also carry lots of weapons," she assured him with a smile. "Besides, I need the job. However, I don't get the feeling Spike pays real well. He seems like more of a 'letting you live is payment enough' sort to me, so why stay with him?"

"We both want to kill the same man...or rather vamp."

"Cassidy."

"Oh yeah. He killed a friend, and I can't say I'm exactly happy about his willingness to share." Xander's free hand gestured up toward his neck and the red scar visible beneath his collar. Of course, he didn't mention that the mark had posed no problems until Spike had waltzed into his life and would hopefully pose none when Spike died. Unless Spike killed him; he suspected that the mark wouldn't bother him much if he was dead.

"Okay, that's just disturbing. Angel told me about the
whole claim thing." Cordelia leaned back against a shelf and flipped her hair away from her face in a gesture that Xander suddenly recognized.

"Cordelia...Cordelia Chase," he suddenly blurted.

"Um, yeah. We've already been introduced." Xander almost laughed as she rolled her eyes in a look that he recognized well from their days together in junior high. She used it on him every time she pointed out something stupid he had done in order to embarrass him in front of as many people as possible.

"No, I just recognized you. Willow and I started the 'We hate Cordelia Chase' club," he blurted a half second before it occurred to him that she might find that information offensive. "Of course, that was when we were waaaay younger, and you were younger, and different."

"Alexander Harris? Oh my god." Cordelia suddenly pulled him into a hug, and Xander threw up his arms, only remembering to turn the stake at the last minute. Boy, wouldn't that be an awkward way to greet an old classmate.
"Cordelia, we weren't exactly friends," he pointed out as the woman held on to him far longer than he expected.

"Don't turn around. When I let go, take off running for the back room, and I'll distract them with some holy water."

Cordelia held on for another second as her hand reached into her purse, and Xander closed his fingers around the stake even more tightly. He knew he should run for Spike, but he couldn't leave Cordelia here to die, even if he had started a whole hate-club and spent one afternoon discussing murder plots with Willow. When she released him and threw the container, Xander turned to fight rather than run. He turned in time to see the bottle crash onto the floor and splash up onto three of the largest vampires he had ever seen. Taking advantage of the momentary chaos caused as the vampires recoiled from the burning water, Xander lunged forward and plunged his stake into the nearest vamp. He thought he had aimed true, but the vampire simply growled and grabbed his arm in one hand while he pulled the stake out with the other.

"Spike," he bellowed at the top of his voice as he pulled
back against the hand which closed like a steel vice. He threw his other arm in an arc, trying to get enough speed in his swing to make the vampire let go, but his awkward left-handed blow bounced harmlessly off the vampires raised forearm. Well, harmlessly for the vamp; Xander felt like his arm had hit a brick and the throbbing in his right hand where the vamp gripped too tightly for circulation joined the throbbing in his left which would soon sport a good sized bruise if he was any judge.

Out of his peripheral vision, he watched Cordelia run from the other two vamps, and he wondered where Spike and Angel had gone. Oh god, maybe they really had staked each other.

"Leave her alone," he shouted as he swung again at the vamp holding him. The same swing ended in the same result, but the vamp still didn't do anything but watch the others corner Cordelia behind a bookcase. Praying for some luck, Xander reached out with his foot and hooked one of the lower shelves of the display unit next to him. Praying that the case wasn't bolted down, he pulled with everything he had, and suddenly the whole shelf started tilting precariously.

When the first of the fragile item slid off and shattered
on the floor, the Neanderthal holding him looked over, and then threw his arms up to protect his face from the falling shelf. Xander scrambled away but didn't quite make it. He felt the shelf fall on his lower leg, and he howled in pain. Grabbing a bit of wood that had broken off the shelf, he staked the now-trapped vampire and turned with his improvisational weapon in hand to face the other two.

Both of the vampires turned their backs on Cordelia, but only one survived the mistake. Xander smiled as he watched vampire number two turn to a skeleton for the brief second it took for the bones to follow the flesh and turn to dust. He could feel more than hear Spike charging from the back room, and he allowed himself to feel relief for a second, but only a second.

Vampire number three charged toward him and grabbed his hand, pulling him roughly over the vampire's shoulder face forward. He struggled to hold on to his weapon, but with the vampire's grip, he couldn't do anything with it. By the time the vampire had reached the door, he had transferred the makeshift stake to his left hand, but the vampire simply reached up and pulled it out of his hand. Xander yelped and winced as that forced dozens of splinters into his left hand, but he continued fighting
and squirming.

Hoping to distract the beast, he even held his bleeding left hand over the creature's face, but the vampire simply tossed him. Xander felt himself flying through the air until he stopped with a thud against the metal of a van. Oh shit. The metal of the inside of a van, Xander realized as the vampire jumped in after him and slammed the door. At that sound, the van leapt into traffic at such a speed that Xander found himself tumbling toward the back doors. He had just decided to grab a door handle and roll out, risking death by pavement, when a hand grabbed him and pressed him to the cold and uneven floor of the van.

"Not so fast," hissed an angry voice, and he shuddered at the sound. Even angry, Spike hadn't frightened him as much as that cold voice without any trace of humanity. Xander felt something cold wrap around his neck, and he reflexively reached up as the lock closed, securing the chain around his neck. With a jerk, the vampire had pulled him toward the side of the van and fastened the other end. Xander realized that he was, for the third time in three nights, chained up. Since he couldn't do anything about it, he leaned back against the cold metal and curled his sore leg under him as he settled
in to glare at his captor. The vampire looked back at him with an ever-increasing growl filling the space.

"You kill him, and the master'll skin you," floated in a voice from the front of the van. With one last snarl, the vampire crawled up into the front part of the van and allowed the curtain to fall back into place, leaving Xander alone. He simply sighed and turned his injured hand toward the meager light filtering in from the back windows as he tried to pick the splinters out of his still bleeding hand. As Spike would say, wankers.

He still hadn't come up with a plan an hour later when he felt the van slow and begin maneuvering around tight turns. Parking lot? With his neck chained, he really couldn't see out of the windows, but then it hardly mattered. He really didn't have any illusions about who had captured him or how ugly this was about to get. He used his teeth to try and gnaw out one more splinter. Sucking until he tasted the salty flavor of blood, he used his tongue to find the end before trying to close his teeth around the barely protruding sliver of wood. When the van stopped and the door came open, he continued his self-treatment. In fact, he took pride in completely ignoring both the vampires, all the way up
until the point his neck was nearly broken when idiot number one used the chain to yank him out of the van.

"Hey, human here," he yelled as he fell to the concrete floor of a warehouse, and for a moment he wondered why that sounded so familiar.

"Don't break him," idiot number two hissed to the offending vamp, but neither one helped him stand up. He used the edge of the van door opening to pull himself back up onto his feet.

"Move human." The chain tightened again, and this time he followed, cursing himself for being so damn weak.

"Boy you two have a lot of explaining, like how two weak little humans managed to kill half of your little kidnapping crew." Xander waited for a response, but the vamps simply pulled him toward a freight elevator. He knew he should shut up, but talking gave him at least some illusion of bravado, even if it was just illusion. "Not that killing you guys is hard. I mean, I've dusted little girl vamps that fought more than you guys. Hell, a little girl did take out your buddy in the store." Xander nodded toward idiot number one: the one who had come into the store and whose buddy Cordelia had neatly disposed
"Shut up," Idiot number one snapped.

"Yeah, right. 'Cause the boss man won't notice that you lost a couple of guys without *me* pointing it out. I mean, if Spike had been there, that woulda been one thing, but you lost your buddies to a couple of walking happy meals. How pathetic is that? It's like a cop getting chewed to death by a cow." As the elevator thunked to a halt, a growl threatened bodily harm to Xander. Oh well, Cassidy would schedule him for bodily harm soon enough, so what did it really matter.

He hadn't come up with any more insults before he found himself in a huge room that looked like the set from a renaissance fair. Heavy red fabric draped the windows, chains hung from wood columns, and a dark-haired man sat on something that looked suspiciously like a throne. He wasn't surprised to find himself forced to his knees before the vampire with the illusion of kingship.

"You do know you can get therapy for this whole delusion thing, right?" Xander asked as he gestured toward the ornate paintings and carved tables.
"Silence!" The vamp on the throne bellowed, and he felt an answering bellow within his own chest. Oh shit no. He concentrated on singing the Rubber Duckie song in his head over and over until he had forced out that flare of joy at seeing *master*. He didn't realize that his internal singing had become a cappella until he noticed the strange looks the various vamps were giving him.

"What? Didn't you ever watch Sesame Street?"

"How dare you speak." The dark-haired vamp stood and descended the two steps to the main floor. Yep, that was definitely a throne, and a god-awful ugly throne with gold gremlin thingies carved on the back and a red seat.

"And you would be Cassidy, the vamp who would be king." That stopped the vampire. Cassidy stood motionless for one moment before closing the distance with alarming speed and snatching up the chain that now dangled from his neck.

"What do you know, human?" Cassidy demanded as he bent over him ominously.

"That you have bad breath?" He never saw the fist, but
he sure felt it as it hit his ribs just above his waist. He tried not to cry out, but his gasp sounded distinctly pained, and he collapsed in agony once Cassidy released his chain.

"Strip him," ordered the calm voice, and Xander tried not to panic as many hands suddenly reached out and grabbed at pieces of fabric, pulling the clothing apart rather than removing it. He would have fought, but he found himself naked before he could gather his wits. He remained sitting on the cold cement floor, aware of the fact that this really only had one outcome for him.

"Kneel before your master, slave."

"You do know you aren't a king, right? Not a king means no kingdom, no subjects, no slaves. Of course, you do look a little like one of the Edward kings—pasty complexion, little squinty eyes, and sort of a flat-faced dopey look. Girlfriend accused me of looking like him once, but I think I have more of the Henry the fifth look—eyes a little too big, nose a whole lot too big. Whadda you think?" He really couldn't help noticing three things: the steadily rising volume of growling, the nervous shifting of various minions, and the desperate moaning inside his own mind.
He expected swift retribution. Instead Cassidy walked over to an ornate armoire and opened it. Remembering what Spike had kept in his cabinet, he wasn't surprised when Cassidy returned with a variety of toys.

"Remove the chain," Cassidy ordered even as he walked up with a steel collar and manacles. "You can save yourself pain by submitting to me. You are mine, and you will kneel at my feet." Xander tried not to shake as he felt Cassidy close the collar around his neck before reaching down for each hand in turn. The truth was, he found himself fighting a need to do exactly that, so much so that he didn't have time to come up with a snappy response.

He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the hands that pulled him up and chained him facing one of the square wooden columns. He tried even harder to ignore the need to throw himself at Cassidy's feet.

"Let's try this again now that you're more cooperative. What do you know?"

"If you try to flush your mom's dry Thanksgiving turkey down the toilet, you'll clog the plumbing," he finally
choked out, knowing what would happen. Sure enough, a half second after he said the words, he heard the crack. It took his body another second after that to register the line of fire going from his right armpit to his left side. He gasped in pain

"What do you know?"

"Spike listens to this really crappy music." He clenched his fists until the whip had dug into him again. This time he couldn't contain the scream.

"What do you know?"

"Storm has got to be the sexiest woman ever." The little ritual continued until Xander hung by his arms, his back numb and his brain barely registering the question. An hour? Two hours? Five hours? He had no idea.

Suddenly, he felt cool hands at his wrists, and he fell to the ground. He didn't even think about the concrete versus knees issue until he found himself curled on his side trying to rub the pain out of his knees without disturbing his back. Of course, that required bringing his arms down, which seemed to cause a special brand of pain all its own.
"Do you think he's coming for you? Do you think he can protect you from me?" Xander pried his eyes open and looked at Cassidy's leering face.

"He's stronger than you," he whispered in a voice nearly gone from screaming.

"I don't think so; I took his Dru. He actually cared for his Dru, and he couldn't save her. Now you, he dangled you like bait and then left you while he and his sire played in the alley." Xander nearly laughed at the thought of Spike and Angel playing. He thought it more likely that they had tried to pull each other's heads off although that did explain the slow response.

"He could have chased the van, but he stayed with his sire. No, he used you to try and pull my empire apart, and now that you've done your job, he's just as happy to let me take over." He flinched as he felt Cassidy's hand move down his side, avoiding the whip marks with surprising accuracy. "You know that, don't you?"

Xander tried to deny it, but in his heart, he knew the truth. Spike himself had called him a pet, an inferior who would never be a lover, essentially a lower life form. He
dropped his eyes, refusing to allow Cassidy to see his despair.

"Poor little human. I left you alone for so long that you had to seek comfort from that second-rate vampire, but he didn't claim you. He didn't want you."

Xander closed his eyes as he tried to close out the words. How many times had he felt this nagging emptiness as someone who had promised to love him walked away? The night Spike had chained him, he had told himself the truth then. Spike didn't need him to walk around smelling of Cassidy; the damage had already been done. No, he couldn't fool himself any more, Spike didn't claim him because Spike didn't want him. He couldn't even sort out the pain on that one. Was that his demon roaring with loss and anguish or his soul? Oh god he was so screwed up; he just wanted to be left alone. Surprisingly, Cassidy did just that. With a final pat on a naked hip, Cassidy locked his collar to a chain at the base of the column and walked away. Xander didn't open his eyes, but he could see the lights go out even from behind his closed lids.

Waking up proved even more difficult than finding a
sleeping position that minimized pain had been the night before. Muscles had stiffened into awkward positions, and the cold of the concrete had seeped into his bones. Xander couldn't physically move off the floor, so he laid there until some minion noticed and mentioned it to Cassidy. He shivered as he felt Cassidy's think fingers trace along the whip marks from the previous night's entertainment.

"Hurting boy?" Cassidy whispered in his ear, the vampire's dark hair brushing across his face. "Submit and I'll call up your demon. I'll make the pain go away." Xander closed his eyes again and simply refused to answer. "Then suffer," Cassidy finally decreed.

Cassidy had obviously called the 'court' back into session because dozens of vamp feet hurried by him, not bothering to pause when he finally lost control of his bladder and left an ever-widening yellow puddle on the floor. He seemed to remember peeing sometime during the whipping, but some minion had cleaned that mess; this time he lay in it as the vampires walked around.

"Tell Wolfram and Hart to get that sacred candle here or I'll start taking late fees in lawyer blood!"
"Yes master," murmured an obsequious voice before another set of feet rushed by him. God, this guy really did have a power trip going, didn't he? Xander tried to shift, but his back simply refused to oblige. For a moment, he concentrated on the sore muscles, trying to will them to shift his ass out of the pee, and he would swear he felt a tingling all along his backbone.

It might have just been coincidence, but he suddenly felt strong enough to shift over and escape the humiliation of lying in his own waste. Of course that also gave him the final piece of the puzzle. Cassidy said that he could call up the demon to heal him only if he submitted. Angel said the demon doesn't respond to a host. Spike had shown such surprise that he could *come* for the blonde vampire. Xander finally figured out who the demon had submitted to, and he couldn't restrain a giggle. The stupid demon had submitted to its own host. He called up the demon's sights, he called up the demon's healing, and he called up the demon's attraction to Spike. Nice, he figured out that he actually wanted the damn son of a bitch just when he figured out Spike didn't want him. Just his luck.

"And what is making you so happy this evening?" He opened his eyes to see Cassidy standing over him with a
thick, three foot rod in his fist.

"I've heard of phallic symbols and compensating, but that's just a little ridiculous," he snorted as he looked at the weapon. As the Cassidy raised the stick, he closed his eyes and waited for the darkness to take him again. It didn't matter anyway, he decided as he felt the heavy impacts on his side and legs. He had betrayed Gunn by helping a vampire. He had been abandoned by the vampire he had chosen over Gunn. The only job he had ever shown talent in involved letting men touch him. He barely even made it out of high school. How many times did he have to fuck up before he just admitted that he needed to walk away from this life and hope for a better one on the other side. As the rod continued to fall, he decided that he had reached the time to find out.

Again, waking up involved stiff muscles, cold through to his bones, and hard concrete. Fuck. Why couldn't he just die? As he struggled to sit up, he realized that much of the physical damage had faded. He panicked for just a minute, until some dark corner of his mind provided the answer: Cassidy's blood. The taste of it still filled his mouth. Xander scooted back on the concrete until he leaned against the pillar, the deep bruises and lash marks
reduced to mere soreness and aches.

"Up again so soon, boy?" He looked over and made eye contact with Cassidy, who leaned over a heavy table with three or four others, making small markings on whatever they had laid on the table, some sort of paper maybe.

"I'm actually getting more sleep than usual, must be the accommodations," he returned with a smile. If he had to die, he was going out with style. Even as the thought flashed across his mind, an answer came back. Cassidy wouldn't let him die. Cassidy would keep him alive until he could show the vampire community that he had taken back his possession. He needed for everyone to see Xander huddled at his feet, and then Cassidy would kill him. Perfect way to stay alive until a rescue, he thought for the two seconds before it occurred to him that no one would rescue him. The most he could hope for was an accidental rescue from Spike showing up to kill Cassidy. Even then, he wasn't sure Spike would save him once he had his revenge. He tried not to be bitter considering Spike had never actually lied and declared undying love, but it was still hard.

"If you're enjoying them that much, we'll have to extend your stay." Cassidy slowly walked over and loomed over
him. The vampire stood there with a slightly confused look as he clearly sniffed the air. "You are mine, you know. You will submit."

Xander considered that. Should he submit? It would be a way to escape the beatings. If he had any hope of rescue, maybe he'd fight, but he couldn't come up with any good reason to keep fighting just to continue the pain. Xander consciously released his hold on his own dark thoughts.

"I know," he whispered as he felt the demon's presence rush by him like a wind, "master."

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14

Confrontation

He only distantly realized that he had shifted to his knees; after all, they weren't his knees any more in any significant sense. Spike had once told him that the demon would simply influence him, but he found that he
could simply hide and allow the demon to move his limbs while he watched. It wasn't him that Cassidy smiled at as he unlocked the chain, leaving the heavy metal collar in place as a reminder of his new status. It wasn't him who knelt beside Cassidy as the vampire planned a final victory. The only him that existed hid in a dark corner of his mind and cried as Cassidy described the ceremony that would force all vampires in the city to submit to him as their master. Some law firm wanted Angel brought under control, and Cassidy just plain wanted control. Xander almost screamed at the thought of this disgusting piece of vampire waste forcing Spike to submit, but it didn't really matter any more, so he slid back into his space of half-dreaming.

A day passed, but he knew only when he lay down to sleep on the floor next to Cassidy's bed. He had hidden in the darkest corner of his mind, expecting rape with a side order of torture and sodomy, but Cassidy seemed content to allow him to publicly grovel. He couldn't even bring himself to care when, as Spike had once told him, he discovered that he was expected to eat off the floor. That was the only time the demon had earned a beating, but the whip marks healed in hours, which surprised even Cassidy.
Xander had resigned himself to this half-life until such time as Cassidy finally killed him. Until, of course, a minion burst into Cassidy's room on night two, nearly falling over Xander to get to the bed.

"Master, you must wake," the dirty-blonde vampire begged as he stood next to the bed. Evan or Eli or Eddy, he couldn't remember the vampire's name, but he didn't really try too hard as he felt his arms gather and fold the single blanket Cassidy allowed him as he knelt on the hard floor in the corner formed by the wall and the bed.

E-something vamp didn't cause Xander's re-emergence, but his next words sure did.

"Master, the guards have captured Master Spike." At those words, Cassidy flew from the bed. For the first time since releasing the demon, Xander felt himself truly wake up, but he also found himself unable to take back control. He raged and swore and insulted Cassidy's lineage until he nearly drove himself mad, but his body remained kneeling, his head bent as he waited for Cassidy to dress and signal him to either join him or wait. When the signal came to follow, he wanted to sigh in relief, but he couldn't even manage that. Instead he meekly followed Cassidy into the throne room where
four or five vampires struggled to hang on to the chains that imprisoned Spike. After a brief struggle, he forced his eyes to dart over to see that Spike had only minor wounds, but then the eyes returned to the floor as he settled in on his knees beside his master's throne. The rattling of the chains grew suddenly quiet so that he could hear Spike gasp and growl.

"Bloody wanker," Spike hissed, and he could tell just from the sound that Spike had on his game face. Unfortunately, his eyes remained fastened to the floor several feet in front of Spike, so he couldn't see for himself.

"Yes, I've reclaimed your little trophy. I'd planned to kill him once I'd finished with him, but now I'm thinking of keeping him." He felt Cassidy's fingers run through his hair, and he cringed as some part of him all but purred and leaned into the caress. Using the demon's pleasure as a distraction, he grabbed back a bit of control and glanced up. Spike had an expression of pure fury as gold eyes and white teeth both flashed in the low light.

"I'll rip your bullocks off and make you eat 'em," Spike promised with a snarl.
"Now, now. You had your chance to claim him, and you lost. Seems like you're good at losing, you've done it enough." Cassidy released his hair, and he went back to a full kneel with his hands palm up on his thighs as he waited unmoving. "He really is quite a find. With very little training, he's become a court favorite." Cassidy gave an imperial wave toward Spike that he could see out of the corner of his eye. "Fasten him to the pillar," Cassidy ordered.

Xander watched as the minions pulled the still hissing Spike over to the pillar and chained his hands above his head by using a pulley that pulled him up until Spike stood on his toes. Other minions fastened his leg chains to the pillar so that the vampire would not even be able to kick.

"Oi, you lot follow him and you'll end up dust, every last one of you nancy boys'll die, I promise that."

"You should have stayed away, Spike. Drusilla with her magic and visions had to die, but I would have left you alone as long as you stayed out of my city and didn't try to save Angel. You could have lived a long and healthy unlife." Cassidy descended the steps and walked toward the now chained Spike, and with a small gesture, ordered
Xander to follow. He followed with his head still bent and knelt at Cassidy's side as Cassidy stopped inches from the imprisoned Spike.

"But now you'll have to die, and for what?"

"He isn't yours," Spike snarled in an accent so think that it took a moment to decipher. When Xander realized the implications, he teetered between joy and confusion. Spike had come for him?

"Funny, he smells like mine."

"Yeah, well he's a bit different; smell lies when it comes to 'im."

"And I suppose that you think he's yours?" Cassidy laughed at that one, and Xander struggled to force his eyes upwards. For the one brief second he caught Spike's eye, he saw hope and pride and a fierce desire to kill, but then his own eyes dropped back down without his consent, and he could hear the clatter as Spike jerked in his chains. "You do, don't you? Well, I promise you that my pet is firmly in hand. I heard about the incident with the Slacktha demon over at Bulad, and I promise you that he has shown no such behavior here because he
is with his true master." Xander shivered at those words. "He's been a perfectly behaved pet," Cassidy commented as Xander felt the touch on his shoulder—or should that be his demon's shoulder now because he had no control over it. Either way he knew the signal to be a command to stay, so when Cassidy moved away, he remained kneeling in front of Spike and waited as he felt Cassidy return.

"I know one sure way to convince you just how wrong you are." Xander looked up as he felt Cassidy's fingers under his chin. Cassidy's face had an almost angelic smile and the vampire held out a sharply pointed stake. Xander felt his hand curl around the stake even as his mind began screaming against the order he knew would come.

"Kill him," Cassidy ordered as his smile grew even wider. Xander struggled to regain control even as he rose to his feet. When he stood before Spike, one part of his brain noticed the look of pain and horror on the blonde vampire's face even while another part struggled to gain control of the hand that slowly rose holding the deadly stake. Spike pulled at the chains holding him once before settling again, but Xander barely noticed as he spent every ounce of strength he owned trying to regain
control over his arm.

In desperation, he resorted to his most powerful weapon: singing Rubber Duckie in an effort to drive the demon back into the space from which it had come. Spike twitched his eyebrow and cocked his head in a familiar gesture of confusion even as Xander felt the arm begin to twitch. He realized that he had broken through when he heard his own voice humming. Xander turned and saw the confused look on Cassidy's face in the moment before he drove the stake forward and turned Cassidy into a pile of dust.

"Oi, you show 'em pet, perfectly behaved except for an odd spot of staking," Spike crowed from his shackles. "Told you lot you were in for it!" Xander started backing away, an odd feeling of panic growing in his chest.

In the background he could hear Spike yelling insults as minions ran, but he soon grew far too concerned about the howling in his own head. The pain mounted, grew, threatened to overwhelm him as he realized that he had staked Cassidy. Part of him, okay all of Xander-him revealed in turning the arrogant son-of-a-bitch into dusty bits, but the demon-him howled in such pain that Xander
squeezed his eyes shut and backed into a corner, struggling to catch his breath. He could hear new voices, demands for release, breaking furniture, but he must not be getting enough oxygen because his brain could not put all the pieces together. A voice finally pulled on his consciousness, demanding his attention.

"Pet?" Xander opened his eyes to see Spike crouched on the floor before him, bouncing on the balls of his feet just like he had seen so many times before. "Pet, you okay?" the quiet voice came again.

"What did you do to him?" demanded an angry voice, and Xander flinched. *Enemy* the voice in his head insisted. *Enemy. Kill. Hide. Escape.* He struggled to pull enough air into his lungs even as he pressed himself into the corner, but then Spike's voice returned and he held onto that lifeline. The voice in his head was confused about Spike. *Enemy* and *Clan* chased each other around in his head, but he knew that he could trust Spike. Spike had come back for him. Spike had stood, waiting for death with nothing more than a look of sadness. Spike hadn't cursed him or blamed him or called him weak.

"Peaches, if you don't back off and give him space I'll
stake ya myself," Spike quietly declared in the same tone most people use to discuss the weather. Xander realized that Spike didn't want to scare him. Spike hid his anger with his sire because Spike wanted to protect him.

"Spike?" he whispered, the voice in his head finally starting to quiet.

"Yeah, pet?"

"I killed him." He flinched at his own words.

"Yeah, did a good job. He was going to kill me, so it's a good thing you did, innit?"

"Spike?" He held out his hand until he could curl his own fingers around Spike's arm, and the bouncing stopped.

"Pet?"

"I don't feel well." In reality, he felt like he was going to throw up his own intestines, possibly his liver and his soul as well.

"Right, we're outta here." Xander felt strong arms lift him, and he wanted to object that he wasn't an invalid,
but the fact remained that he couldn't have walked if his life depended on it. At the physical contact, the chorus of *Enemy* *Clan* grew louder until Xander started quietly singing to himself.

"Bloody hell, not the llama song, do the one from earlier," Spike complained.

"You like Rubber Duckie more than the Llama song?" Xander almost laughed at that, but then his insides froze as Angel stepped in front of them. Before he hadn't exactly liked Angel, but he never felt this level of hatred for him before, either.

"William, you are not taking him," Angel growled softly.

"Not your business, mate," Spike snapped back as he slid into game face. Xander could hear a feminine gasp that he guessed would be Cordelia. He turned and saw her with another man, slender with eyes that seemed to catch everything.

"I won't let you take a life."

"Good, because this isn't him taking anything," Xander said as he struggled to ignore the internal voices. "I'm
"You have no idea what you're saying. I can get you to a doctor—one who knows how to treat this sort of problem."

"No, Angel, you can't. There's only one person in this room I trust, and unless you plan on forcing me the same way Cassidy did, I won't go with you, and I suggest that you check the bottom of your shoe for what's left of Cassidy before you try that." Xander tried to make his voice firm, but he knew that it trembled. Even worse, Spike still held him as if he were a child, but maybe he could make Angel see that he had a right to make choices even if he didn't have the strength to enforce his choices right now.

"Oi, that's that then," Spike announced as he started forward again, ignoring Angel and clearly expecting the older vampire to move. "How many times does he have to bloody tell you to mind your own business, Peaches?"

"William."

"No. Not havin' this discussion with him so bloody hurt
he's humming soddin' children's songs in my ear. Now back off. We'll talk later."

"And will he be human then?" Angel demanded without moving so that Xander found himself inches away from Angel's chest. He knew that the humming gave away his discomfort, but he didn't know how close these two were to meeting a demon loyal to Cassidy that just wanted to kill Angel, even if its feelings towards Spike were a little more confused.

"Not your business," Spike snarled in return.

"It is my business, William." Xander now added the words, chanting them to himself as he tried to force the panicking demon back into the darkness of his mind.

"Bleedin' hell. Peaches, move or I'll put him down and fight you right now." Xander looked up even while continuing to sing about his bath time friend. For a moment, it appeared that Angel would stand his ground, but then he stepped aside and Spike rushed him into the wide elevator and started them back down.

In the garage, Spike put him in a Mustang before ripping off the plastic dash and playing with wires. Soon, they
sped toward the room that Xander now thought of home, and he let himself fall back to sleep still quietly humming.

Xander was quickly learning to dread mornings: the cold realizations, the colder floor, the pain, the humiliation, the chains. So when the morning came, he ignored his body's various signals and tried to keep sleeping. Unfortunately sleep could only last so long, so he eventually felt himself unwillingly drifting toward consciousness. This time was different, though. He found himself warm beneath a sheet and heavy quilt, and he couldn't feel the smooth hard touch of steel anywhere on his body. Reaching up, he realized that Spike had even removed his collar.

"'Bout time, pet. Slept the best part of two days."

"Two days?" he asked as he slowly sat up, pulling the sheet up to cover the delicate bits even though dozens if not hundreds of vamps, including Spike, had seen him parade around in nothing more than a collar.

"Yeah. Startin' to get worried about ya. Ya aren't going to start singing the kiddie songs again, are ya?"
"No, no singing for me," he answered quickly, hoping that he spoke the truth.

"Want to tell me what that was about, pet?" Spike had been sitting in the chair, but now he rose and dropped the headphones on the chair as he relocated to the bed next to Xander.

"Kinda complicated," Xander hedged. He sure didn't want to tell Spike that part of him still craved Cassidy. Yeah, not of the good.

"Try me. I know something's wrong. You smell more like Cassidy than ever, yet ya staked him for me. Shouldn't happen like that. You should've staked me." Spike moved closer, and he couldn't help noticing the intense expression on Spike's face: confusion, but also something closer to wonder.

"I liked you better than Cassidy." He shrugged, not knowing how to explain his inner conflict. "I even missed your stupid music."

"You *liked* me?" Spike's eyebrow rose into his hairline. For the first time, he realized that Spike hadn't
actually spiked his hair, it hung down and tried to form little curls. He reached up and touched one.

"*I* liked you," he confirmed. Spike must have heard the emphasis.

"*You* liked me, but someone in there didn't?" Spike asked while reaching up with a finger and tapping him on the head. "How many you got up there?"

"Just two." Xander had to smile at the irony of that statement. His need for a team of therapists had just turned into a need for a team of full-blown psychiatrists. "The demon isn't just a piece," he admitted.

"So you got a whole demon in there?" Spike's eyes narrowed and the head turned to the side.

"Think so. It took over. With Cassidy," he explained carefully. Then the floodgates opened. "I didn't think you'd come for me; I didn't think you wanted me and I hurt and Cassidy wouldn't let me die and the demon wanted Cassidy so bad and I thought Cassidy'd let me die if I just let the demon give him what he wanted but then the demon took everything and I was so afraid that I
wouldn't be able to stop him from hurting you." Xander realized he had reached the limit of even his babble-ability when he had to actually catch his breath.

"You didn't think I'd come for you, pet?"

"You wanted to get Cassidy, but I didn't think you wanted me; you didn't claim me even when you could have."

"Oi, that's a demon talkin' if I've ever heard one. Human would have appreciated not bein' thrown down and claimed." Xander suppressed a shudder that went through him at Spike's words, and the vampire's eyebrows reached new heights. "That what you want, pet?"

"I don't know what I want. I don't want just one thing; it's like I have thoughts in my head and I can't sort out which are mine and which aren't. God, I'm so screwed up I don't know why you didn't just dump me on Angel and forget about it."

"Luv, compared to Dru you're not just sane, you're nearly borin' in your saneness."

"I want to be wanted. I want to be respected." Xander
began. He drew a breath, not sure how to really express the next one. "I don't want to have to fight myself anymore; I want all of me to want the same thing."

"Alright, pet. I do want ya; wouldn't have threatened to fight the pouf if I didn't. Have to say, if you have a demon in there and still managed to fight it down, that deserves a bit 'o respect. Means a lot that you did that for me; I've never had anyone put me first before." Spike looked away quickly.

"Spike?" He waited until the vampire turned back to him. "Didn't Dru..."

"No, luv. I was just her second choice behind Angelus. Got her full time after he went all soul-boy, but I always knew she'd pick her own sire over me, and I never made a childe before because she took all my time."

"A childe?" He felt the panic now. The demon roared to life, but visions of Gunn tracking him down and staking him sent his heart into overdrive.

"Innit what you want, pet? Innit what you're askin' me to do?"
"No. No vamping the Xan-man,” he felt his heart beating so loudly that he was sure Spike could hear echoes off the cement walls.

"You wouldn't be a minion, luv. I'd make you a full childe and keep ya safe, teach ya to be a master and we'd hunt together, equals," Spike used his best comfort voice, which seemed even more upsetting given the words.

"No, no, not liking that plan." Now his arms had joined the panic, shaking hands making it hard to keep the sheet in place. Oh lord, why hadn't he listened to the little warning bells in his head? He now realized why Angel had asked about whether he would be human; at the time he simply thought that the jerk was trying to drive a wedge between him and Spike.

"You'd like it once I turned you."

"But it wouldn't be me. I *know* I don't want to be turned, and any creature who does want to be turned *isn't* me. I want someone who wants the me with bad clothes and babbling and a habit of attracting psycho demons—I want someone who wants Xander Harris, not someone who wants a demon in my shape." Xander felt
the tears start. "I'd rather you kill me, Spike. I'd rather be dead than know that you never chose me but wanted the demon Cassidy put in me or the demon you'd put in me...please, Spike."

"Oi, not fair using logic; thought you said you were a stupid git. Liar."

"Please." At the quiet plea, Spike reached out a hand and pulled him into an embrace.

"Won't do it if you don't want. Didn't work so well last time a vamp tried pushing you around. I just thought that if I could push the soul out, you wouldn't have anything holding you back, and you'd want me." Xander had to stop and think about that before he realized where Spike had gone wrong.

"My demon doesn't want you, Spike," he admitted slowly. The hand that had been rubbing his back in sympathy stopped. "My demon wants Cassidy, but I'm stronger than the demon, so I'm forcing the demon to want you. The demon's being torn apart by wanting two different masters, hell two different *clans* at once. And I want you, the soul-me wants you. At least I think I want you; I can't tell with all these feelings stirring
around in here."

"So if I get rid of the soul, you'll want Cassidy, or since you dusted him, his clan?" The rubbing began again.

"I don't know; I think so. The demon wanted Cassidy so much that it hurt. I had to resort to Sesame Street songs just to keep it away from the controls. Cassidy's minions thought I was nuts."

"Might agree with 'em. This is the strangest conversation I've ever had with a human. So your soul'd pick me if the demon didn't keep pulling for Cassidy's side?" Spike stood suddenly.

"I don't know. I just don't know anything anymore. Spike, what are you doing?" He watched suspiciously as Spike went over to the cabinet and returned not with the more familiar manacles, but rather with heavy leather restraints.

"Well, if I were a good person, I'd back off and give you time to sort out your own thoughts, but I'm not. I'm evil, pet. So, since you have a bit of a dispute, I figure I'll show your demon who's in charge. Figure the soul's on my side, so I'll just make sure the demon is too."
"Oh god, please Spike, no." He could feel the fear crawling up his backbone like a little live animal chewing its way up.

"Pet, I won't hurt you, won't *ever* hurt you." Spike dropped the restraints and sat next to him on the bed, pulling him into strong arms. "It's the only way to make you whole, innit? The only way to make the demon want what you want?" Xander felt his breathing slow as he realized the truth of Spike's words. "Trust me?" Spike asked, and Xander saw that he had the restraints in one hand. The demon and the soul wrestled for a moment and then Xander held out his wrists, trying to control the shivers that ran down his arms.

"You're safe, luv. You're always safe with me," Spike promised as he closed the buckle and pulled the cuffs together. "Just gotta listen to me on this one." Spike reached up and tied the end of the connected leather leash to the ring before running hands through thick, brown, curly hair. Xander tried to control an even harder shiver as he felt the fingers wander down to the skin of his neck and his scar.

"So glad I don't smell Cassidy on this," Spike whispered
while touching Xander's cock even while pulling his body down so that he lay flat on the bed with his hands over his head. "Trust me," he asked, and Xander realized that he did, even if that made him the fool.

15
Claiming

Xander felt Spike settle in so that the vampire's knees were outside his own; as Spike lowered his weight, Xander felt utterly trapped. The panic started building so much that he returned to humming again, but a cool hand across his forehead made him open his eyes again.

"Demon needs to fight luv, needs to know I'm stronger." Xander looked into calm blue eyes with no hint of anger. "It's all right, let it fight 'cause I am stronger, pet. You can't toss me on my arse no matter what you do." He could feel Spike's weight anchoring his thighs and cool hands hold his shoulders. Suddenly he could feel the panic and anger swell up.
"Get off," he shouted without consciously forming the words. He arched his back and pulled against the restraints as he tried to curl to one side, but calm hands simply pressed him back into the mattress as if he were no more than a child.

"Off!" he roared as he used the restraints to pull himself toward the headboard, dragging Spike along with him until he found enough slack in the leash to reach down to grab at Spike's hair.

"Oi, not so fast whelp. Soddin' strong for a human," Spike complained as he braced his feet and pulled so that Xander felt himself sliding back down again, the leash forcing his hands over his head. Changing tactics, he rhythmically rocked, throwing Spike up into the air as he arched his back and struggled to get his feet under him. He could feel Spike slipping down and settling in closer to his pelvis than his knees, so he brought both of his knees up as hard as he could, slamming Spike in the back and throwing Spike off balance so that the vampire landed, chest first, on his face. Without even thinking, he bit as hard as he could, hard enough to smell unfamiliar blood.
"Bloody hell," Spike swore, as he sat up and stripped off his shirt. Within the space of a second he had spun and now sat so that Xander could only see his back, but when he felt soft fabric around his ankles, he screamed and kicked, trying to keep his feet far enough apart that Spike couldn't finish tying them. Unfortunately, he didn't have the strength of a determined 120-year-old vampire, so he quickly found his feet tied tightly with Spike's shirt. When Spike turned around again, he could see the trickle of blood from where he had bit Spike through the shirt.

"Had enough?"

"Off," he snarled in return, and he saw Spike's eyes flash gold at the rebellion. He tried to repeat the knee slam, but Spike had too much weight on his legs and having them tied made it awkward, so he bucked again, arching his back.

"Enough of this," Spike whispered, and then he felt his head forced to the side. He turned to bite the hand, but Spike's thumb pressed into a soft spot on the bottom of his jaw. He felt his mouth fill with saliva, and he tilted his head up to relieve the pain. Just then he felt the strike, the two points of pain as fangs entered his neck for the
second time in his life. He gave a muffled howl and tried to bring his knees up since Spike had shifted off his legs, but the blonde simply worked his own leg into the crevice formed by Xander's tied legs and placed a knee in Xander's crotch. He quickly abandoned the kicking plan since he really didn't want to permanently damage himself.

His neck burned with pain and he squirmed, unable to really fight back, but then the pulling sensation slowed and the burn turned to a warmth that made him shiver. He still squirmed, but he could suddenly feel the need to fight slip away like a mountain magically turned to sand. The squirming became something else as the burn continued to fade until it became a warmth that spread through his whole body, like every sexual moment he'd ever had all rolled into one. Xander Jr. suddenly look notice of the proceedings, and he squirmed even more as his cock pressed against Spike's knee.

"Spike, please," he moaned as he tilted his head back more.

"You done then?" Spike asked as he raised his head and Xander could see what he had chosen for a lover: a
demon with yellow eyes and ridges that he longed to reach out and touch, he hands closed into fists with frustration at being unable to reach out.

"Oh god no, not done," he sighed as he squirmed under Spike's weight. Spike must have realized his problem because the knee suddenly moved to the other side of his body so that Spike was straddling him again.

"What? Don't want ta stop, then?" Spike asked with a sly smile as he lowered his weight, his jeans pressing into Xander's cock, and Xander moaned again. He could feel Spike's cock twitch under the denim, and he longed to tear the clothes off Spike, but he could only undulate his body so that he rubbed against Spike, causing Spike to softly laugh. "You want something there, pet?" Xander felt a cool hand rest on his hip and slowly start circling in a maddening pattern.

"Please," he begged as he tried to twist so that that wonderful hand touched his cock, but Spike just stood, leaving him naked and tied hand and foot. Xander struggled to breathe as he watched Spike strip off his jeans and drop them to the floor before walking over to the cabinet. He could hear himself whine in frustration as his cock reached full size and a single drop of pre-cum
gathered at the head. "Please."

"Oi, not gonna hurt ya like that," Spike commented as he returned with lube in one hand and his other hand holding his own fully erect cock. He could feel a tingle throughout his whole body as Spike settled down, straddling him again, but this time the two cocks mere inches from each other. He bucked.

"Stop," Spike commanded in a quiet tone as Xander felt the hand press down on his stomach to prevent another movement.

"Please," he repeated again even as it occurred to him that he really needed to develop a larger vocabulary.

"Wish I had time to play, time to taste ever inch of ya and sink my fangs into your thigh," Spike said wistfully before dropping the lube on the bed and allowing hands to explore, starting on his outer hips and moving inward to tease the inner thighs. He whimpered and struggled to open his legs for Spike, but his legs remained tied and the vampire still straddled him, holding him still even as talented fingers made increasingly vigorous caresses. "Unfortunately, I think you'd explode, wouldn't ya, pet?" Xander only answered with another whimper. "Have to
save that for another time."

Spike easily lifted his upper body and shifted him up so that his hands had more slack, and he struggled to touch, but Spike only chuckled and moved out of range before arranging the extra pillows and flipping him over. Xander couldn't help whimpering again when he realized how vulnerable he was with his hands and feet tied and his butt stuck up in the air, although thank god for that because if he laid on Xander Jr. right at that moment, he would have crippled himself for life.

He could feel hands exploring his back, moving in a seemingly random pattern until he realized that Spike could somehow feel the remains of the whip marks, his hands following from one side to the other. He hadn't thought they left scars, but Spike could either see or feel them anyway. He relaxed into the touch, trusting Spike to never put such marks on him or allow anyone else to either. Without a word, the hands moved over the butt and down the legs until he felt the fabric at his feet worked free. He didn't wait for an invitation; he opened his legs as far as he comfortably could.

"Impatient? Thought that was my flaw," Spike laughed as fingers obligingly explored the newly revealed skin,
tracing from the back of the balls up to the hole and then up the crack to the backbone. He howled as he then felt a cool tongue tracing that route back again—backbone to hole to balls.

"God, let me touch, Spike," he begged, but Spike simply continued with the impromptu bath, licking, sucking and then nipping various spots until Xander thought he would explode in desire.

"Don't you dare," Spike commanded as his breath ghosted over his left cheek. "You don't come 'til I do, you hear?"

"But..."

"Pet," Spike cut him off, "you don't come 'til I do, hear?"

"Yeah, I'll try."

"Don't try, do." Spike ordered, allowing one hand to rest on the small of his back with the other circled his hole. Spike's hand withdrew for a moment before returning, the cool, wet digit definitely closing in on its objective with ever smaller circles. He tried to push back into the caress, but the hand at his back held him down
as the finger teased. He could feel his cock twitch and
the pressure build as the finger finally stilled on the
outside edge of the hole. "Relax, luv," came the request
just as the finger pushed in, the still unfamiliar motion of
someone else's body in his own.

Xander struggled to rise to his knees or rock back or
something, but the hand held him firm. "Settle, pet,"
Spike ordered in his thick accent. The finger moved in
and out, and he tried to just breathe without choking on
his own tongue. When the finger withdrew, he felt oddly
cold, but then the hand returned, and two fingers
worked their way in slowly, he felt them push until he
could feel the rest of Spike hand pressed up against his
body, and then the fingers pulled back, pressing against
the side of his channel more firmly. He squirmed in
discomfort, but the fingers simply closed and thrust back
in before repeating the process of widening and
stretching.

"Relax, pet. I'll take care of it, but you have to relax," Spike cajoled him as a third finger joined. Almost at
once, Xander could feel the pain, but the fingers stopped,
barely in him, and Spike's other hand rubbed his
back. "So beautiful, you know. Bite like a soddin'
vampire, fight like demon when you're riled, feel like
heaven under me. Chose me, you did, and now you're mine. Course, I'm yours, luv. Never leave ya. Can feel your heartbeat, Xander. I can feel your heart beat and your blood flow right under my fingers. I can't bloody wait to push into myself, to feel your hot flesh closing around me."

He lost himself in the words and didn't even notice the fingers until he felt the rest of Spike's hand press up against his backside.

"Tell me what I need to hear, luv," Spike ordered, and then Xander felt the fingers inside him curl and press into his prostate. He wailed and tried to push back into that heaven, but the hand on his back held him.

"Tell me," Spike repeated as he stroked the prostate again.

"Spike," he gasped, unable to even form words in his mind as Spike stroked the spot a third time. He felt his balls draw up in preparation, but the hand from his back darted between his legs and gave them a sharp tug. "Damn it," he yelped in surprise.

"Didn't give you permission to come," Spike announced
calmly as the hand returned to the back. "Tell me, pet. If you want to come, tell me."

"Damn it," he swore again as Spike returned to tenderly stroking his prostate, leaving him panting and struggling to thrust back, to make the strokes deeper, firmer. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Demon knows, pet. Let the demon have what it needs, luv." Spike continued the soft stroking, pulling the three fingers almost all the way out to add lube at one point. Xander felt like his genitals would explode or he would turn into a puddle of lust, maybe both. He heard himself begging please and harder over and over, but Spike simply continued until the pressure in his balls was such that he was sure the skin itself would split just to allow the come to escape its prison.

"Let the demon go, pet," Spike suggested as he continued, unaffected.

"Spike, please. It's really starting to hurt," he complained as he writhed ineffectively against the hand on his back. "Please, master." As the last words passed his mouth, Xander felt a quiet in his mind that he didn't remember ever possessing before. The fingers
"Whatever you want, luv," Spike murmured against his back as the vampire settled in behind him and pulled him up to his knees. He trembled with unreleased need as Spike settled in, and then he felt something pushing against his hole. Rather than wait, he pushed backwards, and Spike allowed him as he impaled himself on Spike, feeling the welcoming burn of the large cock. He tried to rock, but Spike wrapped an arm around his waist and held him still.

"What do ya need, luv?"

"You, master," he said, and he realized it was true. "I need you so much." This time Spike initiated the movement, rocking back and forth in small motions designed to tease more than satisfy.

"Whose are you, pet?"

"Yours master," Xander agreed happily.

"You're mine, pet, only mine," Spike said as the rocking increased.
"Yours master."

"You'll obey me."

"Yes..." Xander suddenly froze in the midst of the easy answer. He braced himself and thrust back as hard as he could even while he amended the answer that his tongue struggled to give. The motion hit his prostate and he lost all coherent thought for a heart beat's time. "I'll obey when I agree with you," he finally answered. He could feel as Spike lost the rhythm for a moment.

"Bloody hell, you're arguin' now?" Spike complained, but he thrust more aggressively now, and Xander felt a mouth start exploring his newly opened scar as Spike rested on his back.

"You're mine," Spike growled as he thrust and nipped the scar at the same time. Xander nearly lost his balance and had to grab the sheets in his still tied hands. Pleasure, pain, safety, lust, pleasure, pressure. Thoughts chased through his head until he almost lost track of the question.

"Yours," he finally answered. He felt himself nearly lunge off the bed when Spike bit down again, this time with
dull human teeth, even as a hand reached around and grabbed his erection. He bucked and thrust wildly, seeking his own release and simultaneously driving himself back onto Spike. His body stiffened with the beginning sequence of his own release, and it felt as if Spike suddenly grew to a monstrous, wonderful new thickness as he tightened his ass muscles. When he felt Spike stiffen and begin coming, his own release started in earnest. The pain in his genitals flared as he shot his first load, and then the release of pressure and the pleasure and the sudden freedom from pain and the lust and the feeling of Spike's release tangled around each other until he wanted only to live in that one moment, never come out the other side, but exist in that instant of ecstasy forever.

His arms and legs collapsed, sending him crashing to the bed, once again in the wet spot, and he didn't care. Spike seemed equally reluctant to move.

"Spike?"

" Bloody hell, pet, what? Can't a vamp get a little sleep?"

"Um, if you get off me, maybe. Better yet, how about getting out of me?" he suggested with a wiggle.
"Do that again and we'll be startin' up again a mite sooner than I expected," Spike commented dryly.

"Um, move?"

"Oi, fine we'll have this discussion now. How's the conversation in your head pet?"

"Oooookaaaay," he drawled. "But you just lost me somewhere."

"Not movin' 'til I know the demon's learned his place. Handy thing about vamp anatomy; long as I got enough blood in me body, can keep goin' as long as I want." Xander forced himself to try and relax at that bit of news. He wasn't uncomfortable, but he couldn't exactly call the position comfortable either with his legs spread and Spike's continued erection pinning him to the bed.

"Demon's fine, Spike. Honest. Hasn't been this quiet up here in years," he promised as he awkwardly gestured toward his own head. And are you serious, about the whole hard forever thing?"
"As long as I have enough blood in me."

"Okay, and that's just a little gross to even think about. Can we not discuss your feeding habits while bodily attached to each other 'cause I don't really want to know whose blood you're using to pin me here."

"Pig's blood," Spike admitted with a snort of disgust.

"Pig?" Surely he didn't hear that right.

"Wanker of a sire wouldn't help me if I hunted, and I needed help finding you, so I drank soddin' pig's blood."

"You drank pig's blood?"

"I already said it twice, don't ever bloody ask me about it again or I'll deny ever doin' somethin' so un-vampirely."

"That's romantic; you drank pig's blood for me, and how disturbing is it that I suddenly find pig's blood romantic? I mean I don't expect hearts and flowers kind of romance from a vamp, unless it's the actual heart-type heart as in human hearts, not that I would find that romantic, so don't go there, Spike."
"Well, I can see we didn't damage your ability to babble yourself into oblivion, pet."

"Will you move now? I'm getting pressed into a wet spot here."

"Mite worried about the demon, pet. Don't want your soul and your demon to get into some sort of disagreement when I'm asleep." Spike shifted slightly and Xander felt a weight on his shoulder, a fuzzy weight that tickled his skin.

"You think I'd hurt you?" He felt a weight far heavier than Spike's body descend on him. "You really think I'd stake you in your sleep?"

"Pet normally declares allegiance to a master, but you seemed to hedge a bit, luv. Somethin' about obeyin' when you agree." He felt fingers run through his hair before reaching up for his shackled hands. With one hand, Spike freed the buckle that connected the two cuffs, and Xander began to unbuckle the rest himself.

"I can't just agree to whatever you want," he explained. "I'm not going to help you start killing soccer moms."
"Oi, you think I'd go after soccer moms?" Spike asked in his best offended voice.

"Spike, you know what I mean. I'm not going there, even if I do love you."

"Do you?" Spike asked with such sincerity that he wondered where Spike had been for the last hour or so.

"Um, yeah. Don't normally do this with people I don't love," Xander gestured with a now free hand. "Why are you suddenly questioning whether I care for you?"

"Called me 'master' before."

"Oh hell, the demon still thinks of you as master, and quite frankly the demon would have promised to help you wipe out every girl scout in the country if that's what it took to get claimed, but I'm not the demon, Spike. Don't expect me to go crawling like I did..." He froze, not even wanting to conjure that memory when in bed with Spike, especially with Spike still firmly implanted in him. "That wasn't me," he finally finished.

"I feel like this whole thing isn't my life. Do you know
what I mean?" Xander almost whispered, unsure how to explain his feelings.

"Yep. With Dru for over a hundred years, don't feel quite normal to be with someone else, so I know the feeling."

"You wish you had her back," Xander tried not to feel pain at that, but he did anyway.

"Wish she wasn't dead, least not by Cassidy. Sent soddin' humans after her—whole bloody mob. Wish I could bring her back, dump her on Angel and let him deal with her bleedin' tea parties. Then I'd shag you again," Spike finished, and Xander felt loved—all of him, demon and soul.

"It's like everything changed with Cassidy, like my life is the second verse of some song when everyone else is singing the first verse."

"Prefer you not singing at all, pet. No offense." Silence fell for a moment, but he could feel Spike's need to ask. "Sorry? I mean, about the first bite and all?"

"Some parts, but not you. I'll keep singing the second verse forever to stay with you," Xander admitted,
knowing he sounded like a girl, but needing to say it and suspecting that Spike needed to hear it.

"So you're gonna stay in charge now?"

"Yep, the badly dressed Xan-man, who chose you back when the demon still lusted over Cassidy. That's the me that's large and in-charge," he joked, trying to act normal despite the unusual position. "In fact, the demon's gone mighty quiet in here," Xander suddenly realized. He closed his eyes and tried to feel those dark corners he had so long fought to bury. "He's happy," he finally announced in surprise. He had grown so used to that squirm of discontent and pain in his subconscious that he didn't quite know what to do with a happy brain.

"And are you?" Spike asked as he felt the vampire slowly pull out. He hissed in discomfort and tried to relax as he felt the tugging at his muscles. The weight returned, this time much lighter as the vampire lay half on the bed and half on his left side.

"Yep, right where I want to be." Xander announced. "Wet spot excluded of course."

"You'll live," Spike said as Xander felt an arm slip around
his waist and pull him off the wet spot and into Spike's chest. Spike curled around him and Xander felt more than heard the vibrations start. After a moment, he recognized the sound. He closed his eyes, comfortable and safe, unsurprised when his own demon responded, a soft purr coming from his own chest as he drifted off to sleep.

The End

Book 2

Musical Wars

by

Litgal

1

Real Life

Xander woke to the warmth of the bed he now shared with Spike, his lover's arm still curled around his naked waist. He had to admit that he felt more whole than he had in recent memory. The voice—which he now could recognize as his own personal demon—had withdrawn
into a happy curl in the back of his brain. He felt the
demon purring at the feeling of *master's* arm wrapped
around him, but the feeling was distant enough that he
didn't start an actual auditory rumble himself.

"Mornin' pet. Bit early, yet," Spike murmured from
behind him.

"Yeah, I just feel like I've slept for a week," he admitted
as he squirmed a little. For the time that he stayed with
Cassidy, he had been half-asleep, locked within his own
mind as the demon ran the show, and now he itched to
get back to actually living. Speaking of which...

“So what comes next?” he asked Spike. The silence held
for a long time, and he wondered if Spike had gone back
to sleep on him. He turned all the way around so that he
lay on his side facing Spike instead of spooning with
him. Blue eyes watched him before Spike turned onto
his back and turned his gaze at the ceiling.

“France maybe, haven’t been to China for a while,
pet. Have some good memories of that place,” Spike
finally answered without moving from his place on the
bed, one arm under Xander and the other curled under
his own head. Xander relaxed into the loose embrace,
dripping one of his own arms over Spike’s chest.

“Um, I was kinda thinking of things like how do I tell my mother I’ve suddenly taken up with a man...although the whole vamp thing does seem to trump the whole man thing—not that I'm planning to tell her about the vamp thing," he hurried to say, horrified at even the passing thought of having either of those conversations with his mother.

“What? You plannin’ on staying here?” Spike turned his head and cocked a single eyebrow.

“I sure hadn’t considered the option of picking up and moving to China.”

“Didn’t say move, luv. Could just travel through, see the sights.” Spike’s eyes returned to the ceiling, but he could feel the sudden tension in Spike’s muscles.

“And I’m suddenly feeling like this is a little more than just a passing thought.” Xander studied Spike's face, the avoidance of eye contact and the subtle tensing of Spike's chest beneath his own hand.

“ Might be. Just don’t want to be round here too long,
not good for the health.” The nonchalant tone contrasted with the tense twitching of various muscles.

“Angel?” When Spike looked over in alarm, Xander rushed to explain his thinking. “I heard how that asshole talks to you. He’s probably a decent person to Cordelia ‘cause she sure seems to be pretty loyal, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t a real jerk to us.” Xander didn’t miss the narrowing of the eyes at the word ‘us.’

“Don’t like my sire, pet?”

“Don’t like that he doesn’t seem to like you,” Xander explained honestly.

“Yeah, these’s that. More interested in gettin’ you away before the fireworks, luv.”

“Fireworks?” At his confusion, Spike rolled his eyes and let out a sigh.

“Oi, you’re smarter than this, pet. You know full well there’s goin’ to be trouble.”

“I think you’re overestimating me, Spike,” he laughed, but the look in Spike’s eye stopped his laugh in less than
a second. The vampire’s eyes flashed gold and his eyebrows had lowered in a classic look of annoyance bordering on homicide. “Um, Spike?” he asked, suddenly unsure in the face of such an unexpected response.

“I’ve heard how you’ve talked about yourself, pet, and it stops now,” Spike ordered, his voice low and soft and indescribably commanding.

“I don’t kn—”

“Stop,” Spike cut him off mid-word. “You talk in your sleep, pet. Night after...that,” here Spike waved absent-mindedly toward the far end of the room where Xander remembered spending an evening chained to the wall by an angry Spike, “Night after that you talked all night. Laughed at first. You couldn’t shut up even in your sleep, pet.” Spike stopped and tightened the arm around him, grabbing him in both arms and pulling him into a tight embrace that left him resting on Spike’s chest, breathless. “Then I heard what ya said, what ya thought of yourself--won’t have it. No one insults my pet,” Spike ended with a declaration; his tone of voice showed his willingness to enforce the proclamation.
“Spike, you don’t und—”

“I *do* understand, pet. You fought vampires at night, fought your own demon every wakin’ minute, and you still kept it together.”

“Not very damn together, Spike. I barely graduated. I’ve never held a job more than five weeks.” He could feel the tears start; he never cried in front of people. Alone he turned into the mighty manly water works, but he never cried in front of people and now he struggled to hold it all in, to not show Spike how truly weak he was.

“Sh, pet. It’s all right.” Spike simply held on, a cool hand now rubbing up and down his backbone in a gesture that suddenly set the tears free.

“God, I’m pathetic,” he finally hiccupped out.

“Bloody hell, pet. You’ve survived ten times more than most people. You survived what my Dru didn’t—you fought the demon inside your soul and won.” Those words turned the tears off as quickly and the comforting hand had released them.

“You believe that?” Xander asked, unable to believe that
Spike had compared him to the late Dru and found him better in any way, shape, or form. He still remembered the night when Spike had told him that he would never be more than a pet, a human companion who would be protected but always inferior.

“Just don’t ask me to say it again, pet. I’m evil; I’m not supposed to do this supportive bollocks.”

“Deal. As long as you’re willing to ignore reality and believe it…” He stopped at the growl that immediately erupted from the chest below his cheek. “Right, not insulting the vampire’s pet.”

“Right. Now would ya like to try and tell me why there’s goin’ to be fireworks? You already know the answer.” Spike loosened his grip, and Xander returned to his place lying beside Spike.

“Not July yet, so I’m coming up clueless.”

“Think about minions, pet—minions and masters.” Xander furrowed his brow for a moment before a possible theory began to form, and even the fuzzy edges of the hypothesis he had formed caused his breath to catch in his throat, panic causing the demon
buried in his subconscious to suddenly growl its way to life and stir.

“Oh shit, I killed Cassidy,” he whispered. He almost laughed when he felt the joy and pride from the small piece of demon he had inherited from Cassidy’s bite. Once the demon had howled for Cassidy and happily groveled on the floor for the now-dead vampire. Now the demon belonged to Spike so much that it roared with pleasure at the thought of killing Spike’s enemies. However, he pushed the demon aside with practiced ease, and he felt the demon yield to his prodding. “And because Cassidy is dead, a lot of minions are running around without a master to control them.”

“Yeah, and Peaches sure didn’t accept any minions, leavin’ them to take shelter on the streets,” Spike added.

“And without a master, they’ll hunt indiscriminately,” he finished, suddenly getting a clear picture of just how dangerous the streets of L.A. would be when the minions found enough courage or suffered enough hunger to return to hunting.

“That’s part of it, pet. But many of those minions were older—some were even childer of fallen masters. Ya
need childer or other younger masters if you want workers who can do more than eviscerate enemies.”

“How many is ‘some’?” Xander asked nervously, suddenly very afraid of the picture that began to solidify in his imagination.

“From what I saw in his soddin’ little ‘court,’ I’d say at least fifteen or twenty vamps had enough years under ‘em.” He didn’t even need to ask Spike what ‘enough’ meant; he knew.

“Oh shit. Fifteen or twenty vamps are going to try and set up as masters,” he whispered in horror.

“Yeah, pet, they are, and then they’ll fight over minions and territory.”

“Oh god, Gunn.” Spike suddenly growled, and for the first time, Xander felt his demon urge him to yield to Spike, to show his neck and kneel at his master’s feet. He had to gasp and grab the headboard to prevent his demon from hijacking his body.

“Pet?” Spike had gone from angry at the mention of Xander’s friend to concerned in 0.6 seconds flat.
“I’m fine,” he muttered while he pressed his eyes closed and fought for control. Always before, the demon wanted something so different from what he wanted so that he could fight the urges, that is until Cassidy captured him and he just gave up and yielded total control to the demon. Now, the demon wanted Spike and he wanted Spike and he struggled to divert the demon’s desire to submit to his master. He loved Spike, but he had finally earned the respect he had always wanted, and he wouldn’t give that up just to allow the demon to sit at master’s feet.

“Luv, you’re not fine; you’re not talkin’.”

“Yeah, the demon just doesn’t like it when we fight,” he explained briefly as he struggled to get his breathing and his heart rate to return to normal.

“You got control then?” Spike asked with his head cocked to one side.

“Yep. Just having a small psychotic moment—it’ll pass.” Spike nodded slowly, head still cocked to one side in a concerned expression that he was quickly loving to love on *his* vampire. Oh yeah, like the voice in his
head wasn’t enough, he now had to have delusions that Spike was his; that’s not the way the power ran in this relationship, and he knew it. It might take longer than he thought to get past this latest piece of psychosis. He finally pulled himself together enough to continue. “We aren’t leaving with a city-wide vampire disaster looming on the horizon.”

“Little melodramatic, pet.”

“Still not leaving, blondie.”

“And if I said we were?”

“Are you saying that?”

“You’re mine, pet. You gave yourself to me.”

“I did, but that doesn’t mean that I’ll do everything you tell me,” Xander responded after a long pause. He could hear his own demon grumbling unhappily. Spike appeared equally unhappy if the pinched expression were anything to go by.

“And what does it mean to ya then, mate?”
“Means when push comes to shove, I’ll always pick you,” he hurried to assure both demons, the one muttering in his own chest as well as the gold-eyed one lying on the bed next to him. “Means I’ll always fight on your side and listen to your advice... and love the feeling of your hand on my skin.” He added the last as he took Spike’s hand and laid it on his own stomach. The cool fingers spread out and then began rubbing, and he could feel Xander Jr. begin to take notice, his cock twitching slightly at the feeling. “Means no one else in the world will ever touch me like this and I’ll never depend on anyone else this much and I’ll never trust anyone else to know who I really am and what I really feel.”

“But no blind obedience.”

“Nope, not really good at the obedience thing. Not even very good at the following directions thing, so obedience is *way* out of my league.”

“So what do ya expect to do round here, pet? You want to go find your Gunn, tell him what’s comin’? He’ll want to know how ya know, pet.”

“Yeah, I figured that one out already. How much time to we have before all hell breaks lose?”
“A vampire war is not *all* hell, trust me. Got sent to hell for a month once when one of Dru’s spells went wonky...at least a hell dimension...was a mite bit messier than one little vampire war that most humans won’t even notice. They’ll just pass it off as one more gang war.”

“Fine, how long until partial hell?”

“Right now, those that’re older are probably tryin’ to set up territory, maybe trying to attract some minions. They’ll keep quiet for another few days. May have more vamps hunting on the streets now since minions hunt more without someone to control ‘em. Once the territories get marked, the vamps’ll start fighting over who owns what. Could be a day or a week, doubt any longer than that.” Xander fought to concentrate as Spike hand continued its movement. "Unless some old master comes in and fights them all into submission," Spike finished, and he could feel himself tremble under Spike's talented hands.

"Hey, no fair. You've already had your chance at the naughty touching, and I haven't," Xander pointed out as he captured the hand and brought it up to his lips so that
he could kiss the pads of the fingers before releasing it. Slowly he raised himself and slipped one leg over Spike's body so that he crouched over the vampire and looked down at the amused blue eyes. The demon in his head shifted uncomfortably, and Xander shoved at it unmercifully before returning his attention to Spike.

"I don't have to be fair, pet. I'm evil."

"Be quietly evil, please," he whispered into Spike's ear as he reached out and took an earlobe between his teeth and nipped before moving down to suck and lick at Spike's neck. He could feel Spike's erection begin growing next to his own, the two cocks nestled together between their bodies. He moved his mouth down to a collarbone, exploring it from the neck out to the shoulder. Remembering how he felt when under Spike, he pulled back slightly and blew across the still damp skin. He felt Spike tremble, and he couldn't resist nipping again as the skin under him shivered. From the movement he felt below, he guessed it was a good twitch.

Sliding down the slim body, he turned his attention to one nipple, the darker skin already hardened and wrinkled into a point. He ran his tongue around the edge
of the nipple before closing his mouth over the skin and sucking. The body under him bucked, and he simply transferred his mouth to the second nipple while he used his fingers to alternately stroke and pinch the first. When he raised his head, he found himself straddling a demon in full game face.

He reached up, curious, and ran his thumb over the ridges on Spike's forehead. He had expected the skin to be tougher or thicker, but it wasn't. The soft skin followed the ridges that had formed under the skin, and he followed these formations with his thumb, aware that Spike now squirmed beneath him. A sudden image of Ferengi oo-max flashed through his mind and he felt a giggle slip out.

"Oi, not proper to giggle when you're feelin' up your lover, pet."

"I just..." Xander laughed again, but at least this time it came out a snort rather than a giggle, slightly more manly. "I had an image of a Ferengi getting his ears stroked," he admitted. Spike simply rolled his eyes as he slipped back into his human face.

"Bloody hell, why do I get all the loons?"
"Hey, you made the bumps go away!" he complained, frustrated that he hadn't gotten to finish his exploration.

"You laughed at 'em, luv. That just evil, and *not* in a good way."

"Bring them back and I'll do something to make it up to them," he promised in a low voice as he moved up and brought his tongue out to touch the bridge of Spike's nose. Almost instantly, he could feel the skin wrinkle under his tongue. He ran his tongue up the ridges, feeling it bounce over every bump as he worked his way back to the brow ridges, which he now explored. Again, after he had left each damp patch behind him, he would pull back and blow over the skin, and each time, he could feel the resulting tremor in the body under him.

When he had explored every inch, he moved down to the mouth, but he felt strangely hesitant; he'd never before initiated a kiss with a man, he always responded to what the other wanted. True, he could count the number of kisses on one hand: the men at the club and Spike last night. However, he didn't quite know how to approach such an intimate act, and he certainly didn't know how to do with a partner whose fangs could easily damage him.
Spike must have felt the hesitation because he moved for the first time, slipping a hand behind his head and pulling him into that mouth. He felt their lips connect, and he instantly opened, giving Spike access to his whole mouth even as he gingerly stretched out his tongue and explored the new shapes: the sharp little front teeth, the long fangs on the top, the still dull teeth on the bottom. Exploration over, he turned to truly kissing his lover, his lips brushing over Spike's lips; using his teeth to gently nip Spike's lower lip, his tongue wrapping around Spike's fang until he could feel the prick of the point.

When he had teased until he though he would die, he started sliding down Spike's body, kissing and nipping as he moved in on his target. However, when faced with Spike's cock, he suddenly froze, completely unsure of how to approach such an act. He could feel his own heartbeat speed up as he considered the fact that here he was, with no practical experience at all, in bed with a 120 demon who had probably had more lovers in his life than Xander had ever known people. God, what if he screwed this up? What if he just sucked at it? What if he couldn't suck at it? What if he didn't like sucking at it? He tried hard to control his breathing, but he knew he had failed when he felt Spike's hand at his head.
"It’s okay, pet. I don't expect anythin' here," Spike crooned with a soft caress to his hair.

"It's not..." he didn't know how to finish.

"Not what?" Spike asked with infinite patience, not even complaining about the hard cock with a single drop of milky-white pre-cum slowly sliding down the shaft.

"I don't know what..." he stopped again. God, how pathetic of a lover was he? Surely Spike could find someone who didn't hyperventilate at the thought of being intimate. Could probably even find someone who knew what the hell he was doing.

"'S'all right. Just touch it," Spike suggested. "Run your finger up it." He reached out and did what Spike said, running through the pre-cum drop as he trailed two fingers up and down the shaft. Remember the older man from the bar, he slowly lifted two damp fingers to his mouth and sucked off the fluid. From the way Spike gasped for breath, he guessed that he had done right.

"Touch the head, pet." He did just that. He played with the folds of skin that surrounded the head, pulling them up to play with the unfamiliar foreskin. When he let go,
the foreskin slipped back down, the head barely poking out. He ran a finger around the slit of the head and felt his own cock twitch in sympathetic joy as Spike threw back his head and gasped for breath. "Go on, pet," Spike encouraged him in a shaky voice, and he suddenly felt empowered—he could make a 120 year old demon gasp for breath that he didn't need. With that encouragement, he lowered his head and slipped his tongue along the slit. The pre-cum, salty and slightly fishy, tasted much stronger now that he took it from its source, licking along the head and shaft to recover the fluid. Taking a deep breath, he slipped his mouth over the head and twirled his tongue around the end as he began sucking.

"Bloody hell," gasped a voice under him, and he felt a hand grab his wrist, pushing his hand to the base of Spike's penis. "Press here," Spike ordered and he felt his fingers pressed into Spike's flesh. "Otherwise, we're gonna be done right quick." He would have smiled at the thought of making Spike lose control, but his mouth had other work. He slid his mouth up and down the shaft, letting his tongue play, wiggling over the line that ran down the underside of Spike's cock and to his balls. He pulled back his head and worked his tongue under the edge of the foreskin, pulling it gently to make room for
his exploration. He slid down again and sucked as hard as he could. It was almost like it didn't matter what he did, Spike still gasped and squirmed.

Opening his mouth as wide as he could, he sucked in as much air as possible through his mouth, causing the cold air to rush by Spike's damp skin, and the vampire bucked so hard that he found himself gagging as the cock hit the back of his throat. He knew that many people could relax enough to deep throat, but either Spike was larger than normal or his own throat was smaller than normal because there was no way he could get that down. Instead he pulled back slightly as he tried to control his gagging. Spike must not have noticed because he continued to rock his hips up, so Xander simply closed his fist around the base of Spike's cock and squeezed so that the entire length couldn't slip in too far and choke him.

Then he relaxed and let Spike thrust while he worked his tongue around whichever part of Spike's anatomy he could reach at the time, careful to make sure that he didn't get caught in the foreskin as Spike thrust up more and more powerfully. He released the fingers Spike had positioned as he felt the muscles tremble under him, and with one final thrust, he felt his mouth fill with the strong
taste of semen. He gasped, and then started coughing wildly as he felt the fluid trickle into his lungs. Pulling his head to the side and still coughing, he closed his hand around Spike's shaft tightly as Spike continued to slam his hips up as one spurt followed another. Soon, the movement stilled, and he released Spike to concentrate on his own pathetic attempts to breath.

"Alright, pet?" Spike asked as he finally managed to catch his breath and cough out the irritating fluid.

"Yeah, less than impressive end, there," he gestured toward the bed as he felt embarrassment color his cheeks.

"Not complainin'," Spike commented mildly, "but doesn't seem like we're finished yet." He suddenly felt himself flipped onto his back and his own cock surrounded by a slightly warmer than room temperature mouth. He reached down to grab Spike's head, to touch, to do something, but Spike caught his hands in his own and pressed them into the mattress on either side of his hips even while sliding all the way down on Xander's cock, Xander struggled not to thrust up as a squeezing sensation milked his cock before Spike slowly pulled back with a delicious suction.
He struggled to free himself and respond to the onslaught of pleasure, but his hands remained pinned to the bed, and Spike lay on his legs, immobilizing them completely. All he could do was squirm as Spike deliberately and slowly alternated between sucking as a talented tongue explored the head of his cock and deep throating as powerful muscles massaged the shaft. He cried out and gave up on control, thrusting wildly, but Spike pinned him to the bed and the little movement he managed simply caused the slender figure to move up and down with him. Spike laughed, even with a cock in his mouth, and remained in control as he slid up and down more quickly now. Xander screamed as he felt his balls tighten and his leg muscles begin to tremble; he arched off the bed and gasped for breath as he shot one spurt after another, each neatly caught in Spike's mouth and swallowed without choking, sputtering or gagging.

Wow. Just wow. He couldn't even form other words as Spike slid up and pulled him into an embrace. Yep, wow covered it. He only wished he could have offered Spike such a good time, but he could hardly be expected to compete with 120 years of experience. Experience that could leave a person with no words in the brain other than wow.
"Wow," he finally said out loud. Spike chuckled.

"Pet, you are a treat. Got half a mind to chain you here and keep ya in my bed all the time." The two lay there, tangled in each other's limbs until he felt his bladder begin to complain about the lack of attention.

“Well that was a nice diversion, but it still seems to me that we have to get back to real life, starting with a pottie break."

“Real life’s overrated, pet.” Spike mumbled without moving.

“Yeah, but the longer I’m away, the more difficult it’s going to be to explain.”

“Not dark yet.”

“Not vampire yet. I mean,” he stumbled when he realized what he had said, “not vampire ever, not going there, never, like not ever.”

“Know what ‘never’ means, pet. Demon got away from ya there?”
“Yeah, I think so. Either that or I just opened my mouth before consulting with my brain. I do that,” he muttered.

“Noticed once or twice,” Spike agreed without rancor as he rolled over onto his stomach, facing away. “Goin’ to Gunn’s then?” Xander heard the tremor in Spike’s voice, and he wondered how much control it took for Spike to say that without pinning him to the bed and chaining him to the wall.

“Have to talk to my mother, Spike.” He didn’t miss the fact that Spike suddenly relaxed, the contours of his body eased so that Spike’s back, which had been a roadmap of muscles leading from bone to bone, smoothed out into an expanse of pale skin. “I won’t talk to Gunn without you there,” he promised.

“What ya going to tell your mum?”

“God, I figure I’ll figure that out when I get there.” Spike turned his head and raised one eyebrow in amusement.

“So you’re just going to blither and hope she figures out the main points?” Spike teased.
“Ha-ha, Mr. Evil Dead. Do you want me to meet you back here?”

“No, don’t come here alone.” Spike must have noticed the hurt and confusion because a slim hand reached out and caressed brown curls. “You can't watch out for critters followin' ya 'cause you don’t have vamp senses, least-wise not most of the time. I don’t want some stray vamp followin’ ya back here. I can meet you at your mum’s or you can get to the club before dark and I’ll meet ya there.”

“Um, club. I don’t really feel up to a really long conversation with my mom. I’m still trying to figure out how to break the whole gay thing, so I’m thinking that I’m just going for the whole moving out thing. I’ll get my stuff, so I’ll probably have two or three bags.”

“Bloody hell, you’d better not bring any of those god-awful clothes of yours. If ya don’t have decent kit, I’ll buy ya more.”

“Is that an order, master?” Xander allowed his head to drop and he looked at Spike from beneath his eyelids. He watched as the rim of Spike's eyes glittered gold.
“Bloody hell yes, your clothes give me a headache,” Spike grumbled. "If you show up with one flower, I'll shred your whole bleedin' wardrobe."

"Deal," he laughed. If giving up his wardrobe made Spike happy, he'd do it. Besides, if he didn't fight about the clothes, he thought he might have a better chance with the music because he was not going to listen to punk music all the time, even if it was beginning to grow on him. He slid off the bed and headed for the bathroom as he mentally reviewed the contents of his room at home. Yep, Spike was about to meet his collection of country music greats.

2

Coming Out

Xander slipped into the apartment a good hour before his mother would come home and two hours before sunset. The apartment felt strangely empty to him, as
though he had never lived there, but he pushed those thoughts aside as he grabbed a couple of bags and went into the room that had been his since the night when he and his mother had snuck out of their last apartment without paying the rent--two weeks after his father had left them without a word or enough money to pay the monthly bills.

The music collection and trinkets of his childhood went into the suitcase first. If he ran out of room, he had no doubt that Spike really would buy him new clothes, but the pictures and comics that had given him an escape from life during his early years--those were irreplaceable. He packed the comic book he won from Jesse, the pictures from his life in Sunnydale, his country music CD's and cassettes. He used to have more, but his father had once "punished" him by breaking every single one of his CD's one at a time. He'd had to save a lot of allowances just to replace his favorites.

He felt the demon's anger rise to the surface of his mind, and he struggled to push it back. Four years he had fought with the demon, but now it just seemed so much harder. He almost wished he had waited until Spike could come because his demon seemed so much more controllable around Spike; without Spike he was back to
the constant struggle that had become such a part of his life that he didn't even realized how much effort it took. Obviously he wasn't strong enough to dominate the demon in any permanent or meaningful sense, so what did that have to say about his long-term mental health, he wondered as he sorted his clothes. Wearable jeans, underwear, and plain shirts in one small pile in a knapsack. Rummage sale rejects, Hawaiian prints, and just plain ugly went into the large pile on the bed.

When Spike got tired of him, would he even be able to control the demon anymore? Would he become prey to whatever vampire discovered his secret? His own mind formed an image, and the horror caused him to actually drop the load of underwear in his arms. The demon's answer seemed pretty clear: Angel. If Spike didn't want him, the other master from Spike's line would claim him. The demon started pushing, bringing forward thoughts of Angel's broad shoulders in that sleeveless t-shirt at the theater, the sight of the large vampire forcing Spike to submit in the dark, the knowledge that Angel was so much older than Spike. Yeah, the demon didn't have a problem with the thought of Angel, but Xander fought back. Angel had rejected Spike; Angel had hurt and abandoned Spike. Angel wasn't worthy. Angel couldn't always control himself if the stories of Angelus
in Sunnydale were anything to go by. That made him weak. He focused on the thought of Angel torn between the demon and the soul until his own demon finally relented and retreated. He bent over to pick up the dropped underwear as he felt a shiver run through his body—either the demon's desire or his own revulsion, he wasn't sure which.

Luckily, his mother interrupted his internal conflict with a happy shout.

"Xander!" his mom shouted happily before standing frozen in the doorway to his room. He could see her eyes harden as she took in his activity. "Alexander," she began again, far more cautiously, "it's so nice to have you home. I expected you to come home a few days ago."

"Yeah, I didn't mean to worry you," he sheepishly offered as he tried to mentally add up the number of days. Let's see—two days sleeping in Spike's lair, two or three days captured by Cassidy, the night demon-bar hopping. So not of the good. Okay, he could bluff his way though this. "Things were so messed up in..." he totally blanked on his cover story for a moment before it came back to him. "San Diego that I had to stay there a few extra days to straighten things up because they were really screwed
up...with inventory." He just shut up the minute he realized that he had blown his chance to get away without drama. His mother had her stony look that made it clear that short of physical violence he wasn't getting out without a lecture.

"Really? I thought you said you were going to San Francisco." The fists on the hips, squared off don't-challenge-mother posture told him how absolutely screwed he was.

"Okay, I was in town," he admitted before she could trick the truth out of him. "There was a problem with a competitor and I had to check out a few places. I just didn't want to have to drag myself back here."

"And you were staying with..."

"A friend," he offered, but he flinched at the uncertainty in his own voice.

"Right, a friend who has invited you to stay a few extra days, perhaps?" He watched as his mother gestured toward the bed, the open duffle bag, the suitcase waiting on the floor.
"Um, a friend who asked me to move in?" he responded warily, just waiting for the maternal eruption.

"A week!" his mother screeched, her voice stabbing into his brain. "You're moving in with someone after a week!" The fists left the hips now so that the arms could get in a good swing as she paced, partially in the room and partially in the hallway. Finally she stopped and glared at him. "I thought I raised you better than to fall for this big-city shit about free love and moving in with each other. God, is she pregnant, Xander?"

"What? Ah, no. Just...no,"

"And you're using protection? God, please tell me you're using protection every time because you do not want your life ruined by getting some girl pregnant."

"Geez, Mom, I *so* don't think there's ever going to be risk of that," Xander snorted and then froze at his mother suddenly shocked expression.

"Xander?" she asked, her voice suddenly cautious, as though afraid he would bolt for the door, which was actually pretty perceptive of her since he really was eyeing the space between her body and the door frame
and estimating whether or not he could run for it. "Xander, is there something you want to talk about?"

"I, um...well...uh....no?"

"Oh god, you're gay," he mother suddenly stepped into the room and sat heavily on the edge of the bed. "I should have known considering some of the girls you brought home. That Gretta girl had more testosterone in her than your father."

"Gabi," he correctly quietly. He couldn't exactly deny it, but he sure hadn't planned on this conversation tonight.

"God, please tell me he's not that pushy," his mother asked, her hand running absent-mindedly through her graying hair.

"Surprisingly, no."

"Surprisingly?" his mother snapped back, picking up on the word and brandishing it like a weapon. "Why 'surprisingly'? What kind of man are you seeing?" she demanded.

"He's nice," he quickly declared. "He's a very kind
man." Oh god, please don't ever let Spike find out about *that* comment or he would never live it down; however, he didn't think proclaiming Spike's evilness would win points with his mother. "He has his own place downtown, a nice one bedroom with its own laundry. You'd like him."

"And you're using protection, right?"

"Mom, I'm not having the 'safe-sex' talk with you," he squirmed as he tried hard to keep any thought of sex as far away from any thought of his mother as possible. The two just did not ever need to exist in the same place at the same time.

"Oh good lord, you're blushing to even think about it. Did you have the guts to talk to your boyfriend about this or are you just trusting luck to protect you from your own stupidity? If you can't be responsible enough to talk about this like an adult, you have no business doing anything with another man until you grow up. So, did you use protection or not?" Xander stood beside his dresser, pressing himself into the wall as he tried to remind himself that his mother was speaking out of fear and shock. Tried to remind the growling demon in his head of that too.
"I can take care of myself, Mom," he chided gently. "He's a good man, and I'm fine." Of course, he actually doubted each of the three statements to varying degrees, but he really didn't need to worry his mother with details.

"Then tell me you weren't stupid enough to risk dying just so you could get your rocks off." Xander almost choked at the crass expression coming out of his mother's mouth.

"Mom," he began a little louder this time. "I'm not talking to you about my sex life. Please trust me when I say I know what I’m doing." He tried hard not to look guilty or sheepish or confused despite the fact that he felt all three. He watched as the anger drained out of his mother as though some psychic plug had been pulled.

"Tell me that he's good to you," she whispered, tears clear in her eyes as she looked up at him. He went over and sat next to her on the bed.

"He is. He makes me happier than I've been since we moved here."
"Please, Xander, please tell me he makes you happier than you've ever been because you've had too damn little happiness in your life." He could hear his mother's voice crack as the tears started now. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen his mother cry; she didn't even cry when his father, in a rare mood for a physical fight, had backhanded her into the coffee pot. Brown stains had decorated the wall of the kitchen until they had moved out of that house in Sunnydale looking for a better life.

"He does, Mom; he honestly does," he promised her as he put an arm around her shoulders. "Maybe we can come over for my birthday on Thursday," he found himself offering.

"Right," his mother snapped out of it as if they had been discussing nothing more emotional than the weather. She quickly swiped the back of her hand across her face as she stood up. "Thursday will be the big birthday bash. I'm getting off work an hour or two early, so the three of us can order pizza and get some movies."

"Um, I can't make it until dark," he objected. At his mother's curious look, he continued. "I still have work, Mom. I just started, so I can't just take off early like
some people. In fact, I have to finish packing and get my butt to work before dark," he finished as he look at the sun hovering just above nearby roofs. "I wanted to talk with you, but I didn't think you'd be home this late."

"So you're leaving?" she asked, and he tried not to hear how small her voice was.

"I have to get to work," he explained. "I'll call; this time I won't forget," he promised.

"Don't let him forget how special you are," she whispered as she smoothed his hair away from his face before turning to leave the room. "And if you want your father to know, you'll just have to tell him yourself because I am not going to talk to that asshole about this. If I do, you'll be bailing me out of jail for homicide. Your father is a closed-minded Neanderthal," she announced briskly as she walked out of his room and into the bathroom.

He heard the door shut and the lock turn before the water started. Recognizing the dismissal, he decided to head to the club and see if he still had a job. Oh god, he had forgotten to even ask Spike if he could keep his job. The demon mewed in distress as Xander stamped
down on it and decided that he was going to keep his damn job whether the pushy vampire liked it or not. Unless of course he had already lost the job. He picked up his two bags and headed for the door. When he stood at the apartment's front door, he looked down at the key in his hand. With a sigh, he turned the lock on the doorknob, put the key on the counter, and then closed the door behind him. No going back he decided.

Xander arrived at Safari mere minutes before opening. Half-dressed men rushed by him as he slipped in the back door by the freezer and slipped into the kitchen, hoping to find T. Instead a large man with long hair pulled up under a fishnet cap worked in the kitchen.

"Um, have you seen T?" he asked as he pressed himself up against the prep table so that he didn't get in the way of the stream of people rushing back and forth and put the bags on the floor before carefully maneuvering them so they were half under the prep table and not in anyone's way.

"Out front," the man snapped before he grabbed a sheet from the oven and began loading trays.
"Move it sweetcheeks," ordered a familiar voice, and he turned to see a short Hispanic stripper sneering at him. "You back to get your final check after walking out?" Xander finally put a name with the face: Luis. He was about to respond when a deep, familiar voice interrupted him before he could begin.

"Hey, hey! It's the much-missed food runner," Charlie quipped as he stole a potato skin out from under the cook's nose. When the cook glared, Charlie gave a small laugh and winked at the man. "You know you love me, Ross." Charlie turned back to him. "So, you running away from home, then?" Xander nervously shifted the two bags with his feet.

"Um, meeting someone here," he admitted.

"Well you go, boy. Shy little virgin one night, moving in with the beau a week later. Knew you had it in you," Charlie used a shoulder to push into him. "Course this means that I don't get my shot at you, but I can wait. When you get tired of this new man in your life, you come on back to your first crush, deal?" Charlie asked with a wink, and Xander found himself blushing and choking on air as he tried to come back with a
response to that. Charlie just laughed as he started for the floor in the Tarzan outfit. "Drop the bags in my dressing room." He called as he walked out the kitchen.

"Suck up," Luis snarled as he grabbed a tray of food and headed for the floor. Xander picked up the bags and headed for the back so that he could put them away before facing the rest of the club. It wasn't until he had reached Charlie's dressing room and stowed the bags in the small bathroom that he realized that Xander Jr. hadn't even reacted. He could still look at Charlie and recognize a near-god of a man, but he wasn't the man Xander Jr. wanted. Nope, Xander Jr. was more into lithe and blonde. Shaking his head at how much life could change in a week, Xander went out onto the quickly filling floor and looked for T.

"My god, darlin', it's about time you got your ass back here," sang out a voice as soon as he stepped into the hallway. Charlie had obviously snitched on him.

"T," he responded happily and then realized that he really didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, you're not getting out of it that easy, you start spilling before I call Gunn and the guys and have them sit
on you till you fess up," T threatened while opening a door and gesturing for him to follow. Inside he found T already perched on the edge of a well-worn desk with various stacks of paperwork waiting patiently.

"Um, I don't know where to start," he finally admitted as he dropped into one of the two metal folding chairs.

"This vamp hunting thing, was this just cover so you could run off with your boy?" T asked in a more serious tone than he had ever heard the man use. Serious with just a hint of anger.

"No!"

"Well then?" T asked after a long silence.

"Spike and I didn't...I mean, we obviously did, but not until after. Oh shit." Xander couldn't even get his thoughts together enough to figure out how to tell the story without revealing too much. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and shoved his demon as far back as he could before he started again. "Spike wanted to kill a vamp named Cassidy--the same vamp who was in charge of the nest where Frederick got killed. We've been hunting him. Spike knows how to hunt vamps better
than anyone I've ever seen, and I helped him find places, including the place Frederick died. We got attacked, I got hurt, Cassidy got dead, Spike got me somewhere safe, and now I'm back." Yep, enough truth to sound true, but not so much truth to get himself kicked out or Spike staked.

"And the bags?" T asked, this time in a far more mild tone.

"Well after the whole killing thing, we sorta, ya know." He blushed and then looked up when T started laughing.

"Shit, darlin', I always thought that once you found someone you'd lose that innocent charm, but you've still got the stuff to make a man's heart beat faster." T stood and clapped him on the shoulder before heading for the door. "I'm glad you came back; some of the regulars been askin' about you. In that outfit you'll clean up in tips again tonight." Huh? Xander looked down and realized that he had dressed in club-wear with a deep sapphire blue shirt tucked into tight black jeans. He hadn't even paid attention to what he had pulled out when Spike had opened the armoire and pointed to a shelf with clothes that would fit him.
"I don't know if Spike..." he stopped at T's suddenly suspicious expression. "T?"

"Oh cutie, please don't tell me you've fallen in with some man who'll tell you what to do every minute of the day."

"No," he quickly responded; he didn't need to have T's sympathy. "I told Spike I'd meet him here and I don't know when he'll show up," he finished weakly. T's expression remained suspicious, but the man slowly nodded.

"That's okay, you can work until he shows up. When you leave, just give me a head's up, okay? So, *are* you going to keep working?"

"Don't really know yet, might be too busy," Xander added the last when he saw the worry and disappointment in T's eyes. Shit, he'd only met the man a week ago, his disapproval shouldn't matter so damn much, but it did. He never wanted T to know just how much he needed Spike and Spike's approval.

"Well, you let me know. Going to be some mighty disappointed folks around here if you don't." T quietly
pointed out while opening the office door for Xander to leave first. He didn't have any idea what to say to T that would be both true and stop the look of pity and worry.

"I'm happy," he finally settled on.

"Good for you sweetie," T said as he closed the office door and ushered him back to the kitchen. "You just make sure that you do what's right for you." Xander only wished he knew what that would be; it was hard to tell with both his own thoughts and his demon rattling around. How could he have assumed the demon was simply his own dark thoughts for all those years?

"Ross, this is Xander; he'll be running food when he isn't dropping it on the floor," T introduced him with a wink.

"Um, hi Ross," he smiled to the heavily tattooed white man who looked him up and down appraisingly.

"He the one who got the front stirred up last week?" Ross asked T without interrupting his visual inspection. Xander shifted uncomfortably under the gaze.

"Yep, one and the same."
"Well try not to drop so much of my food," Ross commented as he turned his back to them in order to work with something in the sink. T simply laughed.

"From Ross that's the seal of approval," T whispered as he picked up a tray of chip-bowls and handed it to Xander. "He's a little like your Luther, except *he* isn't an asshole," T confided. Xander had to laugh at the thought of the tall, well-muscled scarred Luther being anything like the short, heavy, tattooed Ross. Then he felt himself pushed back out onto the floor of Safari, the food islands lit by colored lights and Charlie slinking down the raised runway as hands reached through the bars and caressed legs and thighs and even occasionally grope under the loin-cloth when the customer's arms were long enough. He stood mesmerized by the sight of Charlie's dance for a moment until he felt a warm hand on his arm.

"Oh, I have missed you," a man with salt and pepper hair commented as he moved in. He could feel his face growing warm as he recognized the man who had fed him his own semen less than a week earlier. "Such a lovely boy," the man commented as his hand moved down to the waist and began to pull the shirt out from
"I, ah, have to get this food out," Xander stuttered. The man laughed and then slid a bill down the front of Xander's jeans before quickly sliding a hand across his bare stomach under the shirt.

"Just a welcome back," the man assured him before laughing again and then returning to a small group standing a few feet away. Xander slipped away toward one of the far food islands.

"Yell if you need me," a deep voice behind him offered, and he nearly dropped his tray in surprise. He turned to see the black-vested Carlos standing there.

"Carlos, hey," he said as he braced the tray on one hip so he could straighten up the bowls.

"Some things never change," Carlos laughed as he walked a few feet away and turned to watch. Yep, some things never changed; here he was straight off killing one master vampire and bedding another and people still assumed he couldn't take care of himself. He sighed. Oh well, at least they cared enough to watch out for him even if it was annoying.
The next two hours passed with a minimum of trouble. Xander ran food, customers felt Xander up, Xander watched for Spike. Yep, he didn't figure the trouble would start until Spike actually showed up, which he had expected much earlier. Part of him wanted to retreat to the back room and wait for Spike in privacy, but another part of him reveled in the fact that he was acting without permission. Yeah, where were all the psychiatrists when you needed them?

Xander had been caught by a man sitting at a table when he felt the tingle down his backbone. Spike? Vampire? He turned his head, trying to spot the source of the tingle, but he had limited mobility at the time. In trying to get to a far food station, he had walked near a booth, and hand had slipped between his legs, and the occupant of the booth now sat hugging one leg as he smiled up. Xander sighed tried again to pull free, but the man had a good hold. He might be able to pull the man out of his seat, but he couldn't pull loose without his hands, which just now balanced a tray half-full of the dreaded potato skins.

"I do have work to do," he pointed out reasonably, but the man held on and exchanged a knowing look with his
friend at the table.

"You shoulda seen him lasht week," the man slightly slurred to his friend. "Hottest thing ever."

"Please, let go," Xander asked as he started looking around; he caught Carlos' eye and the bouncer started moving in. The drunk must have seen the cavalry arriving because his second hand held up a bill, proving that he was a tipping customer in addition to being a grabby jerk. The second hand slipped up under the loose front hem of Xander's shirt and then he felt fingers pushing down into his jeans. The drunk smiled and shifted his arm up so that it circled the thigh just below Xander's crotch. Xander had to shift his legs apart to keep his balance, feeling annoyed with the liberties the man was talking. The other customers had settled for quick grabs at the ass, caresses of the silk shirt, and darting thrusts into the jeans with money in hand. Xander had enjoyed the attention even if Xander Jr. had been less than enthused. But now, he just waited until the hand withdrew from his jeans and then he tried to step back again. The arm around his leg simply tightened as the drunk leered up salaciously.

"Oi, hands off," came a familiar voice. Xander jumped,
his leg still trapped, and managed to lose two bowls off the edge of the tray before righting it. The bowls landed with a thunk on the floor as grease and potato bit splattered. He groaned and turned his head to see Spike directly behind him, a cool arm quickly sliding his waist.

"Spike," he whispered, unsure whether he was happy for the rescue or terrified of the vampire finding him with a drunk attached to his pants. He really didn't want to get every grabby man in the place killed, and he suddenly realized that Spike was quite capable of doing just that. His heart sped up as the panic set in.

"Okay, time to let the server get back to work," Carlos' voice interrupted.

"Back off, git," Spike snarled, and the arm around his leg disappeared as the drunk and his friend slipped away, not wanting to get in the middle. Xander put the tray down on the table so that his hands would be free--not that he could do much if Spike started anything.

"Let go or I'll toss you out on your ass."

"Like to see ya try, mate."
"Spike, don't. He's just trying to look out for me," Xander interrupted when he felt the body behind him tense and start to bounce slightly. Oh yeah, bouncy Spike equals trouble. "Carlos, head bouncer on Xander-protectage duty, meet Spike." He felt Spike step forward, and then he found himself suddenly thrust behind Spike, watching while Carlos and Spike tried to glare each other down.

"You the one who gave Xander a hard time last week?" Carlos asked with a growl in his voice that came impressively near to the real thing.

"You the git who walked off and left him alone?" Xander could feel the hostility getting quickly out of hand.

"Spike, he's the one who got me out of the crowd after you left. Carlos, Spike's the one who protected me from the guy who killed Frederick." As he watched the two consider each other, he just wished Cordelia would walk in. That woman managed to make Spike and Angel play nice, or at least fairly nice, and he really needed to discover her secret weapon.

"Didn't seem to be protectin' Xander from that wanker," Spike snarled.
"I was coming to stop the guy when I spotted you. Last time you were more trouble than a friendly drunk," Carlos snapped back. The two stood, unmoving.

"Reckon I was," Spike suddenly turned amiable, and he held out a hand. After a brief look of confusion that Xander could identify with, Carlos took the hand.

"Nice to meet you," Carlos managed even while looking to him with a confused expression. Xander shrugged; he couldn't explain the vampire's mood swings any more than Carlos.

"Right, need to talk to my pet, here," Spike announced, turning a back to Carlos. He shrugged again as Carlos looked to him before moving off a distance to watch. He simply he knelt down to recover the lost food.

"Well this seems familiar," Spike commented as he crouched down to bounce in front of him, one arm leaning on the table. Xander bent his head, his heart still pounding with the fear that Spike would be angry, angry with him and with the various men who had touched him. Stupid. How could have risked so many lives just to prove something to himself. And T, he suddenly realized. He didn't want T to think of him as some weak
thing that did whatever his boyfriend told him. Boyfriend? No, master really was closer to the truth. "Pet?"

"Yeah?" he answered without lifting his head. He pulled the last potato skin into the bowl and knelt there, cleaning his hands on his towel.

"You alright, pet?" He risked a quick look up and saw the head cocked to one side and the eyebrows lowered in clear confusion.

"Fine."

"Right," Spike snarked sarcastically. "Anytime you can give one word answers, ya aren't fine. Can't read minds, luv, so you better start talkin'."

"Don't get mad at them," he asked in a small voice, continuing to rub his hands on the towel even though he had already gotten them clean.

"Who's that, luv? The wanker who grabbed at ya?"

"Yeah," he whispered.
"You thought I'd eat them for doing that, didn't ya?" The bouncing stopped, and he felt Spike's hand close around his arm. "That's it, innit?"

"Well, yeah," he admitted, looking up at Spike in the low light of the club.

"If he'd hurt ya, he'd have died a slow and painful death," Spike admitted. "But he didn’t."

"I thought, with the touching..." Xander felt his heart begin to truly race as his demon squirmed, wanting to throw itself at master's feet and beg forgiveness. Spike looked at him for a long time, a strangely neutral expression on his face. Spike finally pulled him close and whispered in his ear.

"If you want to work here, it’s all right with me. Like people seein' what they can't have. Like showin' you off and then watchin' people lust after ya, knowin' that you only lust after me." Spike added a lick from the collar to the ear, and he felt himself shiver as Xander Jr. suddenly came to life. "Cassidy showed ya off, making ya go starkers so they'd all see what they couldn't have." A second lick and he closed his eyes and shifted so that he could press himself into Spike's firm body.
Now Spike pulled him up so that they stood next to the booth. Spike positioned him so that he faced the club with Spike standing behind him. He watched out of half-closed eyes with his head tilted so that Spike could continue exploring his neck. The vampire obliged by sliding a hand under his shirt and closing his lips over the place where neck and shoulder met; he felt the suction and squirmed under the attention, barely registering the customers who had turned to watch. "But don't ya think we should take care of the vamp feedin' on the customers before we continue this?" Xander continued to writhe against the hard body behind him until the words finally penetrated the lust.

"Vamp?" he squeaked. Spike laughed.
"Yeah, business first, then? Need to drive this wanker off since I don't really want vamps hangin' out round ya." Spike commented as he continued nipping at Xander's neck.

Xander scanned the crowd; he didn't see anyone suspicious, but if Spike said a vamp was out there feeding on the crowd, he didn't doubt it for a minute.

"I've gotta..." he gasped as Spike nipped particularly hard at his shoulder. Xander Jr. gave a simultaneous twitch of his own. "I've gotta tell T," he finally gasped out.

"Right, I'll wait here then." Spike let go so suddenly that he found himself struggling to keep his balance. He turned to glare. "What?" Spike asked innocently although the corner of the mouth twitched twice.

"Evil vampire," he hissed as he tried to rearrange his jeans so he could walk. Now Spike openly smirked. He gathered up his food and made for the bar as fast as he could with Xander Jr. pressing against the zipper. He felt hands reaching for him, but he side-stepped and spun out of reach all the way to the bar where T worked one end. When he dropped the tray on the bar and leaned over to get T's attention, he felt hands slip inside his
shirt. He looked back to see an older man in a plaid shirt smiling, but in the background he could also see Spike leaning against a wall, watching. He had an evil thought, and his demon whole-heartedly approved of the game.

He slowly wiggled his butt as the hand under the shirt slid down to the jeans. Spike's eyebrow shot up, but otherwise he remained motionless. Xander could see that T would still be another minute, so he deliberately smiled at Mr. Plaid and pushed back. The hand now slid all the way in the jeans, and he could feel fingers exploring down the crack. He kept his eyes on Spike, and now he could see the lights of the club reflecting softly in eyes that probably had gold in them now. As fingers reached the puckered goal, he shivered and then reached up to touch Mr. Plaid's cheek. "No more," he whispered, and he could see the disappointment as the man sadly smiled his acceptance. The hand withdrew for a moment and then returned with the dry feel of paper against skin as the man slid a tip in equally far. Xander had a sudden image of getting a paper cut and having to explain it to the doctor, and he had to stifle a laugh just as T came up.

"You leaving us then?" T asked with a nod toward Spike.
"Actually, you have a vamp hunting in here." T's eyes suddenly narrowed as he inspected the crowd. "Spike and I are going to go see if we can't get it out and stake it," he quickly added. When T shot him a disapproving look, he amended it. "Fine, Spike will get it outside and stake it while I watch from a safe distance."

"Darling, you watch your back."

"Hard to do that what with the eyes being in the front an all," he quipped, but the worried expression in T's face made him stop. "I'll watch Spike's back, and I trust Spike to watch mine."

"More than you trust Gunn?" T asked sadly. He had to really think about that. A week ago he would have followed Gunn to hell, but how would Gunn take the knowledge that he wasn't entirely human? How would Gunn react to his coming out of the closet. Hell, how would Gunn take him sleeping with *any* vampire, male or female?

"Spike can protect me better than Gunn can," he finally told T before returning to Spike's side. The trip back across the club proved a little easier without his hands full, but he still had to sidestep several interested
customers.

"Not nice, pet." Spike said when he arrived. For a minute he thought Spike was talking about his comment regarding Gunn, but then he remembered Mr. Plaid. Spike took his arm and started walking him toward the far end of the dance floor.

"Yeah, well it's your fault for getting everyone worked up with a floor show before sending me through the crowd alone."

"Nearly came over, threw you on the bar, and claimed you right and proper for everyone to see." Xander Jr. jerked to life so suddenly and painfully in the confines of the jeans that he physically tripped, but Spike simply reached out and pulled him close before he could hit anything. "Like that thought, do ya?" Xander wished he could come back with some witty comment, but even his babble abandoned him in the face of the mental image Spike had created. Spike laughed.

"There's the wanker now," Spike said as he nodded toward a tall thin black man with actual red hair who had his limbs tangled around a hunky line-backer type. He watched at the vamp laughed at something and then
kissed the man on the lips before nuzzling into the man's neck. He would have cried out a warning right there, except Spike held him back. Caught between wanting to save the man and following Spike, he physically swayed, and Spike's arm tightened around his waist.

"Ya don't want to interrupt him right now, luv. Dinner might not survive it." Before he could ask what Spike meant, the vampire raised his head, still showing human features and planted another kiss on the man's lips. The man had a dazed, happy expression, and the vamp backed him toward a wall, where he left him leaning. With a glance in their direction, the vamp started for the door. He felt himself pushed along as Spike followed. Once out in the night, he couldn't see the vamp anywhere, but Spike didn't hesitate as he moved north up the street and toward a closed and boarded up gas station.

"He's there," Spike commented as they came to a halt outside the station. They stood there for several minutes.

"Aren't we going in, I mean, it's a little hard to stake a vamp if you don't actually go in."
"Who said anythin' about staking?" Spike turned to him with a confused expression—the eyebrows drawn down so that the wrinkled form an upside-down V on his forehead.

"You said we were going to get rid of him, that's how you get rid of a vampire." Spike simply snorted at that, but then the conversation stopped when a tall, red-haired vampire stepped out from behind the station. Spike grew suddenly still, and he felt himself for the second time thrust behind his lover. The vampire's hair curled in tight coils and he walked with a gangly stride that suggested youth.

"Wha' ya want den?" called the other vamp, and he could see each of the vampires subtly shifting their bodies. Spike took a step forward and raised his head as if he was sniffing the air. The other vamp shifted to the side, closer to the gas station, and showed his demon features.

"Want ya' away from what's mine," Spike finally announced.

"He be yers?" the vamp asked, and Xander found himself trying not to laugh at the competing accents.
"Yeah, mate, he is."

"Yer a master, can smell ya. Knew I's run into one'a ya's sometime or ruther. If ya want, I's fittin' to move on. 'Bout time to anyways."

"Just don't want ya near my pet. You got control enough to feed without killin', so I don't mind ya in the area or even in the club, but ya smell my pet, and you'd better clear out, mate. Got it?" The other vamp suddenly lost his demon features and dropped his head.

"Raht, Ah won’t go neah him,“ the vampire agreed. Spike stood there glaring for a few seconds and before turning and sweeping Xander away down the street.

"That's it?" he asked, indignant. "You want to go vamp hunting and we end up nicely asking the vamp not to kill anyone. At least I think that's what you asked. I swear, I thought I had trouble with English what with the constant D's and all, but I'm not entirely sure you guys know how to actually speak English."

"Pet..."
"Don't 'Pet' me," he groaned softly when he realized his mistake, "I mean, don't go saying 'Pet' at me, AND don't actually pet me right now; I'm mad. That vamp was hunting in T's club, and you didn't do anything." He felt himself pulled toward a parked car. Spike jumped up on the hood and pulled him into an embrace between his legs before covering his mouth with a cool hand.

"Pet, do ya want T and the customers in there safe?" Spike asked seriously before removing the hand.

"Of course I do."

"And do ya trust me to keep you happy and safe?" Spike asked as strong arms settled in at the small of his back, pulling him in closer.

"Well, yeah." He had to admit that he actually did trust Spike, he just sometimes wondered how much of that trust came from the demon in his head and how much came from his own thoughts, not that he had always picked the best people to love or trust.

"So do ya trust me to keep your soddin' club safe?"
"Okay, we have a problem there, because that club is just a buffet for you, and you can't convince me of anything else, blondie," he pointed out.

"Bloody right, they could all get eaten tomorrow and I wouldn't care, but you would, so I'll keep those gits alive just to avoid the emotional scene you'd throw if ya found them all dead."

"You'd actually protect them? They're like walking meals on wheels to you, without the wheels part, but still. Why would you do that?" Spike simply snorted.

"Not sayin' more emotionally supportive crap tonight, don't want my reputation to be completely buggered, but that vamp is old, older than most and old enough to have control. If he's huntin' in there, it'll keep most of the others out."

"He's a master?"

"Bleedin' hell no, a master would've fought for his territory. He's old enough to be, has to be at least fifty, but without someone to teach him, he'll just be a really old minion." Spike fell silent for a long time. "Surprised he can feed without killin', that's usually a master's trick."
"So with him draining a few pints here and there..."

"It takes the club off the huntin' list for other vamps," Spike finished.

"My hero," he purred agreeably as he pushed into the embrace, pushing his own hip into Spike's groin.

"Bloody hell, don't go spreadin' that bollocks around or I really won't have a reputation. And if you keep up with the teasin', you're goin' to get tied to the bed and ravaged." Xander Jr. had his oh-so-predictable response to that threat, and Spike laughed, his eyes ringed in gold. "Oh, yeah. You're mine."

"Yep," he agreed amiably. Times like this when Spike acted like one of the good guys, it was just so easy to say.

"Well, let's grab some dinner before we have to go and see Peaches," Spike announced and the mood evaporated.

"Dinner as in Italian?" he asked hopefully, even though he knew the answer.
"Wouldn't mind a Luigi or a Leonardo," Spike agreed and Xander groaned.

"I was thinking pizza," he argued as Spike jumped off the car and started back toward the club.

"Let's get your kit and drop it off first, right?" It didn't escape him that Spike totally avoided the conversation, but he couldn't ask a lion to go vegetarian, and he couldn't ask a vampire to give up blood. He did wonder why Spike so adamantly refused to do what the other vamp did and drink just a little.

Xander followed and made the right noises at Ross, the only person he ran into as he dashed through the kitchen to grab his bags before meeting Spike out back with the motorcycle. Once the bags were stowed, Spike turned the bike toward a part of town full of junkies and whores, and within minutes of parking the bike, he had pinpointed a small man who robbed two different street-people while they watched.

"He bad enough for ya?" Spike asked with a nod.

"You can't think I'm going to give you permission to kill someone. Oh, no. So not going there, Spike."
"That's all right pet. I know he's bad enough. Can smell the blood on him from here, even with all the soap he used to wash it off. Probably forgot to clean his boots, most of 'em miss them."

"You mean he killed someone?" Xander turned in horror to watch the young man laugh as he grabbed a bottle of alcohol from some older man and then chased the older man down the street.

"Evil don't just come with the demon package, luv," Spike announced before he started walking toward the mugger. Xander followed at some distance, trying to ignore it when Spike maneuvered his prey into an alley and slid his dagger into the man's neck before drinking deeply and making little happy sucking noises. Ew. When had he started thinking of sucking noises as happy? He severely chastised his demon before returning to ignoring the whole scene.

"Right then, suppose it's time to face Peaches, pet." Xander watched as Spike calmly licked the blood off the knife as they walked down the street.

"Aren't you afraid of someone seeing that and assuming
you're some sort of serial killer?" he asked as he glanced nervously around at the pedestrians.

"First rule of the night: people ignore anythin' they can't explain away. A hundred years ago, I'd of worried. Now, people see what they want. Long as they don't have hard proof, they make up all sorts of excuses." Spike finished the cleaning job and replaced the knife, tucking it into a duster pocket. "S'why I use a knife, don't pay to leave proof laying around with teeth marks in them."

"Is that why you won't leave people alive...because they'd see proof?"

"Don't go there, pet." Spike reached the motorcycle and quickly mounted.

"Don't go where, Spike? Don't talk about why you kill?" He stood on the sidewalk, determined to have the conversation. If the minion in the club could feed without killing, he didn't understand why Spike couldn't as well.

"Xander," Spike's voice drew the name out into a clear warning.
"Spike," he returned in the same tone of voice.

"Enough," Spike bellowed in a deep, loud tone, and Xander felt his knees go out from under him. A couple on the street turned to look in shock as he neatly collapsed to the ground in a heap. The echoes of Spike's cry chased each other through his brain, and he struggled to clear his ears enough to even hear the distant voices. The demon struggled against his control, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he silently hummed Rubber Duckie. Thank god for his arsenal of Sesame Street songs because he had worked through four or five before he trusted himself to open his eyes.

"Spike?" he called softly before he realized that he lay in the vampire's lap with a cool hand smoothing the hair away from his face.

"You’re all right, pet. Be just fine in a bit. Just had a spill, that's all." He could hear the slight panic in Spike's voice, and he looked around for what might have caused the fear, but he only saw the faces of curious bystanders who whispered to each other and watched with meaningful expressions.

"Spike?" he called again, confused.
"Are you sure you don’t want an ambulance?" a man with a cell phone asked, and Xander waited for the guy to get told off, but it didn’t happen.

"Thanks mate, but he'll be fine. Goin' to hospital won't help epilepsy." He reached out and took one of Spike's hands so that the vampire looked down at him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Just a spell, that's all. We'll get you back on your feet and you'll be right as rain." Xander felt himself pulled up as Spike stood so that he now leaned back against Spike. He tentatively put some weight on his legs and felt a wave of relief when his legs held without buckling. "Let's go sit," Spike said, and he felt himself guided toward a nearby bench. Now that the invalid had gotten scraped off the sidewalk, the crowd slowly dispersed and they were left on the bench without any observers.

"What the hell was that, Spike?"

"Bloody hell, I don't know. That shouldn't have happened." Spike watched him silently for several
seconds. "Tell me exactly what it felt like from your side."

"You yelled," he began, and he could see Spike flinch at the words. "I felt this moment of pure panic so strong that my knees just sort of stopped working and I started going down. I wanted to get back up, but I could feel the demon struggling, struggling harder than it has since the day I took control back and killed Cassidy. Eventually the demon stopped struggling, and I that's when I opened my eyes.

"Bloody hell," Spike repeated.

"Why? What did it look like from out here?"

"You just soddin' collapsed without a sound."

"Oh god, maybe the demon has done some sort of damage to my brain. Shit, I don't have so many spare brain cells that I can afford to have a demon randomly frying them."

"Shhh. That's not it, pet."

"If ya have a theory, I'd love to hear it because I've left
freaked out behind days ago and I'm quickly approaching the land of blind panic."

"It shouldn't have happened, didn't mean to cause that."

"Whoa, what did you cause it and how do we make sure you never cause it again because that was just plain unpleasant."

"Used sire's voice," Spike began softly, as though he were admitting some great sin.

"I missed out on vampire anatomy and psychology in school, you know. Kept trying to get the principal to add it as an elective, but they insisted that I should take physics instead. Vampire anatomy would have been more useful." When Spike only looked at him with a guilty expression, he abandoned jokes for the direct route. "I have no idea what that means, Spike."

"Sire's voice keeps fledges in line. When they hear it, they soddin' well stop whatever nonsense they're doin' and follow their sire's commands."

"And your sire's voice dropped me to the ground? Can I vote for you never using that again? Shit, that's just
totally not fair." Xander leaned back against the building feeling the cool bricks through the thin shirt material. He had never felt so entirely helpless; Spike could control him with a single word, leave him twitching on the ground with the demon raging in his mind. Shit. Why hadn't he staked Spike when he had the chance? Oh yeah, he'd never had a chance. And he'd fallen for the bastard. Life would be much simpler if he hadn't fallen for the bastard, but he'd fallen so hard that he didn't think he could get back up even if he wanted to.

"But it shouldn't have worked," Spike objected. "Wouldn't have used it on you on purpose."

"Um, if that's not working, I really don't want to know what sire's voice does when it does work. I felt like a kitten grabbed by the back of the neck. Not that I'm kittenish because I'm a man, so I'm more like a manly thing, a bear or a lion or something: a completely helpless bear all curled up and quivering, but a bear nonetheless." He opened one eye to glare at Spike, but the vampire simply watched the traffic.

"That's just it luv, that's exactly what happens to a fledge. But pets don't have enough of the demon in them to react like that. Pets just get
uncomfortable. Occasionally I've seen pets lose control of their bladder, but I've never seen one react like a fledgling.

"You thought I might pee myself?" Xander opened both eyes and looked over toward Spike in horror. "And ya know what? I'm starting to get a real inferiority complex about this whole pet thing. If either you or Angel point out one more way that I'm doing this pet thing wrong, someone is not getting any more sex...unless it's Angel, him I'll just stake." Spike laughed.

"I like the way you do things, so I'm not complainin'."

"Good, so can we go home?" Xander had regained control of all his limbs, but he still felt shaken up by the revelation that someone had that much power over him. Of course his demon was stupidly happy, damn thing would be happy to lay on the floor under Spike's feet.

"Sorry, luv. Have to go see Peaches, don't we?"

"Um, no?" That earned another one of Spike's laughs.

"Well that's the condition he put on us hangin'
around. This is his turf, and I won't fight him over it. Means we either have to go make nice with the pouf or get out of L.A."

"Shit, I thought when I took up with a vampire that I didn't have to deal with the in-laws."

"Yeah, well wouldn't mind skipping town and leavin' the nancy-boy wonderin' where we went."

"Um, so not okay with the leaving town part, Spike. At least not now."

"So, we see Peaches."

"No chance you could drop me off at home?" he asked hopefully as he pushed himself up onto his feet.

"Bloody well wish I could, but the wanker wants to see that I haven't been torturin' you. Has it in his mind he has to save every bleedin' soul that crosses his path, even the ones that don't need him."

Xander grumbled, but he followed Spike to the bike and got on, shoving the helmet over his head before leaning into the strong body in front of him.
When they stopped at a normal-looking office, Xander had to smile. He expected some grand mansion with gargoyles or maybe an abandoned building with heavy velvet curtains lined with dust. Instead they got a perfectly normal little office with "Angel Investigation" painted on a sign at the front.

"A vampire detective agency?" he asked skeptically.

"Yeah, Peaches does do his own thing," Spike agreed as the two of them went into the office.

"Man, where the hell have you been hiding your ass?" demanded an angry voice as soon as the door came open. He could feel Spike shifting into game face behind him before he could even react. He watched as the speaker's eyes snapped open and the man reached for a stake.

"Gunn, I can explain," he insisted as he stepped between his friend and his vampire.

4

Simple Truths

"Xander, duck," Gunn yelled as he brought his stake up. He would have ignored the request, only he felt
himself physically thrown to one side as Spike first flung him to a nearby couch and then planted himself in front of that couch, loudly growling.

"Son of a ..." Gunn started, and then he lunged. Without even a sound, Spike grabbed the arm, twisted it and sent the rest of Gunn sailing toward the door. Spike might have continued the move to its logical conclusion with Gunn's arm ripped from his body, except Xander threw himself on Spike's back pulling at the vampire and throwing off his balance.

"Sit," Spike roared, and Xander felt his legs moving without his permission.

"Fuck, Spike, stop!" He yelled from the couch once he realized he no longer had the option to physically intervene.

"William," roared a new voice, and Spike stopped with Gunn trapped face first on the wall and his arm, still clutching the stake, twisted up behind his back. "Let him go," Angel roared again as he walked into the room. He could see Spike's arm tremble, but Spike simply turned his game face to Angel without releasing the now squirming Gunn.
"What's this, then, Peaches? Always figured you'd have at me yourself when you wanted me dust." At these words, Xander froze. Never in his life had he felt so panicked, so desperate. He looked around for a weapon he could use because he sure wasn't letting Angel kill Spike without a fight.

"William, that's not what this is about," Angel insisted, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Xander didn't stop looking for that weapon; lamp, good as an impromptu club; coffee pot, break for cutting edges. Oh great, he was considering taking on a centuries old vampire with a lamp, no wonder everyone thought he needed protection.

"Better start talkin' if ya don't want your toy broken," Spike snarled as he twisted Gunn's arm up higher. He could hear Gunn gasp.

"Spike, please," he quietly begged.

"Quiet, pet. Won't hurt 'em as long as Peaches starts talkin'. Course, if he don't, might just have to rip the wanker's arm off and beat him to death with it," Spike pointed out cheerfully. He watched as Gunn grew
suddenly still, and he could just imagine the fear going through Gunn's mind; it wasn't that long ago that Spike had him pinned to the ground in a parking lot and he thought that he was going to die. Not a pleasant experience.

"William, let Gunn go and we'll talk."

"Right, just like he tried to talk when I first walked in? Nope, never trust an enemy enough to let go of the leverage, you taught me that, Peaches, remember?"

"You don't need leverage, William. We just want to talk," Xander watched as Angel took a step toward Spike, but Spike simply growled his response. Angel took a step back, but he could see how Angel had actually inched toward him. He opened his mouth to warn Spike, but the younger vampire was not so easily fooled.

"Ya take one more step toward Xander, and I'll tear the human into dog food sized pieces." Spike warned. "Pet, get over here." Xander slid down the couch so that when he stood he was as far from Angel as possible. He quickly darted to Spike so that they were just a few feet from the front door. Please God just let them get out without anyone getting killed. Funny how he prayed so much
more now that he hung out with the evil undead.

"Spike, please, just let Gunn go," he tried again, but Spike's growl only deepened.

"You want to talk, go ahead," Spike suddenly spun Gunn around and launched him toward Angel. Gunn hit Angel and nearly took both of them to the ground.

"That's right, you better let me go 'cause I'm gonna tear you apart for what you did to my boy."

"Gunn," Xander stepped forward, but Spike's arm and Gunn cold stare both effectively stopped him.

"Don't," Gunn warned him. "Didn't save Alonna and won't save you." Gunn shifted into an attack pose, and Angel put a hand on Gunn's shoulder, a hand Gunn quickly shook off. "You gonna claim he's got a soul too? Maybe there's some big souled monster convention in town I don't know about."

"Ain't got no soddin' soul," Spike objected quickly, and Gunn turned to glare at him.

"Then I ain't got no problem dusting you for turnin' my
boy," Gunn raised the stake, and Angel put a hand on his wrist.

"Xander isn't a vampire," Angel calmly declared, and Xander could see the suspicion, the hope, the fear all cross Gunn's face like a series of veils dropped down over his features.

"Gunn, I'm not. I'm still the same Xan-man demon-magnet as always," he tried to laugh, but the noise came out sounding more strangled than anything else.

"No, you're *not*. The Xander I knew didn't hide from me behind a filthy monster." Xander stood, immobilized by those words as surely as if Gunn had paralyzed him.

"Oi, watch your tongue, wanker, or ya might well lose it."

"William."

"Don't soddin' preach to me, Peaches."

"Well if he ain't a vamp, someone better start explaining or I will find a place to stick this stake."

"Gunn, you don't need..."
"Bloody hell, just try and stick it here, I'll bugger ya with it before I tear out..."

"William!"

"I'll show you how my boys and I dust vamps."

The words washed over Xander, the voices overlapping, shouting, intersecting until the words themselves disappeared under the general tone of hostility and promised pain. He leaned back against the wall as he watched Angel hold Gunn back with one arm while trying to keep his body between Gunn and Spike. Shit. He felt the terror rise as he realized that someone was about to die, and he wasn't going to like any possible outcome. The two vamps each continually squared off, Spike's head tilted up slightly in a posture he associated with Spike searching for some scent. Angel still wore his human face, but flashes of gold in brown eyes revealed his anger. Oh yeah, imminent bloodshed, and here he stood utterly and entirely helpless to stop it.

"Oh. My. God," a female voice yelled from the open office door. He watched as Spike instantly stepped back to stand between him and the door as Cordelia walked in
and slammed the door loud enough to stop all yelling. "We have a lease people! A lease that says we will not disturb the neighbors by screaming in the middle of the night." Cordelia stood with her hands on her hips, a small bag dangling from one wrist.

"You, blondie, lose the fangs before you scare off the paying clients," she ordered as she darted a finger toward Spike. "And you mister don't have the money to get blood cleaned out of the carpet, so you better chill out," she declared as the finger turned to Angel. "And I don't even know who you are, but if you know what's good for you, you WILL NOT come in here waving stakes and threatening murder," she finished with the long finger pointed right at Gunn.

"You tell 'em," Spike cheered even as the fangs and wrinkles disappeared.

"This *another* vampire? If this is a nest, I know what my boys like to do with nests."

"Oh get over yourself," Cordelia snapped as she walked to the desk and leaned over to pull out a cross. "Do we need to pass this around?" she asked as she waved the ornately carved wooden crucifix.
"I'll pass," Angel said as he retreated to the wall opposite Spike. Xander held up his hand.

"Toss it here, Cordelia." The cross made a nice arc through the air and he caught it before holding it up for Gunn to see. "No smoke, no burning," he pointed out as he waved it.

"Watch it, pet" Spike complained as the cross came too close to him.

"Sorry." He tossed the cross back to Cordelia and risked a quick glance at Gunn. The man stood in the middle of the room with an expression that made him fear Gunn for the first time in his life. He wondered if this was the look Gunn gave vampires before turning them to dust.

"I'm really not a vamp," he promised. "Probably look like one cause of the whole clothes thing, but really that's just cause Spike hates the flowers and surf themed shirts even more than Luther. Of course Luther only complains while Spike tends to shred them when I'm not looking. It's kinda like the whole 'your mother dresses you funny' thing only with a vampire instead of a mother and the whole dressing well thing..." He let his voice trail
off when Gunn's expression didn't change.

"You always hang out with vampires, cheerleader?" Gunn cocked his head toward Cordelia. "What? You have death wish?"

"Oh, please. Angel is about as dangerous as a houseplant," she insisted as she walked over to the couch and sat down, placing herself between Spike and Angel and within three feet of Gunn.

"And that one, you trust that one too?" Gunn demanded with a nod toward Spike. He tried not to show how much it hurt that Gunn wanted someone else's opinion and didn't even give him a chance to explain.

"Not as far as I can throw him," Cordelia scoffed. "But Angel and Xander can handle him."

"You trying to tell me you don't mind being in the same room with that monster, a monster who's probably thinking about how much he'd like to tear your throat out right now?" Gunn kept his eyes on Spike.

"Oh, please. Melodramatic much?" she rolled her eyes. "Spike, are you thinking about tearing my throat
out?" she asked with such perfect calm that Xander found himself wishing he could have watched this goddess emerge from the self-involved girl he had known in high school.

"Not really, luv. Thinkin' about tearin' out the wanker's throat, but I wouldn't do that to you." Spike dug in his duster and came up with cigarettes. When he lit one and leaned back, Xander realized that he hadn't seen this casually violent and detached Spike since before his capture by Cassidy.

"There, you see?" Cordelia challenged Gunn.

"If Peaches ever cuts ya loose, I'll probably just turn ya. You'd make a beauty of a vampire," Spike finished with a leer as he took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"Okay, and now we're back with the disturbing compliments, Spike. Can't you ever give someone a compliment that doesn't lead to nightmares and expensive therapy?" Xander asked with a disgusted face.

"Hey, at least he gives compliments," Cordelia countered. "Angel over there, you almost have to throw yourself at him to even get him to notice new shoes."
"Yeah, well Spike gives compliments that would make Mengele proud. He once told me that my hair was so nice that his Drusilla would have kept my body around to pet until I started stinking up the lair."

"Ew," Cordelia's nose wrinkled up in disgust until she had managed a fairly good impression of a vampire game face minus fangs. "Okay, you win that round."

"You're all nuts," Gunn declared as he retreated to the fourth wall and sat on Cordelia's desk, stake still in hand.

"Can we talk now?" Angel asked from his position near the door leading to the back.

"Came here to talk, Peaches. Your boy over there started something he couldn't finish."

"I ain't nobody's boy, especially not some vampire's," Gunn started standing again, and Xander jumped in before all hell broke loose again.

"Gunn, what did you mean about Alonna? What happened?" he asked, fear making his voice tremble. Gunn met his eyes for a moment, and then he
sank back down on the desk, his anger buried under pain.

"She got vamped," he whispered, and Xander felt his legs get suddenly weak. He reached out for the arm of the couch, and he felt Cordelia's hands guide him down to sit with her.

"Oh god, Gunn, I'm so sorry. I should've been there." Xander felt his heart break for the beautiful woman he thought of as a sister.

"Too many vamps on the streets, we couldn't cover everybody," Gunn said in a voice as flat and emotionless as a robot, but he knew Gunn, he knew how Gunn hid his own heart, and he knew Gunn's pain. "Angel here saved most of the crew, but we lost Trey too."

"Oh god." Xander couldn't come up with any other words. How many people would die before this war was over. "It's my fault," he finally whispered into the silence that had fallen on the room. "I killed Cassidy; it's my fault."

"*You* killed Cassidy?" Angel asked in surprise, and he could see the vampire looking from him to Spike. He really couldn't blame Angel for doubting it; he wasn't
exactly prime vampire hunter material.

"Who's Cassidy?" Gunn broke in. "What kinda trouble you in, Xander?"

"Cassidy's the wanker who kidnapped Xander, the same vampire who commanded most of those fledges that've given you gits so much trouble. You're ready to bloody well throw him to the wolves when he's been fighting to protect ya," Spike walked to the open door and flicked his cigarette outside.

"You took out a vamp? Way to go, Xander. Why didn't you call for backup?"

"Oh, and you and Spike would've worked together so well, what with the bonding and the sharing and the love," Xander snapped. "Oh God, I'm sorry Gunn," he quickly added as he saw the expression of shock on Gunn's face.

"So you runnin' with him then?" Gunn demanded.

"Shit, can we start at the beginning?" Xander asked as he leaned his head back against the couch and looked at the ceiling. "I really think I'm going to need someone to put
all this in easy to understand bits using small words. Might even need a few Cliff's notes."

Three pots of coffee later, Xander leaned against Spike on the couch as Gunn sat expressionless at the desk and Angel sat in a folding chair with an expression of intense indigestion. Of course Angel always looked like he had indigestion, so it might not have been a reaction to the night's revelations.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Cordelia swore from her end of the couch. "I think *I* need the Cliff's notes version." Xander just chuckled; he had lived most of it, and he still felt like he couldn't get his mind around it.

"So let me get this straight. When Luther and I saved your sorry ass from Cassidy, the blood put this piece of demon in ya?" Xander nodded. "And when your buddy there smelled you, he grabbed you 'cause he thought you were with Cassidy?" Spike raised his cigarette in affirmation, either that or he had just flipped Gunn off. "And you two idiots were so busy fighting out back in an alley that you let Cassidy take off with my boy?" Angel's expression went from indigestion to
constipation, and this time Spike's two fingers didn't even hold a cigarette as they flicked upwards. Gunn glared at both vampires for a moment before continuing.

"And when Angel wouldn't move fast enough, Spike tried to take on Cassidy's entire army alone?" Xander found himself smiling at that thought. Yes, disturbed that Spike had nearly gotten himself killed but still smiling. "But Xander, whose little inner demon tried to turn him into Cassidy's slave, killed Cassidy." Xander felt Spike's arm slip around his waist and tighten. Gunn's eyes narrowed, but Gunn simply continued with his checklist of events. "And now hundreds of vamps with appetites and no self control are running around L.A.?" Xander's flinch must have been confirmation enough because Gunn continued. "So, Xander still has a piece of demon, but now that demon enslaves him to bleach-head."

"Oi," Spike loudly interrupted. "Ya can still end up dinner if ya don't watch yourself."

"William," Angel warned.

"Won't listen to that rot," Spike snarled. "Won't listen to it, and I won't have him sayin' it to Xander."
"Yeah, right, like you give a rat's ass what's best for Xander." Gunn snorted. "So next question, how do we get the demon outta Xander?" The words barely passed Gunn's lips when Spike, in full game face stood and stepped in front of Gunn.

"Touch him and I'll rip your guts out and string 'em around your neck before ya die."

"William," Angel said again, and Xander wondered if the older vampire actually knew how to say anything else when it came to Spike.

"Time out," Xander added. "Maybe someone better ask me what I want."

"Right, you tell bleach-head here the facts of life, Xander." He could see Spike's head tilt, the posture of uncertainty familiar even from the back since Spike refused to turn away from Gunn. He knew Gunn's expression equally well, that look of calm self assurance when he held the winning hand in a poker game or set off a vampire trap. He opened his mouth and nothing came out; how could he say anything knowing that he had to cut off one half of his life or the other. The demon made its choice clear, but he couldn't say the
"Can we even get the demon out?" Cordelia saved him by asking. He heard Spike growl, but Cordelia ignored it, and after a brief glare, Angel did too.

"Normally there is a spell, but I'm not sure this is a normal case. There've been a couple of...abnormalities."

"Yeah, ya know, sorta tired of hearing how abnormal I am, especially from a vampire with a soul," Xander pointed out. Time for him to make a decision. "Gunn, I appreciate everything you've done, and we can still be friends and hunt together, but I can't walk out on Spike. He saved..."

"I saved your sorry ass more than he ever did, and I'd never turn around and use you like a slave or a quick dinner." He could see Gunn's hand tighten on the stake, the knuckles paling on his dark hand.

"That's not what we have; that's not how it is between us..." Xander struggled. He wanted to just crack a joke and make it all go away, but he knew he couldn't do that. "He understands the part of me that's the demon, and I think Angel's right, after four years this isn't a..."
normal case of possession." He sighed and tried again. "You never knew me without the demon. It's part of who I am and Spike understands..."

"No, I understand you perfectly well. You made your choice now live with it...or don't. I guess that's your problem now." Gunn slid the stake back into the back of his jeans and then held his open palms up as he walked past Spike on his way to the door. "Next time, all truces are off. I catch any vampires on my turf, and I'll dust them. And whitebread," Gunn turned to look him in the eye, "We aren't friends, so don't come looking to hang out with the real vampire hunters." Gunn disappeared out the door, and he tried not to cry or scream or beat his head against the wall. He felt Cordelia's hand on his back.

"And don't you be gettin' any ideas about the mojo, either," Spike growled as he turned on Cordelia.

"Oh please, give it a rest. You're going to wear your face out at this rate," Cordelia sighed. "I just thought if there wasn't a cure, Gunn might be a little more forgiving." Spike's game face faded back into human features, and he started digging in the duster.
"Whether he wants help or not, we've got to do something," Angel sighed. "They're kids in the middle of a vampire war."

"So, stakes and swords all around?" Cordelia asked cheerfully. "I can call Doyle, you can call that weird little demon who owes you money, and the six of us can go start making dust."

"Oi, not goin' to solve anythin' that way," Spike interrupted. "Need to have a master strong enough to hold the minions in check and chase off any newcomers," he finished as he lit a cigarette.

"And I suppose you think you're strong enough to take the job?" Angel growled.

"Bloody right I am, but I don't want the soddin' job. Came here to kill Cassidy, and I'm not goin' to get tied down to some piece of turf." Spike blew his smoke toward Angel and the older vampire narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

"This isn't a game, William. You try to set up as the master here, and I will stake you."
"Listen ya nancy-boy, I told ya I don't want the job, so you can take your threats and shuv them up your oversized arse."

"Boys!" Cordelia snapped and both vampires stopped to look at her. "Play nice," she absent-mindedly ordered.

"Ya have to find someone to be master here, Peaches. Either that or ya have to take the job yourself."

"That's not how I work," Angel opened the door to the inner office. "I kill vampires, and I'll hunt down there until I kill all of Cassidy's minions." Angel disappeared into the inner office without giving anyone a chance to respond.

"Wanker," Spike hissed.

"If by that you mean totally unfashionable and unreasonable, I agree." Cordelia nodded.

"Really, I thought the translation was broody, overbearing, and overly willing to use threats when completely unnecessary," Xander added to the banter even though he thought his heart would break. If Cordelia could accept Spike for his sake, why couldn't
Gunn? Four years he had fought beside Gunn, and yet a girl he hadn't seen since his freshman year of high school stood by him while Gunn walked out.

"Think 'wanker' covers all that," Spike confirmed. "Time to go, pet." He felt a hand on his arm as Spike gently pulled him up and out the door.

"Be seein' ya ducks," Spike called to Cordelia as they reached the door, but he couldn't find the energy to do anything other than follow Spike's lead. On the motorcycle and again with the freakish careful driving. Back to the lot where Spike unlocked the door without a word. Down into the safety of the lair and he finally felt like he could breath.

"'S'all right, pet," Spike offered as he felt a hand guide him toward the bed and sit him down. Delicate fingers pulled apart the boot laces and then pulled the boots off his feet. He watched as slender hands worked the buttons of the shirt before pulling it off.

"He walked out on me," he whispered.

"'S'all right," a soft voice repeated. "We'll get a hot bath and a bit of sleep, and things'll look better, pet."
"I thought you'd be celebrating, you know, what with the not having me talk about Gunn all the time and all." Spike stopped at that, and he watched the vampire settle down on the floor in front of the bed. Spike put a hand on either side of his face, the cool fingers pulling the warmth from his hot skin.

"Wanted you to turn to me and not him, but I never wanted ya to hurt like this." Spike's blue eyes locked onto his own. "Could bloody well gut him for doin' this to ya."

"Not worth it."

"You're always worth it, pet." The hands left his face and continued to undress him, unbuttoning and unzipping the pants.

"If Angel just kills, more masters'll come, trying to take charge of all these minions, won't they?"

"Yeah, pet, they will. Bloody pouf's forgotten how to be a vampire, forgotten how they think. The way he's doin' it, he can fight for the next decade and he'll just keep the population down without ever gettin' them under
control."

"God, my mother lives in that neighborhood, Mr. Evans down at the comic book store and Mrs. Walker who paid me to watch her cats. How am I supposed to walk away from all those people? How can I stand back and let them all face this without trying to help?"

"Don't worry, luv." He realized Spike had finished undressing him, but the vampire only helped him lay down before pulling up the covers. "Just rest and I'll get the bath."

"Angel's going to get them killed," he groaned.

"Not goin' to happen, pet. We're goin' to set up some vamp as the master for L.A., whether Peaches likes it or not."
When he woke in the morning, he tried to turn off that part of his brain that constantly tried to analyze everything; he didn’t want to think about how much it hurt that one more person had walked away from him. With Gunn turning on him, he probably couldn’t set foot in Safari again, so he could add T and Carlos and Charlie to that list too. Damn, that list was getting entirely too long.

He felt the arm draped over his back, and he wondered how long it would be before he added one more name to that list. He blinked to keep the threatening tears from dropping. The thought of losing Spike tore at something so deep in his soul that he couldn’t imagine surviving it. The good news was that he probably wouldn’t survive it. What had Spike once told him? Something about turning or even killing but not mentally breaking him? At least he knew he wouldn’t have to survive this pain of always being left behind since Spike's departure would probably be the last straw for his already teetering mental balance. Gunn certainly wouldn’t care--he’d said that last night, hadn’t he.

“Pet?” inquired a sleepy voice.

“Just thinking about how many people want me dead,”
he cheerfully replied even though cheer was the last thing in his heart.

“Oi, no one wants ya dead pet.” Xander stopped and thought about that. Spike was probably right about that, but no one really wanted him alive, either.

“Just feeling sorry for myself here, sorry. I'll try to keep the pity volume down.”

“Ya had a hard night, pet, not totally unwarranted.”

“Unwarranted? Since when do you talk all collegey?” He turned to look into pure blue eyes.

“Oi, not an idiot, and neither are you.” Spike pointed out.

“Nope, I just play one on T.V.” Spike’s eyebrow rose at that comment.

“And when, exactly did you play the idjit?”

“Um, last night. I just stood there helpless while you and Gunn went after each other.”

“Really? I seem to remember a certain git jumpin’ right
in the middle until ordered back.”

“Yeah, exactly. I accomplished exactly zero, and then Angel threatened you, and I was left considering a table lamp as a weapon. Shit, I’m worthless. Most of my fighting moves come straight from Itchy and Scratchy.” He turned over so that he lay staring at the ceiling. Spike’s arm withdrew at the movement, but now the strong, lean hand pressed in on his chest.

“Not worthless,” Spike said with a nearly growling ferocity.

“I sure felt it in that room. I wanted to rip Angel apart, but I sat there utterly helpless and wondered if I was going to have to watch you turned to dust.”

“Peaches couldn’t do it, pet--even if he does want to sometimes.”

“But if he did, I’d just stand there,” he quickly pointed out, and Spike’s silence spoke volumes. He could feel the demon squirm; the demon didn’t want *master* to think him worthless, but Xander just pointed out to the voice in his head that if he didn’t make Spike see truth, someone was going to get hurt, probably Spike
himself. Hell not even Gunn ever trusted him to be a fighter. No, he was more of the demon bait, sidekick type than a fighter. Isn’t that what Gunn meant with the whole, ‘don’t come trying to hang out with the *real* vampire hunters’ comment?

“Don’t believe that,” Spike finally declared, blue eyes refusing to release his gaze. “Think you’d fight through hell with me.”

“I’d try, Spike, I really would,” he wanted to drop his eyes in shame, but he couldn’t seem to escape the ice-blue gaze. “But trying isn’t doing, and no matter how much I tried, I’d never be able to do. Just don’t count on me in a fight, Spike.”

“Why would ya even say that pet? Ya took out two vamps in the theater and killin’ Cassidy the way ya did took more moxy than that wanker Gunn has.”

“No,” he closed his eyes in frustration. Why couldn’t Spike understand? “I’ve never been able to fight; you can’t count on me, Spike.”

“Oi, don’t talk bollocks.”
“I don’t want you to die, please, if you count on me, I’ll just get you killed.”

“Bloody hell, are we back to Frederick? Not your fault.”

“Just don’t count on me,” he whispered his new mantra.

“Mind if I ask a question or two before ya condemn yourself to the home for the worthless and forgotten?” Spike asked with a touch of annoyance in his voice. “How much trainin’ you got in fightin’?”

“I train with the guys,” he defended himself.

“Right, how many times a week is that?”

“They’re always training--god, probably four or five times a week.”

“Don’t give a shite about how often they train, how often did you get up, weapon in hand, and practice a move?” Xander blushed.

“A couple times a month,” he admitted.

“Right, thought so.”
“The guys, they just knew I wasn’t big with the fighting. I mean, I did manage to drop a stake in the middle of staking a vampire. Haven’t really inspired trust what with the amazingly lower than average fighting skills.”

“Already said that wasn’t you, pet. The demon wanted a master and tried to keep ya from dustin’ the candidates. Not a problem now because that demon in ya better soddin’ well know who his master is now and stake any poachin' vamps.” He could feel the happy turning in his mind, like a dog circling a favorite spot before lying down, and he couldn’t help but smile.

“He likes that,” Xander confessed.

“Wot?” Spike asked, the reversed V wrinkle apparent in his brow as he pulled his eyebrows together in confusion.

“The demon, he likes you telling him who his master is.”

“He tell ya that?” Spike asked, his voice sharp enough for Xander to look up in concern.

“No, not in words; I can just feel him.”
“Ya feel him without him fightin’ or pushin’ ya to do something?” Oh shit, here came the abnormal speech again, he could tell from the way Spike tilted his head to one side with one eyebrow higher than the other.

“Spike,” he said in a tone that carried a clear warning. “Remember what I said about the whole not getting sex thing?”

“Oi, not fair, you didn’t stake Peaches,” Spike returned with a quick laugh.

“If I’d had a stake, I would have considered it.”

“Bloody hell, you didn’t even have a stake?” Spike’s eyes grew wide at that.

“Um, I left it in my bag?” At that, Spike froze, his eyes wide, for a good minute. Slowly he closed his eyes and shook his head in obvious disbelief.

“Lesson one: Remember your soddin’ weapons," he said in a voice half pleading and half exasperated. Spike practically jumped out of bed, flipped on the overhead light, and stalked over to the far end of the room.
“Geez, warn a guy,” Xander complained as the sudden light stung his eyes. He squinted in order to watch naked, bouncing Spike standing in the shadows of the empty far end of the room.

“Oi, come on, then. Let’s see if ya can dump me on my arse,” Spike said as he made a come hither gesture with both hands.

“We’re naked!” Xander nearly squeaked. “Not that naked is bad in and of itself, but...we’re naked. And the odds of me knocking you down are right up there with Voyagers' writers having the nerve to show Paris and Chokotay having hot monkey sex on the bridge.”

“I'm going to ignore the whole lustin' over other men for your sake, but as for the naked part, think I noticed. Enemies don’t always give ya time to get ready. ‘Sides, the Greeks wrestled starkers all the time. Now get your arse over here and let’s see what you got.” Xander rose from the bed and fought the urge to pull the sheet around his waist. He tentatively approached Spike, and stopped about four feet away.

“Okay, I’m going to come at ya with a right punch, what are ya goin’ to do?” Spike bounced in clear pleasure at
the fight to come.

“Fall down and bleed?” Xander used his best pleading eyes to escape the humiliation that was to come.

“Oi, enough of that.” Spike stepped forward and moved in slow motion with his right arm coming up in a slow arc. Xander started backing up, his eyes darting around for something to use as a defensive weapon.

“Lesson two: don’t back up, pet. In a real fight, ya never know what’s behind ya, and ya don’t want to back yourself into a corner. So try again.”

“Okay, I guess I have to either block or duck,” he said as Spike stepped up and repeated the move. He tried ducking, leaving Spike standing over him. He quickly realized that he had limited options and even less ability to move away from an attack from above.

“Funny, that usually works with vampires,” he laughed when Spike put hands on his shoulders effectively trapping him on the ground. He struggled for a few brief seconds before settling down on his haunches, waiting for Spike to let him up.
“With fledges or minions, maybe. They sometimes get in a blood rage when they fight, can’t soddin’ see anything except the next big enemy they want to gut—tend to miss the smaller targets. That’s good to keep in mind if ya know they’re fledges, but don’t trust every vampire to fight like that.” Spike pulled back his hands, and Xander stood.

“I guess that leaves blocking,” he mused as Spike took the stance again. This time he raised his left arm so that Spike’s slow-motion swing hit his arm instead of his body. Spike’s left hand then came up and grabbed his hair, pulling him into a close hug, head pulled to one side in order to expose the throat. Spike nipped at the vulnerable throat before letting go.

“And we’re back to my original suggestion that I bleed,” he quipped as he watched Spike take the stance again.

“Don’t put yourself between my arms...well leastwise not when we’re sparrin’,” Spike quickly amended himself. He studied Spike’s posture carefully before stepping forward so that Spike would start another attack. This time he grabbed the attacking arm and pushed it so that it went past him and he ended up standing by Spike’s right shoulder with both of Spike’s arms pushed to the
side. He knew that the vampire could easily counterattack, but it still felt good to earn the look of approval in Spike’s eyes.

“That’s it, now ya can hit the exposed kidney,” Spike said. “Let’s try that a mite faster, and this time try for a hit of your own.” The session went on with Spike modeling one attack after another while he tried different defenses. Spike peppered the workout with commands:

“Don’t try to knock me down, pet. Try to get me off balance, move at the last minute so that I have to reach too far to hit ya…. Stop fightin’ like you’re tryin’ to win a bleedin’ video game. Doesn’t matter if ya hit me a thousand times and I only get in one hit, if my one hit kills ya, I bloody well won…. The closer ya stay, the less room I have to swing hard enough to knock ya on your arse; keep close and to the side of your enemy.”

Xander fought until he felt sweat dripping down his body despite the fact that he knew the basement tended to be rather chilly. Spike moved in for an attack from the rear, and he waited as Spike had taught him, playing dumb so that he could catch the attacker off guard. When he felt Spike’s presence directly behind him, he stepped to the
left, toward the center of the room, even as he spun with a fist already throwing a fast punch. After all, as Spike pointed out, it's better to knock a friend on his arse than risk letting an enemy get the first hit.

Rather than feeling his punch connect as it had the previous three times they’d practiced this move, he felt a firm grip close over his wrist as he felt himself tugged into the vampire’s embrace so that his back was pressed up against Spike’s front. Following earlier instructions, he pulled up his legs and so that the weight of his body would pull the attacker off guard, but Spike simply held more tightly until he struggled to breath. Suddenly he felt a presence at his backside, and he felt Spike drawing heavy, unneeded breaths.

Almost instantly, he felt his own cock twitch in anticipation. He could hear Spike sniffling at his neck, and without hesitation, he dropped his head to one side so that Spike could scent his throat. With a low growl ringing in his ear, he felt himself half dragged, half carried over to the bed and thrown like a doll so that he hit the bed and bounced, struggling to catch himself before he bounced off the other side. Spike tore open the door to the cabinet with inhuman speed, and before he could truly regain his balance from being thrown, he felt Spike
pounce on him like a tiger landing on a mouse. Okay, not the manliest image, but he certainly felt rather mouse-like with Spike straddling him in full game face.

"Mine," Spike snarled, and he could feel an answering growl reverberate in his own chest. Without warning, Spike drove fangs into Xander's neck, piercing the skin with such speed that he didn't even have time to react. He arched his back in pleasure and wrapped his arms around the strong shoulders, but Spike pulled out with little licks and kisses to the two tiny wounds.

"Oi, not this time. Time for me to explore my prezzie, after all, ya gave yourself to me and I haven't taken time to properly inspect ya." Spike held up the leather restraints he had used once before, and Xander trembled. He felt his skin tighten as Spike fastened a heavy padded cuff around each wrist before buckling them together. When he looked from his now restrained hands to Spike, he could see hunger in the vampire's eyes.

"Goin' to make sure I know every inch," Spike promised and then he felt his hands pulled up toward the headboard as Spike pulled the attached leather lead through the slats of the heavy wood and tied it off. Oh
yeah, Xander Jr. had earned full points for participation, he thought as he felt a drop of moisture hit his stomach.

"Spike," he hoarsely whispered as he wrapped his own legs around Spike's legs, pulling the vampire down onto his erection and gaining for one precious moment the friction and pressure he needed.

"Oi, my turn to explore, pet," Spike complained as he pulled himself free. Xander trembled when he felt the restraint close around his ankle before Spike disappeared at the end of the bed, probably tying the restraint to the leg of the bed. Spike reappeared on the other side and he felt his left leg similarly restricted so that he now lay on the bed with his legs opened, completely helpless. He panted, trying to get in enough air, and he could feel the demon in his mind stirring to life, inching forward as Spike took control.

He looked at Spike, waiting for the feel of those hands, but the vampire simply stood there at the side of the bed watching, his own erection hard against his stomach. Suddenly, Xander felt self conscious, certain that he must look like a fool tied like this, but Spike was at his side instantly.
"Sh, pet, let me have my fun then, right?" Xander felt a hand slide over his chest, the sweat from the training making the passage slick. The hand continued down to his right hip where he instinctively jerked, but the restraints held tight and he couldn't move more than an inch in any direction. Spike chuckled.

"Go on, then. Pull away, but you aren't goin' anywhere until I say," Spike whispered as he leaned over Xander's chest. Xander shivered at the feeling of helplessness as Spike slid down and sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed between his own legs. Again with the staring. He just wished he could read Spike's mind at times like these. He pulled against his bonds, but he couldn't move, and Spike wouldn't move. After a good two or three minutes, Spike reached out and ran a gentle hand up the outside of his thighs, and he could feel every nerve come alive at the touch. Unable to reciprocate or object or even shift, he couldn't do anything except feel as Spike's hands crept up to his hips and then down the inside of his thighs, causing him to buck even harder as every nerve in him demanded that he act.

He felt ready to rip the headboard off the bed when he felt the tongue on the inside of his knee: tasting, kissing, and finally a sharp dragging sensation across his
skin. The movement traveled upwards until a sharp sting and drawing sensation on the inside of his right thigh made him cry out in pleasure, pulling wildly while his cock twitched in sympathy with his bucking body. He called out for Spike to let him go so that he could grab the vampire and return the passionate exploration, but Spike continued unhurried and Xander could do nothing but experience every moment. Spike ran a sharp tooth down the length of his right leg, causing every nerve in his body to fire as he writhed and pulled against the bonds.

His fists clenched helplessly as he felt Spike's fangs descend again into the soft flesh on the outside of his left leg, two little pinpricks that became volcanoes of lust when Spike sucked a slow mouthful of blood out of them. Then he felt the licks and kisses over the spot as Spike moved downward toward his feet. He didn't know what he expected, but the feeling of strong thumbs pressing into the balls of his left foot surprised him. Spike held the pressure in place for a moment before working down into the arch with firm strokes. Every inch of his body suddenly relaxed as if Spike had total control of his nerves. Well, almost every inch: Xander Jr. still bobbed madly. Spike then repeated the process on his right foot, and he decided that even if
Spike untied him, he would never be able to move from the bed again.

He unexpectedly gasped, sure that he would pass out from lack of oxygen when Spike's mouth closed in on his nipple without warning, the sensitive skin instantly puckering at the touch. He could feel a sharp tooth teasing the edge and he struggled, but even he didn't know whether he wanted to escape the fang or throw himself onto it. He felt Spike's weight pin him to the bed, and he closed his eyes in an effort to avoid screaming in frustration. He wanted to come so bad that he could hardly breathe. Just when he hoped Spike's wandering hands might finally touch his cock, all sensation disappeared.

When Spike left the bed, he wanted to cry, but he couldn't find enough air in his lungs to do more than whimper. He heard a soft chuckle, but Spike didn't immediately return. As strong hands settled in over his hips, he prayed for a quick end to the teasing torture, but instead, he felt himself rolled. He hadn't even realized his legs had been freed, but now Spike flipped him as easily as a child. It took a few seconds for Xander Jr. to actually get through to the brain with the distress signals as his cock was trapped between his body and the
mattress leading him to struggle up onto his knees.

A finger snaked down and gave his cock a quick stroke causing him to whine in frustration and try to hump, but he found himself urged back down. He struggled for a minute before he realized that Spike had positioned pillows to keep him from crushing himself. Allowing Spike to push him back down, he couldn't resist a whimper when he felt his leg pulled straight and restrained again. Spike returned to the other leg, securing it as well so that now he found himself helpless. He felt the mattress dip as Spike sat next to him.

"Bloody beautiful," he heard Spike whisper as he felt hands slide across his back, strong fingers kneading his shoulders even as a tongue darted over the expanse of his back. "Not a bit of fear in your smell, pet," Two points of fire descended on his right flank, and he screamed and thrashed as he felt a burning lust spread from his flank outward until it encompassed his whole body.

"You're mine, pet. Never goin' to let ya go," Spike murmured when he finished his traditional licks and kisses on the skin he had just bitten. "Don't care what ya
think, you're mine and I don't walk away from what's mine." He felt Spike's body sink onto his own back. "Never goin' walk away, never goin' let anyone take ya; never going to let ya leave," Spike promised in his ear as fingers ran through his hair, and he couldn't do anything to move away from those words. He could feel a tear run over the bridge of his nose to fall on the pillow. "Mine," Spike muttered slightly louder this time. He could feel his cock twitch with every repetition of the word. "Mine," Spike muttered again, almost as if he knew the lust that single word could inspire. He began to twitch and struggle against both the bonds and the weight as the need to come built up in him like a fire. "Mine," Spike said again before rolling off the bed altogether.

Suddenly, he succeeded when he pulled at his bonds, his right leg freed moments before his left. He began to madly hump, but he had only managed one mighty thrust before he felt himself flipped again.

"Not bloody polite to finish before your partner, pet," Spike commented airily even though his own cock was hard and dripping and erect and quickly turning a deep red. Xander dared a single peak at his own cock, and the sight slightly frightened him. He had no idea that his
cock could turn such a dark color, but then he had never teased himself to near insanity before either.

He watched as Spike settled in between his legs with a bottle in hand.

"Relax, pet," Spike murmured, and he felt slick, cool fingers circle his hole before the first one darted in. He planted his feet flat on the bed and pushed up in invitation, unable to even form the words despite mentally screaming 'hurry up.'

"Oi, someone's ready," Spike laughed, and he felt Spike's second finger enter almost immediately. This time the fingers brushed his prostate, and the tingling, tickling sensation made him jump and curse. The third finger and then a fourth, the last one stinging a little until he could relax into the feeling. "Goin' to show ya how a vamp does it," Spike promised, and then the fingers disappeared as Spike finished preparing himself before tossing the bottle to the side. He watched as Spike knelt and then lifted his butt so that Spike could slide under. His butt was supported by Spike's knees, and now Spike grabbed his feet and held them up as he felt Spike thrust into him in one push and begin slamming into him immediately.
He grabbed the headboard to keep from being pushed up the mattress by the force of Spike's drives, each one running the full length of the prostate, leaving him trembling and screaming. He desperately wanted to reach down and grab his own cock, but Spike simply drove in harder and harder until Xander was sure he would die from lack of coming. He felt Spike's trembling muscles announce the beginning of the vampire's ejaculation, and without a thought, he dropped his head to one side, pulling his arm out as far as he could while still tied. Spike's gold eyes met his a mere moment before his legs fell to the bed and he felt Spike's weight drop onto him, Spike's fangs penetrate him. Spike gave two more pushes and then came even while he began to feed, causing a fiery lust that started at both ends and flowed back and forth through Xander's body. Even pinned under Spike he managed his own thrust into Spike's sweat soaked body and he felt his own orgasm explode between them.

Spike pulled out and then lay half on, half off him, purring softly. He could feel a purr from his own chest as he lay there and thought about the promises Spike had whispered. He didn't want to doubt, but he had trusted so many people, and so few had ever returned that
faithfulness. He had always thought that Willow would trust him, but then she started with her secrets and without Jesse, she turned from him. Then he thought Gunn would stand by him through anything, but now that was gone, so what right did Spike have to ask him to risk that kind of pain again? How could he let himself believe this would be forever? He felt his own purr falter, but a thought from within circled: 'Trust Master.' His purr again matched Spike's as he lay, his arms still tied to the bed.

"Could stay here forever, luv," Spike finally said, the words stopping the purr in both of them.

"I think those human bodily functions you hate so much would get in the way," Xander pointed out. "In fact, when are you planning on letting me up?" he asked with a yank at his still tied hands.

"Never?" Spike asked with a quirk of an eyebrow even as he stood up.

"Spike?" he called as the vampire left the room. He looked up at the various buckles and straps. Given long enough, he probably could free himself, but it would take a heck of a long time and probably result in damaged lips
from trying to work the buckles loose. Finally Spike reappeared with two towels.

"What? Don't trust me to take care of your needs?" He watched as Spike settled in on the bed and started cleaning his body with the warm, damp towel. "Could keep ya down here forever, ya know. Not even Peaches knows where this place is."

"Yeah, but then I'd get all moldy from not getting aired out properly and humans start to stink after a while when left in small spaces," he laughed as Spike dropped the first towel on the floor and started drying him with the second one. Spike looked at him with serious blue eyes. "And that wasn't a joke, was it?" Xander asked as he looked into those stunning eyes that could both hide every thought Spike had or reveal them all in perfect detail.

"Don't like ya gettin' hurt," Spike admitted.

"And I don't like to get hurt, but I'm not going to hide from the world," he quickly answered. If Spike decided that he was too fragile to allow out of the lair, he realized that he really had very little choice in the matter. "If you think I have low self-esteem now, wait and see what
happens when everyone I know gets killed while my lover keeps me locked in a safe little room because he doesn't trust me."

"I trust ya," Spike objected.

"You trust me not to turn on you, but do you trust me to survive out there?" Xander asked as he nodded toward the stairs.

"Yeah, trust ya to do that too," Spike finally agreed, but Xander could see the hesitation in Spike's blue eyes even as he untied the leather lead and unbuckled the two cuffs.

"You know the old saying, 'That which does not kill me makes me stronger.'"

"You're plenty strong, pet, I just worry about whether you know it." The serious voice suddenly transitioned into Spike's normal snark without even a transition moment between. "Alright, get your arse up because sunset's in thirty or forty minutes, and you've got a job to get to."

"Um, Spike, I don't think that's such a good job since
Gunn's probably talked to them."

"Bollocks, they respect ya and want ya around, so ya aren't goin' to walk away assuming they'd reject ya. If they don't want ya, we can always kill them later."

"Okay, please tell me you're joking," Xander demanded as he went to the cabinet to replace the restraints and get himself clothing from his diminishing pile.

"Whatever ya want luv," Spike said as he disappeared through the hallway door. Xander threw the clothes for today on the bed as he opened his bag to put away the few clothes he had salvaged from home. Looking at the second bag, he darted a quick look toward the closed hallway door before he executed his plan. He'd teach the vampire to tease the human, he thought with a laugh as he quickly opened all the CD cases on the shelf and carefully replaced each CD with one of his own: Garth Brooks, Patsy Cline, Tim McGraw, C.W. McCall. He even replaced the CD in the stereo with one of his "Best Of" collections. Taking the stack of punk music, he carefully nestled the disks inside his clothes on one of the cabinet shelves. He smiled in anticipation.
6
Taking Sides

“Spike, I’m not sure this is such a great idea, what with the whole he probably knows you’re a vampire and he’ll try to stake you when we walk though that door thing.” Xander said as they stood in the shadows of twilight looking at the club door. The club opened in thirty minutes, but the street was still quiet.

“Oi, can take care of myself,” Spike snorted

“Yeah, I don’t doubt that, but I don’t want you taking care of yourself to result in T having massive arterial bleeding.”

“I won’t kill your little friends, luv; now move your arse before ya get yourself fired and put an end to this discussion.”

“I just know I’m going to regret this,” Xander complained
as he considered the doors of the club.

“That’s rich coming from someone who used to dress like a soddin’ game show reject.”

“Sticks and stones,” he chanted in response as he pushed open the doors to the club. He nodded at the black-vested doorman who gave a quizzical glance toward Spike. Xander reached back and felt Spike's hand slip inside of his, and the bouncer wordlessly stepped aside and allowed them to pass. Inside, the same tired-looking men cleaned the same tables; the same grey-haired bartender wrote in the same ledger; and the same old Mexican man wandered from one island of greenery to another watering the same plants. Somehow he had expected some sort of response, but maybe Gunn hadn’t gotten around to telling T yet. Suddenly that thought terrified him more than facing an angry T.

“Darlin’, you need to get your ass in gear and get back to that kitchen,” shouted a voice from under the bar.

“T?” he called. The man appeared with a bandana wrapped around his head and a wrench in his hand.

“Damn beer tap won’t work right. What the hell are all
these gay men doin’ drinking beer anyway?” T swore as he put the wrench on the bar. The nearby bartender simply grunted.

“Can I, ah, talk to you? That is, if you’re not busy or anything because I don’t want to interrupt if you’re busy just so that we can, um, talk ‘cause we can talk later...if you’re busy.”

“Good lord, the boy’s started babbling,” T laughed, but it sounded more nervous than genuine. “I am busy, but if you need to talk, you just go on and do it.”

“I was hoping for some privacy.” Xander sneaked a look over to the bartender who now looked up with one eyebrow raised in a strangely Spike-like gesture.

“If you and your vamp need privacy, rent one of the back rooms because there are some things that even I get squicked by,” the bartender wryly commented. Xander felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as the world suddenly tilted on its axis, south becoming north and east turning west.

“I, uh,” he froze, unable to even create babble to fill such an awkward moment.
“To mate, don’t think you’d object if ya saw us in action. Boy’s a bloody treat to watch all squirming’ and moanin’,” Spike quipped back.

“Oh. God. No. There will be no discussion of my sex life in any way, shape, or form. No, no, no, and once more for emphasis, NO.”

“Kinda limits our topics, pet,” Spike said as he stepped up and leaned on the bar. “Don’t think your mates really want to hear ‘bout the time Angelus and I dropped in on this weddin’ to give the couple our regards and have a spot to drink.”

He looked at Spike leaning against the bar and for one moment he could see what others must see—the cold and calculating eyes scanning every inch of the club and every person in it, the casual discussion of blood and death, the tense and coiled muscles clearly ready to spring at any provocation. Shit, no wonder Gunn thought he’d lost either his mind or his humanity, but then he blinked, and he recognized the tenseness as Spike’s worry for him, and he suspected that the reference to the wedding murders was more a warning than anything else. If they knew better than to attack Spike, then Spike
wouldn’t need to kill them. He remembered that at one time he had wondered if Spike had some sort of multiple personality disorder, but now he thought of the cold killer and the loving partner as inseparable parts of the same personality.

“Subtle, but then compared to the only other vampire I’ve met, you actually do pass for subtle,” T remarked quietly while clearly trying to edge away. For that matter, the bartender had grown very fond of his ledger, gazing at it as if the meaning of life could be found within the columns of numbers.

“Not like most vamps,” Spike agreed, and Xander could only groan.

“When did I fall into the Twilight Zone?” he asked no one in particular. “Once upon a time I had a nice simple life—hunted a few vamps, got fired by a few jobs, failed a few math tests, got used as bait now and again. Now I have weirdness.” He watched T’s face slowly settle into a smile. “I assume Gunn called?”

“More like ranted,” T confirmed. “Came in several hours ago, just before we headed home this morning, so Pete and I were the only ones who got the pleasure of
listening to him rage for nearly an hour.” T jabbed a thumb toward the bartender who nodded at the introduction.

“And you don’t mind?” Xander hated how needy and small his voice sounded, but faced with the chance of regaining some part of his life, he felt an overwhelming need to do so.

“Won’t go that far, darlin’,” T commented. “You bet your sweet ass I mind you hooking up with a vamp, but it’s your life, and I trust you haven’t completely lost your mind.” T’s words sent him both sailing and crashing. T trusted him and that meant more than he could possibly express, but at the same time, T trusted him after knowing him a week and Gunn didn’t. Of course, maybe that *was* the explanation. Maybe T trusted him because he hadn’t known him long enough to know what a screw up he truly was. “And I’m also trusting that your vamp isn’t going to start snacking on the customers. I’m having a hard time keeping the club going as it is; if people start disappearing outta here, I’m never going to turn a profit.”

“Oi, not some fledge to go snackin’ on the locals without bein’ careful.”
“Can I assume that ‘being careful’ in this case means not eating any locals inside my club?” T turned and directly addressed Spike for the first time.

“Deal, mate,” Spike said solemnly.

“I think I’ve lost what little mind I started with,” T complained as he held out a hand over the bar. Spike took the extended hand and shook it without even a touch of sarcasm. “And I’m assuming what Gunn said about you enslaving Xander is a load of crap.”

“Yeah, mate, it is.” Spike agreed.

“I just don’t get it,” Xander said softly. “Why can you and Cordelia accept this and Gunn can’t?”

“Don’t matter, pet,” Spike said softly.

“I’ve known Gunn for eleven years,” T started, and Xander turned to him, hoping for some sort of explanation. “He doesn’t take to change; he wants the world to follow his rules. Can be a bit of closed-minded bastard, truth be told.” Xander had never thought of Gunn in such terms, but hearing T say it without anger or
bitterness made him wonder if the man could be right. “He’s hurt because he lost his sister and the man he thought of as a little brother all in a couple of days.”

“He didn’t lose me,” Xander insisted, trying to ignore the suddenly sour expression on Spike’s face. It occurred to him that Spike probably still wanted to spread Gunn’s guts all over south L.A.

“For Gunn, you’re either totally in his corner and you do what he wants you to do or you’re against him. And sweetie, it doesn’t help that he’s never seen you and Spike together.”

“Oh, he saw us together alright,” he responded, remembering Gunn’s glare when he had slipped an arm around Spike the previous evening.

“From what I hear, he got a front row seat for you standing up for Spike,” T said hesitantly. He paused, obviously struggling to find words. “I saw you together last night, before I knew you had taken the concept of unsafe sex to new heights. I saw how you looked at Spike, and I saw how Spike looked at you. The look I saw had a whole lot of mutual lust and affection, but not the evil that Gunn described.” T sighed deeply. “I guess I
can handle having a vampire bouncer around.”

“Oi, don’t work for ya, so don’t push it,” Spike warned. T only laughed, his voice still a little thin to sound entirely natural.

“I had to have a bouncer watch out for Xander; he tended to attract a lot of attention. Whether you’re pulling a paycheck from me or not, I suspect that you’re taking over that job,” T pointed out. Spike had stood up defiantly at the thought of taking a job from a human, but now that he understood T’s logic, he settled back into his nonchalant lean against the bar.

“Takin’ care of the boy’s my job,” he confirmed.

“Figured. So, do you drink? I mean the alcoholic type of drinking because that was not an invitation for another story.”

“Wouldn’t mind a JD,” Spike said with a smirk when T lost his composure.

“Drinks on the house as long as you don’t drink anyone in the house,” T said as he picked up the wrench and disappeared under the bar again. “And you get your ass
into the kitchen before Ross comes out here and yells at me for holding up his assistant,” T ordered from under the bar. Xander took one look at Pete who continued to count bottles and write numbers in columns and Spike who leaned back against the bar and watched the workers as if he had nothing better to do. Hoping that the truce held, he headed for the kitchen to load nut and chip bowls while Ross fixed the snacks that required cooking.

When Xander took food to the farthest stations before the club opened, he could see Spike motionless at the bar, a drink now balanced in one hand. When the club doors opened and the first few customers wandered in, he watched Spike standing in the middle of the milling customers. When the strippers started on the runway and the customers started catching random feels with quick darts inside his jeans, Spike's eyes never left him from the time he walked out of the kitchen to the time he walked back through the doors.

At first he tried to keep an eye on Spike, hoping that some random human wouldn't hit on him or vomit on him or do something else worthy of dying, but after a while the crowds thickened and he found himself concentrating on the food. He had almost forgotten his
silent watcher when he felt a strong arm wind around his waist. He turned to convince some random drunk to let him go, but he found himself face to face with Spike.

"Got to go take care of some business, pet," Spike announced.

"Business as in...?"

"Business as in doing some vamp shoppin'. Need to check out the possible candidates for kingship," Spike explained with a small laugh. "Not going to go eat any soddin' girl scouts. Just want to let Carlos know to keep an eye on ya."

"I don't need babysitting, Spike."

"Pet, I'm not leavin' ya without someone to back you up." He could tell from the serious look in Spike's eyes that he had just reached the end of his metaphorical leash. "So we're goin' to go talk to Carlos." He felt the arm firmly guide him toward the side where Carlos stood watching over the crowd. As they walked up, he saw Carlos' surprised expression as Spike stopped inches away from the bouncer.
"Need to do some business, thought I'd ask ya to keep an eye on Xander, here."

"Sure," Carlos sounded hesitant; however, Carlos' eyes then widened in fear and surprise. When he looked at Spike, he could see yellow eyes flashing in the dim light.

"Shit, Spike," Xander complained, "Not exactly low profile."

"Xander?" Carlos asked, obviously confused.

"Just thought I'd just let him know the stakes before I left him watchin' over my pet," Spike said softly enough that only Carlos and Xander could hear, but the tone left no doubt about his seriousness.

"Okay, we have to talk about this unnecessary random threats thing," Xander said as he stepped between Spike and Carlos, hoping none of the nearby customers had noticed the strange events or stranger conversation.

"Holy shit, Xander, what have you gotten into?" Carlos asked in an equally low voice.

"Oi, none of your business," Spike quickly retorted. "Just
need ya to look out for him while I'm out. Trust you lot, your people have a reputation for standin' by their word, but I want to make sure ya know the score."

"Spike? What are you talking about?" Xander asked as he looked in confusion from the smug expression on Spike's face to the embarrassment on Carlos'.

"He's a demon, pet. Can smell him. He's a Largis."

"A quarter Largis," Carlos quickly interrupted, and Xander found himself staring wide-eyed at the bouncer. "Don't really have much to do with that part of the family, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread this around." Carlos' eyes darted around the room in a good imitation of panic, an expression Xander had never associated with the calm bouncer.

"No skin off me, mate. You keep Xander safe, and I'll put ya on the ‘don't kill, maim, or publicly humiliate list’." 

"I don't know if..." Carlos began.

"Course if he gets hurt, I'll make ya sorry ya were ever born."

Xander felt a cold tingling down his backbone when he heard the tone of Spike's words and then the
vampire turned in a swirl of black leather and disappeared into the crowd. He turned to glance at Carlos who still stood as if shocked into immobility.

"Guess you're with me tonight," Carlos shrugged and then waved a hand suggesting that they both get to work.

The rest of the shift went by in a normal stream of gropes, embraces, and drunk men taking food from his tray while making obscene remarks. If Carlos stayed a little closer than normal, he wasn’t going to say anything. No matter how long he looked, he couldn’t see anything other than human. He noticed that in return Carlos spent a lot of time watching him with a guarded, worried expression that either meant that the man questioned his sanity for hooking up with Spike or suspected that Spike wouldn’t keep his secret.

“Got to take a bathroom break.” Carlos suddenly appeared at his right side, and Xander shifted the tray of empty bowls to one side with quiet efficiency.

“Go on, then. I’ll be fine. Just gonna get some more pizza squares out,” he replied off-handedly as he scanned the crowd: Well-dressed possible tippers in the far north
end; rowdy twenty-somethings to avoid near the bar, and snotty Luis dancing down the runway.

“Oh, I don’t even think so. If I’m off the floor, you’re off the floor,” Carlos said a tone sharper than he had ever heard the other man use.

“Not a child here; I’ll be fine.”

“Last time you said that you ended up getting targeted by a vampire,” Carlos pointed out with a pained expression.

“Yeah, but now that vampire is off somewhere playing his little vampire games, so all’s well.” Xander nearly had to shout to be heard over the music Luis used for his dance number. He only hoped that no one was really listening to their conversation.

“And that vampire’s your master now, and he’ll skin me alive if something happens to you, quite literally.” Carlos stepped closer, and he could feel the man’s body heat as Carlos reached out put a strong hand on his arm, pulling him gently toward the back. With a sigh at how little control he seemed to have over his own life, Xander followed. In the kitchen, he dropped the tray on the
prep table before following Carlos back to the hallway with the bathroom.

“I’ll wait right here,” he promised as he leaned on the wall outside the bathroom. From the suspicious look Carlos gave him, for one moment he feared that Carlos would make him come in the bathroom. He leaned back against the wall and gave Carlos his best ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ glare until Carlos finally went into the bathroom alone.

“So, am I allowed back on the floor now?” Xander demanded sarcastically when Carlos reappeared a minute or two later. He watched Carlos’ expression go from shock to frustration to profound sadness.

“Xander, I’m so sorry,” Carlos said sadly.

“For what?” Xander knew that he sometimes did the whole spacing out and not noticing thing, but he honestly couldn’t think of any reason why Carlos had to apologize to him.

“If I’d been out there when he spotted you, I might have kept this from happening.” Carlos waved a hand in the air indicating the whole general situation. He suddenly
realized what Carlos had assumed.

“Carlos, I’ve had a vampire mark for four years--since a vamp named Cassidy marked me. Spike just sort of moved in and took over.”

“But...then why were you here?”

“Oh man, long story, longer than I really want to go into now, but I will say this—if Spike hadn’t stepped in, some other vamp eventually would have, so I can’t say I’m sorry it was Spike who made a move.”

“But Xander,” Carlos interrupted, “you’ve become a marked human, a pet. You’ll never have the freedom to make your own choices again.” Xander leaned back and thought about how to answer Carlos truthfully while still making him understand.

“I know I don’t have certain choices,” he began uncertainly. “But Spike isn’t Cassidy. He doesn’t keep me sitting at his feet with no chance to do what I want.” He stopped when he saw the doubt clear in Carlos’ face. “It’s like...I told Spike that I felt worthless in a fight, and if he had given me a choice, I would have kept feeling worthless and just avoided fighting, but he
didn’t give me a choice, and so I learned some moves I’m really proud of.”

“So he’s a good master?” Carlos asked uncertainly, still looking at him as if he had lost his mind. Well, he didn’t have a good grasp on it to begin with, so if he lost it, there wouldn’t be much difference.

“I wouldn’t call him ‘master’ exactly,” he replied, grimacing at the term.

“And what would you call him?”

“The vampire who tells me what to do, where to go and what to wear?” Xander responded with a crooked smile. "But that’s okay because he gives some really cool presents.” Xander bent down and reached into his boot. When they had been ready to leave, Spike had handed him this and knelt down to show him how to wear it without having it irritate his foot. Now he pulled the silver dagger out of the sheath inside his boot. Carlos gave a whistle.

“That’s demon work--a beautiful weapon,” Carlos said appreciatively as he held out a hand for the weapon. Xander surrendered it and watched as Carlos
turned the blade to examine the edge. He whistled again.

“Yeah, Spike didn’t like the fact that I kinda forgot my weapon when we went to see Angel,” he confessed.

“Angel?” Carlos asked absent-mindedly even while continue to admire the blade with its intricate etching.

“His sire or his sire’s sire—something like that.”

“He introduced you to his line?” Carlos’ head snapped up in with near comical speed.

“He took me to see Angel.” Xander took back the blade that Carlos held out and replaced it in his boot.

“He’s not a normal vamp, that’s for sure.” Carlos sighed heavily. “Normally a vamp will keep his pets away from older or stronger vamps rather than risk having the pets taken away.”

“Yeah, Angel and I had that conversation. I sorta offered to stake him if he even tried to do that.” He remembered the look on Angel’s face when Spike had carried him out of Cassidy’s lair. Carlos nearly choked on
his own laughter.

“Only you,” he finally coughed out.

“Yes, I’m one of a kind,” Xander agreed. “So, is little ol’ me allowed back on the floor now?”

“Don’t mock me,” Carlos said with a teasing cuff to the back of the head. “If I let one hair get pulled out of your head, your Spike really will turn me inside out and leave my body in pieces.”

“And I so wish I thought you were joking,” Xander replied, but he realized that Carlos wasn’t joking. Maybe Carlos’ paranoia was a little justified since Spike wouldn’t have any trouble killing the bouncer. Maybe he should be a little more sympathetic and accept Carlos’ overly protective attitude.

“Come on, back to work,” Carlos said as he headed for the kitchen ahead of Xander.

Four hours later, Xander stood in the empty, dirty club and handed Carlos his share of the nightly tips before
pocketing the rest. Carlos accepted the money warily while watching Spike lean against the bar with a glass of alcohol in hand.

“You really don’t have to,” Carlos said for the second time as he held the money without putting it away.

“All the performers tip the bouncers, T just said I should just tip you directly when you spend the evening pulling drunks off me.”

“It’s alright,” Spike said as he walked up. “Largis don’t take money for their work, pet; think it’s crass.” Spike said quietly, and Xander felt the arm slip into its normal place against his lower back.

“But I’m not offerin’ money, and what you and Xander work out, that’s between you, mate.” He watched as Carlos’ eyes narrowed in consideration. Finally the hand disappeared into his jeans as Carlos pocketed his share.

“Deal,” he said to Spike.

“Come on then, pet. Nice night for some action, innit?”

“Oh shit, I think that depends on the action,” Xander
complained without malice. He felt the familiar arm guide him out the door and he stopped dead when he saw the figure waiting. A tall, thin, red-hair black man leaned against a street lamp.

7

Settling In

Xander looked at the vamp who only a night before had been threatened within an inch of his unlife if he ever came near Xander again. Now Spike calmly guided him toward the waiting figure.

“Xander, meet Q; Q, meet my pet who if you put one fang on I’ll pull every tooth out of your head before I dust ya.”

“Yes, master,” the red-haired vampire replied, his head tucked down as he looked out the side of his eye.

“Q? Like in Star Trek?” Xander looked the thin body, the hesitant movements, and lowered head and couldn’t imagine a being more unlike Q.

“Naw, me new master, he call me dat.” Xander turned to Spike and repeated his question.
“Q?”

“Oi, looks like a Q-tip, don’t he: all thin and fuzzy headed.”

“Geez, offensive much?” He turned to the vampire even while he stayed close to Spike. “What’s your name?”

“Ajani,” answered the vamp in a soft voice, head still bent.

“Close enough. Not like it matters,” Spike shrugged, and he felt the arm start encouraging him down the street, away from their lair. He could see the red-haired vampire following behind at a safe distance. Without another word, Spike guided them to an old warehouse with a side door lying on the cracked concrete. When they walked in, Xander had to squint to see in the dim light filtering in through the dusty windows.

“Pet, pull up your vision,” Spike said, and he looked over at the vampire in undisguised exasperation.

"Yeah, like that's gonna help," he snorted, and suddenly he felt himself lifted and thrown back against the wall of the warehouse with enough force to drive the air from
his lungs.

"Do as you're soddin' told and use your true vision," Spike snarled in full-game face with an arm trapping Xander to the wall. He froze, shocked into silence by the unexpected tension in Spike's body. He could feel the shifting inside his thoughts, and he listened when he felt an invisible presence council him to look down, to submit. He dropped his eyes and suddenly the warehouse was bathed in a soft reddish-brown light. Glancing up at Spike without fully lifting his eyes, he watched as Spike fell back into human face.

"That's it, pet," Spike nodded encouragingly and stepped back, and he realized that no lights had come on; he had switched into his glowy-eyed man persona. Okay, still need a better name for that, he mused as he watched Spike walk over to Ajani.

"Fight well enough against minions, but they're soddin' stupid little beasts. Ya have to learn to fight somethin' with a little more intelligence. So, ground rules." He had only half listened to Spike lecturing Ajani, fascinated with the amount of detail he could see in the dim light. A growl brought his attention back to Spike immediately. "Ground rules," Spike repeated with a
sharp glare.

"Pet, you can do your best to dust Ajani. If he's too slow to protect himself when you've only had one day of trainin' with me, he deserves to die." Xander looked at the other vamp in alarm. Yes, he hunted vampires. Yes, he had staked vampires. No, he really wasn't okay with killing a vampire he had been introduced to. Besides, Spike couldn't possibly mean for him to fight another vampire. He wasn't the fighter; he was the sidekick.

"Q, you can hit my pet, hurt him if he's careless, knock him on his arse if he lets ya. Ya cannot kill him, cripple him, seriously injure him, or bite him. If ya break even one a those, you'll beg me for death before ya actually turn to dust and I walk through your remains like the piece of nothin' ya are." Ajani only dipped his head in acceptance of the rules, but Xander couldn't help gasping at the threat, all too aware that Spike would carry through without a bit of hesitation.

"So soddin' have at it," Spike said as he stepped back. Xander took one look at Ajani before the vampire leapt for him, both hands held as if to grab him by the neck. Xander grabbed the vamp's right arm and shoved it to the side so that he would have a clear shot for his
elbow to drive into Ajani's side. He completed the move, but then lost his balance, sending him to one knee. He heard Ajani scramble on the concrete floor, and he pulled the knife from his boot as he turned to face the vampire's second attack.

This time Ajani moved in more slowly, circling like a predator scenting wounded prey, which actually wasn't far off reality, Xander thought to himself as he turned to keep Ajani in sight without showing the pain he felt in his left knee where he had hit the concrete just a little too hard. Without a sound, Ajani darted forward and tried for a punch, and Xander stepped to the side and back a half step so that Ajani had to reach farther than he expected. In a flash, Xander brought the knife down and cut through the exposed flesh. The scent of blood awakened his own demon even more, and he could feel a tingling hunger that left him both desiring just a taste of the blood and nauseated at the thought. Ajani hissed some unfamiliar word--context suggested a curse--before beginning to circle again.

Xander thought he might hold his own until Ajani began a series of fast, light strikes on right side, which increasingly pushed him back on his left leg. He heard himself snarl as Ajani forced him to pull back onto his
injured knee for the fourth time. This time he spun around and kicked viciously at the vampire's legs. He didn't move fast enough, and while he was still off-balance, Ajani drove forward and slammed him to the ground. Xander felt his head hit the concrete, the unfamiliar vampire pinning him down, and he growled his frustration as an uncontrollable rage grew in his chest. With a roar, he threw Ajani back and jumped for him without any thought for strategy or defense, knife forgotten on the floor. Ajani instantly slipped into game face and grabbed at him even as he grabbed for the vampire's throat.

"Stop It," roared a voice that instantly left Xander crouching on the ground, still feeling an overwhelming urge to kill Ajani who had retreated, but also feeling an even more overwhelming urge to stop and wait.

"Pet, ya need to calm down," Spike said, and he felt fingers run through his hair until his thoughts had cleared enough for him to regain control of his limbs. He looked up and saw Spike holding out his knife. He took it and carefully slid it back into its sheath as he stretched out his legs and sat on the floor. "Let that leg heal a bit; I'll take it from here," Spike ordered, and Xander could feel a cold tingle in his knee even as Spike gestured for Ajani
to follow him a few feet away where they had room to spar.

It made Xander feel a little better to watch the two vampires spar. From the sidelines, he could see Ajani's speed and grace, which made him feel better about getting his ass kicked. He also felt better after seeing Ajani get slammed to the ground more often than he could count. Every time the vampire simply got up without complaint and returned to attack Spike. Long after Xander's knee felt better and his butt had started going to sleep, Spike called an end to the session.

Spike came over and squatted in front of him, fingers going over the knee before standing again and holding out a hand to help him up. Xander accepted the assistance and stood leaning against Spike even though he didn't need the support.

"Both of ya are goin' to have to control the anger; you let yourself get angry durin' a fight, and you'll find yourself dead. But ya both did well today." Xander felt the familiar warmth that Spike's compliments always brought, but he almost smiled at Ajani's reaction. The vampire's back suddenly straightened, and he looked directly at Spike for a moment before dropping his head
"Dank ya, massah," he whispered joyfully. Xander almost laughed at how alike the two vampires could be. Each had an accent that became nearly indecipherable when emotional.

"Where ya from, Ajani?" He could feel Spike tense at the question, obviously unhappy, but he didn't say anything so Xander ignored the signs. Ajani looked first at him and then at Spike before answering.

"Naw Orlins," he said.

"Born in California, myself. Going to be nineteen in a couple of days, but I'm guessing you're a little older."

"1887," Ajani answered the unasked question and then returned his gaze to the floor.

"Oi, time for us to get to our lairs before the sun gets us," Spike commented and all three left the warehouse.

"Tomorrow, same time," Spike ordered, and then Xander felt himself firmly guided away while Ajani stood by warehouse, unmoving.
"Tomorrow for what?" Xander asked as they hurried down the street. He couldn't see any morning light, but from the way Spike rushed, he suspected they were out later than normal.

"Tryin' to give him what 'e needs to be a master. Didn't know he was that old, but I knew he's old enough to be a master if has someone to teach him how to control himself."

"If you're trying to help him, why did you keep tearing him down because I have to tell you that, from experience, that's not a pleasant experience," Xander pointed out as he remembered Gabi with her various insults and Pamee with her forays into public humiliation.

"Vamps aren't the same. If I went up to 'im and said that I thought he's strong enough to hold the city, he'd ignore me; his demon's got no reason to respect me."

"But if you dominate his demon, prove that you're stronger and wiser and *then* tell him to take charge, he'll listen," Xander guessed as they reached the outer gate to the truck yard.
"Somethin' like that. He's got to learn to fight back, stand up for himself and demand respect or he'll never survive. To do that, he has to stand up against a strong enough master to feel strong himself." Spike dug in his duster pockets for the key as Xander watched the edges of the buildings start to glow with the first warnings of daylight. Once the door opened, Xander hurried down the stairs, waiting until Spike finished locking up and came down the stairs.

"Course pet, there's a good chance he's goin' to get himself killed before claimin' any territory. Don't get too attached to him," Spike suggested as the leather duster flew to the chair. "Goin' to get more sheets." Spike hit the play button as he walked through the hallway door and disappeared. Xander had settled himself into the chair, enjoying the smell of Spike and leather when the first strains of "Sixteen Tons" started coming out of the stereo.

Xander was happily singing along, "St. Peter don'tcha call me, cause I can't go; I owe my soul to the company store" when Spike appeared, a look of absolute horror on his face.

"Bloody hell, no," Spike entreated as he tossed sheets on
the bed and went to the stereo.

"What? It's political commentary, about the workers during the great depression who got exploited by industry," he said, proud of himself for keeping a straight face. Spike opened one CD case after another, uttering a string of curses that he hadn't heard since Spike and Angel had tried to talk in the back of Thopis. He didn't even know most of the words that Spike muttered in his general direction.

"Where the hell is my bloody music 'cause if you damage one a those CD's, you're goin' be tied to that bed for a month." Spike confronted him with narrowed eyes, but Spike didn't go to turn off the CD, even when the track changed to "King of the Road," and Spike visibly flinched. Xander simply shrugged and waved a hand in the general direction of the room.

"I'm sure they're somewhere."

"Bleedin' git," Spike looked around the room for a minute before disappearing into the hallway again. Xander tried not to laugh at the sound of curses and the sound of rough ceramic dragging as Spike must have checked toilet tanks. Spike finally reappeared at the hallway
door, his eyes flashing gold.

“Get your arse in the bath and clean up; ya smell of sweat,” Spike snarled, but Xander couldn’t resist laughing a little as he darted past, listening to Spike still cursing. Luckily, he had enough tip money in his pocket to replace all the CD’s even if he came back to find all his country music in shiny little jagged pieces. Worth it, he snickered to himself.

By the time Spike joined him in the bath, sliding into the hot water and settling between his legs, the vampire had settled into annoyed mutters.

“Daft git,” Spike grumbled, but Xander picked up a washcloth and reached around to start cleaning the vampire’s chest and arms, causing the vampire to lean back and sigh in pleasure.

“Duck your head under,” he suggested, and Spike immediate bent down to get his hair wet. When the blonde head reappeared, with the spikes now damp and sagging, Xander grabbed some shampoo and started running his fingers through the soggy spines, rubbing until the hard locks dissolved and the hair turned soft and silky. With a single whispered word, he got Spike to
dunk his head again, and then he worked in the conditioner, his hands sliding over the now slick curls while Spike simply lay in his arms spineless and sighing.

“Bloody hell, Dru never did that,” he finally moaned with a graceful stretch.

“That a yes vote on the hair washing?” Xander asked with a small chuckle; he couldn’t believe that he could make the ancient creature so happy with such a small act.

“Hell yes.” Without warning, Spike twisted around to face him, nose to nose. Xander held his breath as he watched Spike slowly sink, a leer on his face. A moment after Spike disappeared under the water, Xander felt the suction on his cock, and his hand flew to the side of the tub where he clung like a man about to fall off a cliff. His knuckles turned white and he gasped with pleasure as a tongue played with the underside of his cock, leaving him gasping and desperate to buck, but unwilling to hurt Spike like that. Instead, he fought every muscle and nerve and instinct in his body to remain still as Spike swallowed his entire cock, working his throat muscles until Xander literally screamed. All too soon, Xander felt his own balls draw up as he started coming. He threw his
head back onto the edge of the tub and lay there, still twitching and wheezing when Spike reappeared with a lascivious grin.

"Hmm, like some help there?" Xander asked as he reached for Spike's cock, but Spike intercepted his hand, pulling it so that Xander would instead embrace the vampire as Spike leaned in for a deep kiss.

"Too late," Spike whispered. "You're just so bloody perfect I finished off with you," Spike admitted as he stood, showing a near-flaccid cock. While Spike went about drying himself, Xander ducked his head under the water to hide the smell of tears that he knew Spike could scent so easily. Grabbing the shampoo, he drained the water even as he washed his own hair. He knew that he hadn't been exactly spectacular last time, but he had never expected Spike to reject him like that. Spike would rather give himself a hand job than let Xander try again. He rubbed the shampoo over his face to hide the tears he tried to hold back. Of course, Spike had certainly enjoyed their earlier activities, so maybe that's what Spike needed from him; he could do that. Hell, he enjoyed that, but he couldn't deny the aching pain that Spike didn't want any more than that from him. He'd do anything to make Spike happy just to keep the vampire
around for a bit longer.

Xander finished rinsing under one of the shower heads, grabbed a towel to dry off, and then tossed his towel into the corner as usual before grabbing the robe Spike had started leaving at the edge of the shower room. He looked at the robe and realized how many habits the vampire must have changed to have him there; obviously Spike liked something about him, and maybe that could be enough for him. If he was never anything more than a pet for Spike to use, then Spike would still stay with him, and anything that kept Spike in his life was acceptable.

Wrapping himself in the warm terrycloth, he wandered into the main room to see how many CD pieces he had to pick up. The bed looked the same, rumpled sheets on the bed with the clean sheets in a pile on the edge. His country music cases lay in the corner undisturbed, Pasty Cline balanced on top of C.W. McCall. A pile of dirty clothes guarded one corner and not a CD shard to be seen. Xander narrowed his eyes. For a moment he stood there, confused, but then he realized what Spike had done. He felt a small smile sneak onto his face as he looked around the room. So, the vampire wanted to play, huh?
“Soddin’ hell,” said a voice behind him. “Need to turn a minion or two.”

“Whoa, what??” he yelped, playful mood gone.

“Look at this place, need someone to clean,” Spike said casually as he walked over and dropped into the chair naked as the day he was born, his head moving to the sound of a punk singer screaming indecipherable lyrics.

“Not a reason to kill someone,” he quickly pointed out, but Spike simply gave him a confused look.

“Not goin’ to kill them, just turn ‘em.”

“Oh boy, sometimes I just need to remind myself you really are a demon,” he answered, still slightly shaken at the thought of Spike killing someone just so he didn’t have to do housework.

“You kept the place clean by yourself, so let’s assume the extra mess is my fault. Simple solution: I’ll clean up after myself.” He looked at Spike’s incredulous expression and he couldn’t help but think of his mother. And his mother had been right to doubt his promises because no matter how much he promised, he usually did forget to actually
do any actual house work. But then again, his mother had never threatened to kill anyone if he didn’t do housework, unless you counted a few idle threats to kill him, so he had a whole new level of motivation.

“You?” Spike said in a sceptical voice that again reminded him of his mother, but considering what they had just done in the bath, he took that comparison and repressed it in the darkest corner of his mind.

“Yes, me,” he answered with some frustration. Geez, it was usually polite to actually wait until someone broke his word before sounding so cynical. “Unlock the doors where you keep the cleaning stuff, and I’ll do my share.”

“Pet,” Spike said softly, “those doors have been unlocked since I got ya back from Cassidy.”

“Oh.” Xander looked at the hallway door behind him for a moment before curiosity overcame him and he just had to go see.

The first door on the left swung open to reveal shelves, tons of shelves. Looking closer, he realized the shelves at the back had old ration boxes, dusty army blankets, and forgotten tins of lord knows what. The shelves at the
front had torn open bundles of black jeans, stacks of soft shirts that tilted wildly, piles of sheets still in their plastic containers scattered across boxes of rations, and silk shirts hung from the corners of the shelves, obviously Spike’s version of a closet. The only thing he could think was how many new places he now had to search for his CD’s.

He walked along the shelves, pushing ration boxes onto the floor as he cleared space to stack shirts and jeans and sheets and towels neatly on the shelves, each item on its own shelf; his mother would be proud. In reality, he just wanted to find his CD’s. Once he had straightened the front shelves, he walked around the back shelves, running his hand behind boxes, trying to find the missing disks. When he finally gave up the search, he left, rubbing his running nose which protested the dust even as he went to the second room.

Opening this door, he stopped in the doorway, utterly shocked. A row of antique washers and dryers sat next to a brand new set, still sitting in the middle of the room unattached to anything. That didn’t shock him. The mountains of towels, old sheets, and dirty clothes shocked him.
“Holy dirty laundry, batman.” Xander heard the door open behind him.

“ Took ya long enough,” Spike leaned against the door jam with a smirk on his face.

“Yeah, yeah. Do you have some sort of dirty clothes fetish I don’t know about?” he asked looking around in dismay.

“Never thought a that—might be worth a try, luv.” Spike’s arm suddenly lifted him and dropped him in the middle of the sheets and towels before the vampire sprawled over him.

“I’m never going to find my CD’s, am I?” he asked in despair as Spike laughed.

“Oi, not the one who went and started this.”

“And why do you have all this damn laundry? It must have taken years to get his much.”

“Only ‘bout six months.”

“And what exactly are you planning on doing with it all?”
“Dump it in the sewers. Can always steal more, can’t I, pet.”

“To steal your word, ‘Oi.’”

“Nothin’ wrong with that, pet.”

“Yeah, for an amoral demon, probably not high on the list of evil sins. For an ordinary mortals, stealing’s one of those things that you try to avoid.” He watched Spike’s features turn from amusement to a seriousness he didn’t normally see.

“Bleedin’ hell, sometimes I just need to remind myself you really are a human,” Spike said in imitation of his own earlier words, and he felt slim cool fingers brush over his forehead.

“Any chance of hooking up the washer and dryer? I’m willing to actually do the wash, and I can’t believe I actually just said that…I must be possessed.” Spike laughed.

“Yeah, I was plannin’ on turning a minion and having them do the cleanin’ but then I decided to keep a lower
profile ‘til I’d found Cassidy. I don’t do soddin’ laundry myself, but if ya don’t want any minions around, I’ll get rid of some a this old stuff so ya don’t have so much to wash and then connect the machines.”

“Before you start dumping this stuff, just answer one question.”

“Anythin’ pet.”

“Are my CD’s in here?” He turned his best pleading look to Spike, but the vampire simply laughed and got up.

“I’m evil, pet. Not likely to tell the truth, am I?” Xander sighed in frustration and lay his head back down on the pile under him.

“I’m never going to find Patsy,” he groused as Spike left the room, still chuckling. By the time he had decided to give up on finding the CD’s in the pile, Spike had fallen asleep on the bed, sprawled on his stomach with his arms and legs thrown across the length of the bed. He looked around the main room for a moment before starting to straighten up. He pushed the empty country music CD cases into a single pile and stacked them on the shelf under the stereo. He picked up the dirty laundry
and folded it, putting it in a corner to wait until Spike hooked up the washer and dryer. He noticed that Spike had changed the sheets, tossing the dirty ones into a corner. Since the storeroom had no shortage of sheets, he took the bundle and tossed it on the mountain Spike had promised to throw away.

Giving up, he crawled into bed, feeling Spike quickly shift to curl up around him.

8
Payback

Morning came with slightly stiff muscles and the sound of British cursing. Xander sat up in bed and looked around at the room, hoping for some inspiration, but he couldn’t see any good hiding places. Crawling out of bed, he opened the cabinet and grabbed clean clothes before heading to the bathroom for his morning ritual. By the time he had gotten ready for his day, Spike had reappeared in the main room, his hair still in soft waves
and his jeans dirty.

“Soddin’ things are in,” Spike said as he hit play on the stereo and Xander could see the smug expression on Spike’s face as he started singing along with the punk rock.

“You throw the old laundry away, and I’ll keep the new laundry clean.”

“Deal. I’ll start dumpin’ it; need to get it far enough away that it can't be tracked.” Spike disappeared though the hallway door again, leaving Xander still considering possible hiding places for those missing CD's

Xander suddenly found himself looking at the CD cases on the shelf. The evil vampire had obviously hidden his music in the last place he would look, especially since he hadn’t found it yet. As he looked at the cases on the shelf, he had a sudden suspicion. Dashing over to the shelf, he grabbed Garth Brooks and snapped open the case. He looked in at the black and white CD and smiled. Evil vampire. Reaching up for the Dead Kennedys, he quickly slipped Garth Brooks into the case before dropping the punk CD on the bed.
Working quickly, he switched all the CD’s on the shelf even while the song on the stereo continued to scream. When he had a stack of punk music, he darted into the storage room and scanned the shelf for the plastic bags he had seen earlier. Grabbing one, he dashed back into the room and put the CD’s inside. And now for something to hide the package inside. With a smile, he grabbed a black pair of jeans and folded them with the CD's inside.

"Ready, pet?" Spike asked as he reappeared. He walked over and turned off the CD player. "Need to get goin'."

"Almost. I can't find my knife." Xander tried to focus on looking innocent.

"Oi, you and your soddin' weapons."

"I'm still looking through stuff out here," Xander said with a pleading look. For nearly a minute Spike simply glared back before rolling his eyes.

"Fine, I'll bloody look in the other rooms." As soon as Spike left, Xander grabbed the last punk CD out of the stereo and slipped in Patsy Cline before adding to his hidden stash.
"Spike, I found it," Xander yelled as he took his knife out from under the pillow and slipped it into his boot. When Spike returned he had a definitely annoyed expression.

"Goin' to pin your bloody weapons to ya," Spike complained, but Xander simply grabbed the jeans without a word. At Spike's raised eyebrow he shrugged.

"I owe Mike a pair of jeans. Last week this vamp I didn't know pinned me up against a wall and made me come in my jeans." From the smile on Spike’s face, he remembered.

"Right, enough talkin' time to start moving."

"Why the hurry? I can't believe you care this much about my punctuality at work."

"I don't. However, got some work of my own to do."

"What exactly are you up to?" By this time they had reached the top of the stairs and Spike stopped to lock the gate.

"If Q wants to take power, he's got to take it; I'm just
"He really didn't seem like a take over the world type of demon to me, Spike. He seemed more like a 'if you leave me alone, I'll leave you alone' type." Xander followed Spike to the motorcycle, but he didn't get on right away. "Maybe he just doesn't want to take over the city." Spike looked over, one eyebrow lifted in an expression that merged amusement and disbelief.

"Some demons live like that," Spike acknowledge without starting the motorcycle. Xander swung up behind him and pushed up against the vampire. It really was the best way not to fall off given Spike's driving. "Vamps are different, though," Spike continued after a long moment. "Vamps need to know their place, who they're above and who they're below. Not really comfortable without that. When Q was on his own, he didn't fit anywhere, but now he knows he's under me and with some promptin', he's happy enough to be over all the soddin' minions we can collect."

"But doesn't that make the minions under you?" he asked, suddenly unsure about belonging to a vampire who controlled an army of undead. Cool idea for a movie of the week, not such a cool idea for real life since armies
required provisions. Yeah, like calling them provisions would ease his conscience about vampires' source of their essential daily vitamins and minerals.

"If I fought for him, yeah. But I just sorta sit back and advise, help him spot the weak masters to pick off, take out a few key players. Leave the battles to him and his minions 'cause if he can't take a few pansy-arsed minions and decade old childer, he deserves to die."

"Funny enough, I think I'd be sorry if he died, and god, aren't I supposed to be cheering for the other side here?"

"If it makes ya feel any better, dozens of vamps a night are goin' down in these fights; won't be much of an army left by the time, and if Ajani's smart, he'll keep it small to avoid Peaches." Spike kick started the motorcycle and Xander had to raise his voice.

"Hey, you called him 'Ajani'."

"The git looks like he might survive, guess he deserved to be called whatever he wants." At that, they sped down the street, dodging through cars and even up on the sidewalk once as Spike avoided rush hour traffic.
Xander arrived at the club just as the doors opened, in other words, late. Rushing past the bouncers, he went to make a dash for the kitchen when a cool hand stopped him.

"We find Carlos first, pet." Spike turned, scanning the half-full club until finally zeroed in on something that Xander could only assume to be Carlos since the club lights weren't bright enough for him to really see anything. Spike urged him toward the south wall, and he followed Spike's touch blindly until he finally spotted the bouncer leaning against a table talking to someone. When they got there, Carlos looked up with a cautious smile.

"Spike," he nodded toward the vampire.

"Mate," Spike replied indifferently. "Got him from here?" Xander couldn't control his need to roll his eyes at being discussed while standing inches away.

"Yeah," Carlos confirmed with his tight smile.

"Right then," Spike turned, and Xander could tell from the expression that he had something on his mind.
"Spike?" he asked suspiciously.

"Didn't say good mornin' to ya, pet. Thought I'd say a proper goodbye." Xander watched as the yellow rings appeared around Spike's eyes, and he started backing up until he bumped into the half wall. Spike stalked closer and put a hand on either side of Xander's waist, leaning against the wall. Oh yeah, familiar territory here, Xander thought as he cursed himself for reminding Spike about their first meeting. The vampire obviously wanted an encore, and he braced himself to not embarrass himself this time by coming in his jeans.

"Wot? Don't ya want to give me a proper send off?" Spike asked in feigned innocence, looking strangely innocent for a hundred year old serial killer. Spike leaned in for a kiss, and he met the lips half way, pressing forward as Spike's tongue invaded, explored, demanded and took, Spike himself slowly leaning forward until he could feel himself pressed back into the half wall.

He felt one of Spike's hands move up to cradle the back of his head and pull him forward, away from the wall. He followed willingly. Just when he began to feel light-headed from either lust or lack of air, his lips were freed, and a mouth descended on his scar just as a slim hand
slipped down the back of his jeans. Xander gasped and lunged forward, trying to get some friction against his cock, and not caring who saw his mounting lust.

He could hear Spike chuckle without lifting his head, the slim fingers now playing with the sensitive skin between his cheeks, and he shifted his legs apart to give Spike more room to work in the tight confines. His own hands locked onto Spike's shoulders as Xander Jr. sent so many signals to his brain that he feared he would collapse. Now the hand disappeared from his neck, and pulled his one arm free, twisting it up behind his back and forcing his body into the vampire, trapping him against the cool body. The suction at his shoulder stopped just before a quick lick and nip left him whimpering and clawing one handed at Spike's back, but Spike stepped back and held him up by one arm as Xander felt himself sway unsteadily.

With an evil smile, Spike turned and left with saying over his shoulder, "Serves ya right for teasin'."

Xander groaned as he looked around and saw the lustful eyes considering him and his temporary inability to walk. Well at least he'd earn enough in CD's to replace any that Spike broke once he discovered his own had left
the lair. Suddenly terrified, Xander looked around and found the jeans on the floor where he dropped them. Oh lord, if those CD's had broken, he would be seriously sorry. He tried to bend down to pick it up, but groaned again as the tight jeans and his engorged cock conspired to prevent the motion.

"Let me," offered a voice, and he watched a balding man stoop down to retrieve the package. When the man stood up, Xander smiled his thanks and held out his hand.

"Payment first," the man demanded as he held the jeans behind his back. Realizing that Spike had set him up for a very difficult start to his shift, he just smiled and held his arms out in a clear gesture that the man had access. The man moved in, putting the jeans, and Xander noticed the CD's as well, on the half wall before leaning his own body into Xander's in an imitation of Spike's position. Xander braced his hands against the half wall as he felt the man's hand slip down the front of his jeans, the fingers sliding in until they found the slightly moist head, rubbing along the slit until Xander had to bite the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from coming. Something in his head, oh who was he kidding, the baby vampire in his head told him he couldn't come for someone else no matter what
Xander Jr. wanted.

The light rubbing continued until Xander threw back his head and gasped as he thrust up against the willing fingers. Then he felt a hand pull his head back down as he was kissed roughly and a second hand slipped into the back of his jeans with the familiar warm feeling of paper money. When he opened his eyes, he found the balding man gone, his tip presumably down the back of Xander jeans, and a much taller and more muscular replacement kissing him. He tried to catch his breath, but the man quickly braced his knee against the wall, forcing Xander up onto his toes if he wanted to avoid crushing his balls. He tried scooting his feet closer together, but the thick knee prevented him from coming even close to closing his legs, leaving him vulnerable, trapped, and unable to come in a room full of hungry strangers.

Xander really thought Spike had gone too far this time, so he looked around for Carlos, determined to get a rescue. He quickly spotted Carlos still standing by the same table, but the Largis demon bouncer simply shrugged and gave him a little wicked smile. Seeing that the bouncer wasn't going to interfere, Mr. Tall and Muscled pressed his knee up a little higher, and Xander blushed when he heard himself make a very unmanly
squeak. Tall and Muscled reached forward and pinched one of his nipples, harder than Spike ever had, and he tried to jerk back but couldn't with the wall behind him.

"Hey," he protested, his voice breaking in the middle, so he tried again with a deeper tone. "Hey, don't..." he didn’t get any farther when the fingers on his nipple tightened, leaving him gasping and looking to an impassive Carlos for help. Tall and Muscled leaned forward without moving the knee and kissed him again, teeth nipping at his tongue and lips even as the man trapping him chuckled. He felt another set of hands pull his right arm away from the wall, and he pulled away from the aggressive mouth, nearly bending himself backwards over the half wall, his hair tangling with the plants.

"Hey now," he complained again as a blue-shirted Hispanic man held his wrist and ran warm fingers up and down his arm.

"You mind, man?" Blue Shirt asked, but the question went to Tall and Muscled whose knee disappeared for a moment, but before Xander could react, Tall and Muscled had placed a left knee into his crotch, trapping him even while moving to the side so the second man
could move in. The second man smiled and trailed a hand up Xander's arm and down his chest, a five dollar bill threaded between his fingers. He watched, helpless, as the man's fingers disappeared down the front of his jeans, leaving the money just over his left hip before the fingers moved in to tease Xander Jr. who already ached with a need to come. The man ran a fingernail lightly over the sensitive skin, and Xander could feel his whole body shake with the familiar feeling that announced that he was about to embarrass himself again, but this time his cock simply refused to take the last step, his semen remained trapped, and his cock throbbed.

Blue Shirt smiled his gratitude to Mr. Tall and Muscled, and hey didn't he get any gratitude since it was his body being used here? Of course Spike who had set up the show for this purpose and Carlos who refused to step in might also deserve some gratitude he thought as he shot the bouncer another dirty glare. The pressure on his balls intensified and he returned his attention to Tall and Muscled who looked annoyed at being ignored, but no problem because he couldn't ignore the man now. No matter how he struggled to lift onto his toes, his balls were pressed up into him from the imprisoning knee.

"Please, enough now," Xander asked, but Tall and
Muscled simply smiled and wrapped a thick hand around his left wrist, pulling the hand up to the top of the half wall and pinning it there so that Xander had no hope of freeing himself, and obviously no chance of rescue since Carlos had just nodded off another bouncer who had come to break up the party. He started considering breaking Spike's CD's himself when an older blonde man moved in and ran a warm hand down his chest, soothing the sore nipple.

The man looked into Xander's eyes for a minute, and then both hands came to his chest, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. Xander opened his mouth to protest, but the knee at his crotch pushed up, and he froze. Carlos would never let him get seriously hurt, but the man would obviously let him do some suffering, so he decided not to see how far that went. He closed his mouth and allowed the blonde man to unbutton his shirt and push it back before running his hand through the hair gathered on his stomach and disappearing into his jeans. He wasn't surprised when the man's hand followed the line of hair down into the jeans, his fingers teasing his already engorged cock head until Xander lowered himself onto the knee slightly just so that the pain would keep Xander Jr. in line. The blonde man smiled and slipped his own bill into his jeans.
Xander looked up at the crowd and saw how many customers stood around, and whimpered, but that only brought on another low rumbling laugh from Tall and Muscled who, Xander decided, must have been a relative of Spike's in a previous life because they had the same evil sense of humor. Xander braced himself as another customer moved in. He had no idea how long he stood there, trapped as man after man rubbed the slit of his cock; caressed the head; slid cum-slicked fingers down the shaft; stroked, rubbed, bit, or sucked his nipples; and pressed into him. The only constant was Tall and Muscled who massaged his left shoulder, imprisoned his left arm, and tortured his balls. Schizophrenic much?

Suddenly, the man pulled him forward off the wall, his shirt still hanging open and now half hanging off his right arm. The man's one hand slid down the back of his jeans even as the other twisted his arm up and pushed him into the man's embrace. For a moment all he could think about was the relief of having his balls released, but then his vulnerability frightened him and he tried to pull back.

"Spread those legs or this is going to hurt even worse," the man roughly whispered in his ear and think fingers forced themselves farther down the back of his
jeans. Xander had almost reached the point of panic when a familiar voice came from inches away.

"Let him go or I'll redecorate with your blood before tossing you out on your ass." Carlos said in such a calm and business-like manner that the man didn't respond for a couple of seconds, and then the invading hand retreated and he felt his arm fall free.

"Just having some fun. Boy knows how to play or he would have come long ago," Tall and Muscled smirked, and Xander could only lean back against the wall and watch as Carlos stared the man down and then stood guard as Xander buttoned up his shirt.

"Yeah, thanks for the rescue there," he sarcastically snapped. The words came out a little harsher than he intended, but he had wanted help earlier.

"Your master set you up for that; I wasn't going to interfere."

"Not my master," Xander grumbled as he tried to adjust his jeans and found them so full of money that he simply exposed his manly bits to death by paper cut. Glancing around and realizing that he had too much of an
audience to get away with any subtle action, he simply stuck his hand down his own jeans and rearranged the tips to avoid an embarrassing hospital visit. Oh god, his mother was still listed as next of kin. What would she say to the doctor who explained this injury?

"Okay, the vampire who tells you where to go, what to wear and who to talk to set you up for that," Carlos amended himself with a slight sigh of either frustration or amusement. Xander was too busy trying to relax enough to walk to actually pay attention to the difference.

"I think I'm dying," he complained as he picked up the jeans and CD's. He tried to walk to the back with his head held high, but he knew full well that he did more of a waddle. Dignity be damned when the equipment is in danger of exploding. He got into the back, and Ross turned, a snarl on his face as he clearly prepared to tell off his missing helper. Obviously he looked worse than he suspected because Ross first stopped dead, his expression of annoyance chiseled into frozen flesh, and then the man began to laugh. Really laugh. Xander hadn't known the man long enough to tell him off, so he restricted himself to a dirty glare as he shuffled past half naked dancers to the bathroom.
In the bathroom, he quickly stripped off his jeans and recovered a nice stack of bills before he turned to the task of relieving other needs. He leaned against the tile and remembered his first day when the sight of Charlie in that loin cloth caused his side trip, but now his mind focused on only one man as he stroked himself. He had expected to finish in one or two strokes, but he continued, his orgasm building ever closer to the edge, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't seem to fall over that precipice into release. He could feel his fear grow as he realized that something was wrong. The demon in his mind began to circle in distress at his distress, and he pushed it to one side and he concentrated on imagining Spike's hand touching him. The image aroused him, but in his current condition, that wasn't really of the good. He stood, still leaning against the tile, as a slow panic grew. A knock on the door interrupted his horror.

"Xander, I've got something for you," Carlos called from the other side. Xander walked over so that he would be hidden from the door, and cracked it open. Carlos stood there with a bin of ice and a thin towel.

"Thought you might need these." He took the bin, still
confused, and Carlos pulled the door shut. Of course he knew exactly what he needed it for, he thought as he ran cold water into the bin, allowing the ice to turn it frigid before dunking the towel in the water, but how could Carlos know about his problem? He took a deep breath, looked at the towel floating in the ice water, and cursed Spike before using the towel on his own genitals.

Xander Jr. silently shrieked with pain and quickly shriveled, leaving his overly full and still sore balls looking even larger now that every drop of blood had retreated from his cock. Now he leaned against the wall to keep from shrieking out loud and bringing the entire staff to witness his humiliation. He gave his genitals one last swipe before dumping the water and redressing. The impressive pile of bills on the counter got divided into two neat piles and then deposited one in each front pocket before he opened the door to a serious Carlos.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, totally new problem, has never happened before because, ya know, the plumbing works just fine, temporary problem." Carlos watched with an amused expression, not answering so Xander just continued. "Totally temporary in the probably won't
ever happen again...definitely won't ever happen again
type way temporary." Xander stood silent for a moment,
refusing to look at Carlos. "Okay, I have to know. How
did you know? What? Could you hear me with your
demony hearing? Smell me? What?"

"You really don't know, do you?" Carlos asked.

"Okay, I think that's pretty obvious. Normally, if you
assume I just don't know, you'll probably be right."

"Pets can't come without their m...the vampires who tell
them what to do, where to go and who to talk to."

"You mean that son of a bitch knew what would
happen?" Xander asked, imagining all sorts of vampire
tortures: holy water, sun lamp, crucifix tattoo.

"Says a lot about Spike that you didn't know," Carlos
reflected.

"Yeah, says he's sadistic," he nearly shouted, and at that
moment, a couple of dancers walked by the entrance to
the hallway, giggling. Xander leaned his head back
against the wall. Great, now everyone at work would
think he was some sort of pain slut. Yep, purgatory and
hell combined couldn't come up with worse tortures.

"Actually, I was thinking that maybe I didn't have to worry so much about you." His expression must have clued Carlos in on how much sense that statement didn't make to him because the bouncer continued without prompting. "Vamps control pets through emotions; they use the demon to amplify strong emotions until the pet can't think straight or fight back. Most use fear, leaving a pet trembling on the ground and afraid to do anything without a specific command." Xander opened his mouth to protest the implication, but Carlos waved him off.

"Yeah, I figured out that couldn't be the case pretty quick. But, and this was a real concern for me, some vamps use lust instead. Get a pet all worked up and then deny him or her the right to come. Eventually it leaves the human even more disabled than the one controlled by fear."

"You thought Spike was manipulating me through my deep and entirely normal for a human teenager lust," he guessed.

"Yeah. But if you didn't know this would happen, he's obviously never denied you before."
"True, and if he doesn't want to take up smoking in a more personal and immolation-by-lover type way, he won't ever do it again," Xander complained as he felt his genitals still throbbing. "I need to drop these off in a locker," he said as he started walking toward the employee area, trying to get his gait back to normal.

Once he had locked up his jeans and the CD, he headed back for a tray of food. Ross started laughing again the minute he walked in the room. Ignoring the heavy guffaws aimed his way, Xander grabbed the prepared tray of pizza squares and headed out to feed the masses, Carlos close behind.

The first food run he made included multiple gropes, one proposition, two rescues from Carlos and one very ookie feeling. The second trip included even more gropes, one rescue and three ookie feelings. By the third trip, Xander knew for sure that he recognized the sand rubbing his backbone feeling, and he pulled Carlos to the side.

"We have vamps on the dance floor," he whispered.

"Oh shit." Carlos froze for a second, and then the bouncer's instincts kicked in.
"Tell T first, and then we'll get the number for those vamp hunters who saved him last time." Carlos moved to put the plan into action, but Xander held him back.

"Those vamp hunters are human. They aren't going to know who to stake, and I used to train with them so I can tell you that the training never covered trying to fight with a hundred humans in the middle." Xander knew the only possible solution, he just hated saying it. He considered possibilities. He didn't have Spike's number. Ajani was a big no. The vamp might not kill humans for food, but he wouldn't protect humans either. Besides, he was probably with Spike anyway. He looked at the floor, mentally searching for any other answer, but when he looked up, he could see Carlos' tacit demand for an alternative.

"We have to call Angel," he said calmly. Oh boy, Spike wasn't going to like this one.
Within a couple of seconds, Xander found himself ushered into T's office, a telephone book thrust into his hands. Carlos then took up sentry at the door as if expecting rogue vampires to burst through any second.

He dialed the phone with trembling fingers, his demon shifting uncomfortably. He felt like just shouting at the thing, but generally preferred to avoid looking like a complete and total loon. The phone on the other end stopped ringing, and a male voice answered.

“Angel Investigation, helpin’ the hopeless,” the voice didn’t sound like Angel—far too cheerful, but he could hear Cordelia’s offended squeal at the greeting, so he clearly had the right place. Irish accent fit too, even though he’d never heard Angel speak with so much lilt.

“Angel?” he asked tentatively.

“Not likely,” the voice laughed. “Doyle here, how canna help ya?”

“Um, is Angel there?”
“Not right at the moment, but I’ll take a message if ye want.”

“Yeah...I mean, no. Can I talk to Cordelia?” he finally settled on. He could hear indistinct voices in the background, and then the familiar voice came through the phone.

“Cordelia Chase here,” sang the melodious tones.

“Just me, Cordelia, Xander.”

“Oh,” the voice quickly dropped into a near bored expression. “You left Angel even more depressed than usual, which is a bit of an achievement. He hasn’t even commented on my new jacket. Must've dropped like a dozen hints, too.” Xander smiled, he could almost imagine her doing her nails just like in 7th grade with that first year teacher they had managed to drive out of the profession.

“We’ve got a problem down at Safari. I’m not sure, but I think there are several vamps in the crowd.” He waited for a response, but the phone was silent for several seconds.
“Think? If there are no ridges and screaming people, it’s a little hard to tell, even for us professionals.” Cordelia tried to keep the tone equally light and carefree, but he could hear the undertones of worry in her voice.

“Yeah, it’s kinda one of those things. My little piece of demon keeps raising the alarm, so I know something not human’s out on the floor.”

“Probably just indigestion.” Cordelia quipped, but he could hear a pencil madly scratching across paper. He couldn’t decide if she was being sweet by trying not to worry him or offensive by trying to hide things. The Cordelia he knew in school would have meant it as an insult, but this new Cordelia? He wasn’t so sure.

“We really need Angel here,” he interrupted her writing and he could hear a frustrated sigh. Could almost hear her eyes rolling.

“We as in ‘me and Spike’ or we as in ‘me and whoever else is here and when Spike shows up he’s going to go all postal on Angel again’?”

“Um, the second,” Xander admitted. “Spike left about an
hour ago, and I don’t know how to reach him. I don’t know who else to call.”

“We’ll pick up Angel at the butcher and come straight down. You just sit put and stay in the back.” Cordelia ordered in a voice that obviously expected immediate obedience. Damn, Spike was right about her making a good vampire. He didn’t bother arguing even though he had no intention of running from a fight.

“Thanks, Cordelia.”

“Whatever...it’s our job,” Cordelia dismissed his thanks and hung up the phone without another word. Yep, that was the Cordelia Chase he knew and no longer hated.

“They on their way then?” Carlos asked from his position next to the door.

“Yeah. They’re coming.” He walked over to lean again the wall next to Carlos. His demon stalked through his mind like a predator seeking the scent of blood, and he pushed it back again. Aggressive little bugger today, he thought to himself, but then Carlos’ words brought him back to reality.
“Xander, you made your call, so let’s just leave.” He could feel Carlos’ hand tightening on his arm, and he shrugged it off, unwilling to be ordered around like a child. True, he wasn’t the best in a fight, but he could hold his own and he would be a lot more prepared than most of the walking happy meals on the dance floor.

“I’m not leaving them. What if Angel doesn’t get here before they start pulling people out? Na-uh. Not going.” Xander turned to out of the office and he felt a strong arm pull him back, pushing him up against the wall.

“You are *not* going out there,” Carlos insisted, and for the first time he could see the inhuman blood reflected in Carlos’ face, the skin blushing with blue.

“What? Are you going to play slaver? Thought you didn’t like those games?” He could see Carlos flinch from the accusation, releasing him from the wall.

“Xander,” Carlos began in a low, pleading voice. That made him stop where nothing else had, but he wasn’t going to give up all control over his life, not yet, not ever. "Take this," Carlos pressed a stake into his hand.
"This regulation for a bouncer?" he asked as Carlos pulled a second stake from the back of his pants and tucked it into the front.

"I seem to spend an uncomfortable amount of time hanging out with a vampire and his pet, of course I carry wood. Are you sure you won't just wait here?" Carlos pleaded.

“Going now,” he cheerfully announced as he left the room. He walked down the hall onto the main floor, his shadow close enough behind that he could hear the bouncer’s footsteps. He made his way to the bar and Carlos must have signaled T because the man came out from behind the bar almost immediately and met them by the kitchen door where the music was only slightly less deafening.

"Vamp problem," Carlos said.

"Oh sweet Jesus, no," T closed his eyes in obvious despair before putting on a face that looked remarkably like the resolve face his best friend back in Sunnydale used to use. "Okay, do we need to call Gunn?"

"Gunn can't tell a human from a vamp; we need
someone who can," Xander pointed out, trying to make sure that T understood the logic and didn't assume that he just wanted to avoid calling his former friend. "We need someone who can spot them, and that means we need a vamp."

"I only know one vamp on a first name basis, and I don't see him around." T waved toward the crowd.

"He's busy," Xander admitted. "But Angel is coming."

"Angel?" T turned a confused expression first to him and then to Carlos. Carlos simply shrugged.

"Angel has a soul; he runs a supernatural detective agency, and yes I do know how completely corny that sounds, but I can't help it. He doesn't kill at all, doesn't even really like Spike because Spike won't give up killing. He'll do the right thing," Xander pleaded with T to believe that he knew what he was talking about. If T called Gunn, the crew would just lose more people.

"Are you sure about him?" T asked, concern and fear and anger all tangled in his expression.

"Yeah, I am," Xander responded.
"Good enough for me," T said. "So, I assume closing the club would be bad."

"Not for the vamps, it'd let them pick off the humans one at a time," Carlos pointed out. "Best if we just wait." So the three of them moved to the corner of the bar where they stood watching the crowd and waiting for the disaster to strike. It felt like hours, but Xander's watch suggested that only about fifteen minutes had passed before the shit hit the proverbial fan.

“Oh shit,” T swore as the first scream pierced the air. Xander looked toward the sound, but a tingling in his skull cautioned him and he turned in time to see a short little man standing three feet away vamp out.

“Xander!” Carlos cried out, but he had already brought up his stake, driving it forward so fast that the vampire didn’t have time to do anything other than look surprised, the expression turned into a dust sculpture for one second before the body floated to the ground. He turned, his attention back to the floor, ignoring the hand that pulled him as he planted himself beside the kitchen door.
“Shit, the customers,” T cried, and Xander realized that the club had become a cattle pen, trapping the humans into a small confined, confused space where the vamps could feed amid the panic. Reaching out, he grabbed a wide-eyed Hispanic man wearing clothes so tight that they outlined his stomach bulge. He pulled the man toward the kitchen door before shoving him through and yelling to T.

“Keep them back there.” He reached out and grabbed another man, the demon stirred, but Xander could tell that it wanted to kill they prey; it didn’t feel threatened. He assumed that meant human and he shoved the man toward the back. He hadn’t gotten any farther before the demon in his mind howled, and he looked up to see Angel standing at the doorway holding an axe. Cordelia, stake in hand, stood on one side of him and the green-eyed man he vaguely remembered from Cassidy’s lair stood on the other. He made eye contact with Angel for a moment before he continued his impromptu inspection and evacuation process.

He had refined the process, grabbing arms and flinging bodies towards Carlos when he touched an arm that made his demon growl and snap within his mind. Pulling back, he braced himself for the yellow eyes that turned
to lock in on him. He brought up the stake and started a lunge, but the vamp fell back and to one side. Xander refused to fall for the same trap he had laid for Ajani, so he aborted and withdrew, circling some and watching the vamp move. The vamp stabbed at him with a clawed hand, and he grabbed the outstretched wrist and yanked, pulling the vamp off balance before driving the stake into its heart. The ash flew to the ground with the momentum of a falling body.

Xander exulted in his kill. Either that or the demon did, but damn it felt good. He shook his head to refocus and re-start his evacuations; he turned to find Carlos. The man had stepped forward, standing barely two feet behind him with wide, amazed eyes. Yep, he crowed to himself, he did that, he shocked the big, bad bouncer.

“Get ‘em outta here,” he shouted at he pushed a human toward Carlos. Carlos simply thrust the man toward the kitchen door, but he must have gotten the idea, because he scrambled toward safety.

“Not leaving you,” Carlos shouted over the screams, and Xander didn’t take time to argue as he pushed forward. A tingle behind him, and he turned to see Carlos’ stake stab into a vamp, reducing it to dust. He
glanced back and saw T now standing guard at the door with several crosses, so he slid farther into the crowd, Carlos at his back, as he pushed the humans toward the door to safety and searched for more enemies.

A third vamp turned to dust before it could turn its eyes to him, and he continued, the demon voice in his mind bellowing in triumph. Strong. Worthy. It roared. Xander wasn’t sure he’d go that far, but he certainly didn’t feel like the sidekick loser. He wasn’t the second-string vamp bait. He didn’t have to hide behind the real vampire-hunters.

He sunk into his internal monologue...dialogue? Was it a dialogue if the two people involved lived in the same brain? Maybe he’d have to go find his junior English teacher and ask. The crowd had thinned to a few milling people, and he felt the tingle of vampire.

He quickly spun, driving the stake forward and throwing his weight behind it only to find his hand diverted so that the stake sunk into flesh and his own body was pulled forward into a hard embrace. His demon panicked, and Xander did the same, pulling back wildly without even affecting the huge vampire. He unexpectedly felt the vamp stumble forward, and he pulled up his legs, taking
advantage of the moment to throw the vamp off balance. He felt them both head for the ground, and he tucked his legs closer, hoping to have a chance to drive home a few well aimed kicks once on the ground.

“Xander, enough!” he heard a deep voice yell, and he wrenched himself out of that tight embrace only to look over at Angel, on the floor, a stake embedded in his abdomen. Wow, he had really missed the heart on that one. He struggled to his feet, and he looked for Carlos. The bouncer stood not more that a couple feet away, blue-flushed skin and a broken stool in his hands as he struggled with the green-eyed friend of Angel hanging on his arm and Cordelia clinging to his back, her legs wrapped around his middle. Carlos looked ready to topple under the weight, and Xander shouted.

“Carlos, it’s okay; they’re the ones we called.” Xander knew that Carlos had heard when the bouncer lowered the stool and the strange man before returning to a more human skin tone. Cordelia still perched on him as though getting a piggy back ride. He looked around and realized that the five of them were alone in a room full of broken furniture and a couple of broken human bodies. Ugh.

“You can get off me now, girl,” Carlos pointed out, and
he watched as Cordelia untangled herself and slid to the ground.

“Not nice to stake other people’s vamps,” she criticized, and Xander could feel the wrongness in the statement. His demon complained about the human girl claiming a powerful old master, the master of his line, Xander suddenly realized. He studied Angel and the fear of the older vamp remained, but he could also feel the demon’s grudging deference to the head of the line.

“Sorry about that,” Xander said with a wave toward the stake that Angel had pulled out of his own stomach with a grunt.

“You’ve been training with William,” Angel replied, and it took a half-second for him to translate the proper sounding ‘William’ into his own oh-so-improper Spike.

“Well, yeah.” He decided to leave Ajani out of the discussion. Some things Angel just didn’t need to know. Angel looked at him strangely, and he feared the vampire could hear the omission.

“Let’s talk,” Angel reached out for his arm, and suddenly Carlos stood between them.
“He’ll stay here,” Carlos insisted, blocking Xander’s view of Angel.

“Isn’t that his choice?” Angel asked, the threat in his voice clear in the slight growl.

“Carlos, it’s okay.” Xander put his hand on Carlos’ arm to soothe the obviously angry man. “Angel has a soul; he’s not like other vamps,” he assured the fuming bouncer who now appeared to be bathed in a blue light, even though all the colored lights had gone off and the brights had been turned on shortly after the attacked started.

“Stay back,” Carlos insisted, pushing Xander farther behind his own large body.

“Don’t push him around.” Around Carlos’ body he could see Angel step up, the brown eyes twinkling with yellow in an expression he had never see on Spike because Spike had usually vamped out long before getting that angry.

“Whoa, back off there guys,” he tried in his best imitation of Cordelia. And when you had to imitate a cheerleader to seem manlier, that really was reaching the bottom of the barrel. Unfortunately the real Cordelia chose this
moment to decide to mind her own business, leaning against a table and examining a finger for either a splinter or a broken nail, he couldn’t tell which.

“Xander,” Carlos said in a warning tone, but he had endured enough coddling for the day.

“No, Carlos. Angel is a giant pain in the arse, as Spike would say, well actually Spike would be more likely to say giant Pouf or Peaches or Hair-boy, but you get the general picture.” Xander stepped out around Carlos, dodging the arm that tried to pull him back into protective custody. His demon lurched forward, making Xander gasp for air for just a second before he settled himself and his demon with a firm mental push.

Carlos looked ready to argue, but he felt a cool hand on his arm pulling him behind the vampire.

“Decision made,” Angel snapped and then pushed him toward the back room. When T appeared at the door with his armory of crosses, Xander stepped forward.

“T, get everyone out; it’s safe now.”

“Sweetie, you may feel safe around vamps, but I sure
don’t. Why don’t you come with us?” he asked with a glance toward his large guard.

“Angel’s cool, well not cool as in he dresses cool but cool as in he won’t eat anyone type cool.” Xander bit his tongue, ordering it to stop babbling, but some things never changed.

“Sure,” T said slowly, and he could see Angel flinch under the disbelief. “Come on gentlemen, the tour of the kitchen is over and the criminals are gone, so we need to get outta here,” Xander watched at the tall thin man waved the terrified customers out the door like a parade marshal. The only time T even showed the stress came when he saw his broken club. He stopped, his eyes moving from one corner to another, and then he shrugged. “Can always go back to tending bar,” he sighed.

When the customers and employees had abandoned the building, Angel gestured him into the back, away from three pairs of curious eyes. Once in back, Xander leaned against the prep table and waited for the lecture to come. He knew what to expect...what business did he have trying to fight...he was just a weak human...his demon wasn’t normal...he shouldn’t be with Spike...Spike
couldn’t be trusted. He buried himself in his inner conversation so deeply that it took quite a while before he realized that Angel wasn’t talking. In fact, the dark vampire simply leaned against a wall, his arms crossed, and his eyes focused on Xander.

Angel sighed, and Xander suppressed an urge to laugh. He knew he couldn’t carry a conversation, but he was just an eighteen year old loser; here was a 250 year old vampire with social skills even lower that Xander's own.

“You wanted something?” Xander finally asked.

“Spike’s not treating you like a pet, is he?” Angel asked, serious brown eyes searching for some answer Xander didn’t understand. He shrugged an answer.

“He isn’t treating me like Cassidy did, but then Cassidy’s dust, so he isn’t treating me like anything these days.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“It’s my life, which implies it is a joke, actually.” Xander watched the frustration growing on Angel’s features, and he wondered if he should tone it down with the older
vampire. He really didn’t know him that well.

“He could hurt you,” Angel stated, the ‘he’ in the sentence unspoken but clear.

“He could,” Xander agreed, feeling a need to be honest. “But he treats me better than my own parents do.”

“He’s a demon.”

“So are you.”

“A soul-less demon,” Angel amended himself, and Xander didn’t have a response to that. He stood there and examined his nails.

“You don’t know what he’s really like.” Angel finally announced into the silence, and Xander looked up at that accusation. How many times had he heard his own father claimed to know what was best for him because Xander didn't really understand the way the world worked?

“I have an idea; I’m really not as stupid as I look. I know about his whole penchant for grooms although really
that’s your fault since you always went for the brides.” He didn’t even feel guilty about the pained expression; after all Angel was trying to get him to leave Spike. “I know about dragging people back to the lair so that Dru could play with them both before and after they died, and can I just say ewww here. I know how he kills; I know where his name comes from; I see what he is.”

“And do you see how much you’ve changed?” Angel stepped forward this time. “Do you see what you’ve become in one week? How much of you will be left in another week or a month or a year?”

“You don’t know who I was a week ago or even four years ago before Cassidy.”

“I’ve talked to Gunn; I have a pretty good idea who you were a week ago, and the man Gunn described is not the same man I saw out there on that floor.”

“Gunn? What, did he tell you what a loser I was? He describe how I got Frederick killed? He tell the story about how I dropped the stake when I tried to dust that old-man vamp? That’s one of his favorites.” Xander hadn’t realized how much he resented being the center of the crew’s jokes until Angel’s words. When he had
been part of that family, it felt like brotherly ribbing. Now it felt like a betrayal. Gunn had told this man, this vampire, all about his failures. He didn’t want Angel to look at him as the loser.

“He told me you were a moral man who would do anything to protect his friends, to protect innocents.” Angel had frozen in the middle of the room as if he didn’t know what to do with himself. The hands finally crossed over his chest.

“I haven’t changed that much then,” he replied with a wave toward the dance floor. “Carlos begged me to leave, but I wouldn’t walk away from this.”

“But the man Gunn described wasn't fighting out there on the floor tonight.”

“So we’re back to the whole it can't be me if I'm not a big loser thing. I *can* take care of myself.”

“You can’t, not against Spike. I can protect you.”

“Don’t really feeling like trading up, thanks,” Xander replied even though he doubted that Angel would be a step up. The man seriously needed Prozac and he could
imagine hating him if he spent any amount of time around him.

“I could get you a ticket to some place where vamps wouldn’t be likely to find you, where you could be independent. Montana maybe, went through there once and didn’t find a vamp in the whole state.”

“I don’t need saving,” Xander insisted, and Angel stopped talking, focusing on Xander until Xander felt the demon squirm and he glared back.

“You really aren’t a normal pet,” Angel sighed.

“Hey! Getting sick of the complaints. In fact, I seem to remember telling someone that I would stake you next time you called me strange. ‘Course I kinda did stake you so maybe we can call it even.” Xander fought an urge to retreat behind the table as Angel stepped up to him, getting in his personal space and looking down at him imperiously.

“And if I said you were leaving tonight?” Angel asked, his eyes flashing yellow.

“I’d answer, ‘Over your dust,’ Deadboy, so let’s not go
there.” Angel instantly retreated, turning away and leaning against the tile wall. “Just because you hate Spike doesn’t mean he’s all evil, and being that he’s a soulless demon that sounds really stupid, but it isn’t nearly as stupid as you might think.”

“I don’t hate William. I hate what I did to him.”

“You mean the whole sire-punishing-torture thing or the whole getting a soul and abandoning him to Darla thing?” Angel’s head snapped around and Xander caught his breath at the pain and fury he saw reflected for one instant before the calm and emotionless mask returned.

“He told you.”

“Yeah, some.”

“Then you know why he hates me. Even after Dru turned him he had humanity left in him, and that infuriated me. I turned him into the monster he is today, and don’t ever forget that he is a monster who has tortured and raped and enjoyed every minute.”

“He has that in him, but he’s more than that.”
“I wish I could believe you. There are days I wish I had William back.” Xander saw the pain and loss in Angel’s eyes, and he wished he knew the words to fix it because he recognized the expression of hopelessness. He’d seen it in the mirror often enough before Spike. A thought came to him.

“Wait here,” he asked as he dashed for his locker and spun the lock open. Reaching inside the folded jeans, he pulled out the stack of CD’s and then locked his locker again. When he got back to the kitchen he pushed the stack of silver disks into a confused Angel’s hand. “Spike and I have a bit of a musical war going on, don’t really agree on the definition of good music,” he explained, but the confused look only grew deeper. “If you could hold on to these, it’ll drive Spike crazy trying to find them. Just please, promise you won’t scratch them until he comes for them.” Angel looked down at the bundle of discs for several seconds before he gave Xander a calculating stare.

“I’ll keep them safe," he promised. "So, you don’t like pointless screaming either?”

“No, not really." He paused as the meaning of that settled in. "How do you know his musical tastes?"
“He’s my childe; I may have checked on him once or twice,” Angel admitted with a shrug, and Xander could see the ache in Angel’s eyes. He felt sympathy for a vampire trapped between a demon and a soul, but he also feared how much damage Angel could do if he decided to seriously interfere with their relationship.

"Then you know he's not a monster, not like the vamps out there," Xander waved toward the dance floor.

"I know Spike forms attachments. I know what he's willing to do to keep those attachments. It doesn't mean you're safe." Angel took a deep breath, strange habit for creatures that didn't need oxygen, but he supposed that even 200 years of being dead couldn't break some habits.

"I've never been safe, and I probably won't ever be, but being with Spike doesn't feel nearly as dangerous as some things I've done...like in 11th grade, I goosed Mrs. Kerpel when we were on this field trip. That was pretty darn dangerous."

"I don't trust him."
"Then talk to him; don't just issue random threats, show him that the Angelus who cared about him is still down in there somewhere."

"That's not it." Angel fell silent, but this time Xander had the good sense to wait, feeling like Angel had more to say and he just needed time to say it. Finally the vampire started again. "Angelus hated him for being too human, too soft, too weak. Angelus humiliated him, took everything away from him and drove him to become harder. Angelus created Spike." Angel closed his eyes and turned away, and this time Xander stepped closer. Part of him wanted to reach out and put a comforting hand on the vampire's arm, but his own demon railed against that so he just stood closer.

"And I hated him too at first. When I was turned, I destroyed my family; he tried to save what was left of his. I obliterated everything in my path; he tried to create this fairy-tale relationship with Dru." Angel stopped, but Xander could see the problem.

"You were jealous of him," he guessed, and the silence confirmed it. He got the feeling Angel didn't normally talk to people, so he couldn't imagine why the vampire had chosen him to confide in.
"I know how different Spike is, but I also know how dangerous he is. Stay with me," Angel turned and Xander felt himself pulled toward those dark eyes, but the memory of ice-blue eyes sparking with an evil sort of happiness interceded, and he backed up.

"I can't. I want Spike." For a moment, he feared that Angel would continue, but he simply nodded.

"If you need me..." Angel allowed the words to trail off, but a crash and string of curses interrupted them.

Xander exchanged a quick look with Angel before dashing for the door, the tall vampire just behind him. He froze the instant he entered the main room, the sight of Spike in full game face holding Carlos against a wall and suspended above the floor stopping him cold. He felt a hand on his shoulder either because he had stopped too fast and startled Angel or because the older vampire wanted to offer comfort or protection. At that point, Xander nearly asked for protection because when Spike's eyes turned on him, he could feel his heart falter and his chest tighten.

"That wot ya call protectin' 'im?" Spike demanded in an
accent so thick as to be nearly indecipherable. Carlos didn't respond, probably because of the hand around his neck, and Xander rushed forward.

"Spike, everything's fine, really, you can let him go now." He had nearly closed the distance between them when Spike's growl stopped him and he froze as Spike tilted his head up, glaring at him. Spike dropped Carlos and slowly circled. He turned to look at Angel for some sort of explanation, but the older vampire had moved over to his two friends, using his body as a shield. On the third circle, Spike moved in and grabbed him by the back of the neck, and Xander yielded without argument, allowing the vampire to pull him in close.

"Ya poachin' now, Peaches? If we aren't respectin' each other's territory, I wouldn't mind doin' some poachin' of my own." Xander couldn't see since Spike had pulled him into his body so that his head was buried in Spike's shoulder, the hand held him there, but from Cordelia's gasp and Angel's growl, he could just imagine the look Spike had just given Cordelia.

"William," Angel snarled.

"Sod off," Spike snapped, and then he felt himself being
propelled through the empty club to the door and the familiar motorcycle. When Spike got on, he climbed on behind even though he knew that this time he had screwed up, and the demon in him warned of punishment to come.

10
Consequences

Xander silently slipped down the stairs, well aware of the angry vampire following behind. At the bottom, he went to the chair and waited silently. When he looked over at the stereo, he flinched. Oh god, he only hoped that Spike didn’t try to listen to music tonight. The last time Spike had been this angry, the vampire had watched television, so he could only hope. Right now, the vampire in question was rattling around in the armoire, which Xander had to suspect was a bad thing.

“Strip,” came the order, and Xander jumped when the harsh voice broke the silence. With trembling fingers, he slowly removed his shirt before toeing off his boots and pulling off his pants. Then he sat in the chair trying not to shake in the chilled basement air.

“Spike pulled chains out of the armoire before heading back to the dimly lit far end of the room. Xander
shivered, but he stood and followed without complaint. When Spike turned and fastened manacles around his wrists, he waited silently. He trusted Spike not to hurt him too badly, and, he reminded himself, he had once told the vampire that he’d rather be punished and get it over with rather than endure Spike’s attitude. So, when Spike pulled his hands up and chained the manacles to a ring in the concrete, he didn’t comment; he simply tried to stand back far enough to not press up against the cold concrete, but close enough to not strain his arms.

He could hear Spike moving around behind him, and he tried not to tense his muscles; he knew from his time with Cassidy that it would only hurt more if he did.

“Pet, tell me what you did wrong today,” Spike asked in a tone that sounded far more reasonable than the circumstances would suggest.

“I called Angel?” he guessed in an unsure voice, but then he grew more forceful with his next statement. “But I couldn’t just let those vamps feed on the customers.”

“Don’t give a shit about the other customers,” Spike quickly pointed out in an annoyed tone. “Care about you
not gettin’ killed. So tell me what ya did wrong.” Xander stopped and thought about that for a moment; obviously calling Angel wasn’t the million dollar answer. Unfortunately, he couldn’t come up with another answer to give. He stood mute until he felt the bite of a whip across his back. He knew Spike hadn’t used his full strength, but the force still sent him forward into the concrete with a cry.

“Asked ya a question,” came a voice that grew more displeased with each moment.

“I don’t know the answer. What do you want me to say?” Xander begged. He could feel the stirring in his mind that spoke of an unhappy demon, but he didn’t know how to make either demon happy.

“Ya do know. What happened today that ya know I wouldn’t allow?”

“I got in the middle of the fight,” he rushed to say before the whip could return. The speed of the answer didn’t matter because he felt the whip land one, two, three, four, five times. He gasped for breath and braced his hands on the cold wall to keep from crashing into it, but he also realized that Spike hadn’t broken skin or criss-
crossed the lashes. Could be worse, and oh god, when did his life get so out of control that being chained by a vampire in a secret lair and whipped didn't phase him? Spike stopped at five.

“Yeah, and what else, pet?” He tried looking at the day from a vampire’s perspective, and he could feel his inner guest sending up reminders. Okay, when had his inner vamp been upset? Not at the fight; god, the thing had loved the fight whether Spike approved or not. Then it came to him, the moment when his inner voice had cringed.

“I shouldn’t have talked to Angel; I shouldn’t have gone into the back room with him,” he offered.

“And why not?” He had to think about his answer again, but again his mind provided an answer.

“If he tried to take me, he could turn the demon.” He didn’t honestly think Angel would do that, but he understood the animosity between the two vampires. After all, Angel didn't exactly love Spike, so he could see Spike's point of view. Oh god. Angel. Soul. If Angel thought he could ‘save’ Xander, he might do it just to keep him away from his soulless childe. And if Angel
did turn his demon, Spike might not be able to turn it back; Angel was the older vampire. “Oh shit,” he breathed suddenly understanding the danger he had put himself in. Even if Angel did only want to help, he could have taken him away from Spike.

The whip landed again, and again Xander felt himself pushed into the concrete, his cheek resting on the cold surface for a moment before he forced himself back onto his feet. These strikes fell slower and harder. Each one turned into a line of fire before the next one landed. Ten hits. Xander truly struggled to breathe now.

“And what ‘bout Carlos?” Spike asked, and he had to sort out the thoughts and emotions running through his brain before he could correctly translate that threat.

“Oh god, I put him in danger. Spike, no, please,” he truly begged now. “He told me to leave the club; he begged me to call Gunn and then leave with him. Please don’t hurt him.”

“Left ya in his care, came back to find ya with another vamp. That’s not taking care a my pet, that’s failin’ in his job.” He could hear Spike pacing, but he didn’t have the strength to turn. He simply leaned his forehead into the
concrete and pleaded.

“Spike, I’ll give up the job. I’m off until next Thursday anyway, so I can call T and tell him I can’t come back. We could even leave town, just please don’t hurt him.” Xander offered everything he could think to offer in return for Carlos’ life. Never before had he felt so helpless or so scared, not even in the beginning when he thought Spike would kill him.

“Not that easy, pet.”

“Spike, he tried. “He really tried to keep me out of it, and he stayed by my side the whole time; he even faced off with Angel. Please, don’t hurt him.”

“He’s got to pay. He’s Largis; he knows what failure means.”

“He’s human, humans are allowed to screw up,” he countered, panic robbing his mouth of moisture and his body of strength. Oh god, would he hang here until Spike went out and killed Carlos? “Please, Spike. Please don’t.” He couldn’t come up with any other words, and he realized that his arrogance and his lack of eloquence had condemned Carlos to death. The pacing stopped
and he held his breath, praying for some reprieve.

“Would of rewarded him if he’d looked out for ya. Had a weapon picked out as tribute.”

“He did look out for me; he kept me alive when I went sailing into the middle of a vamp fight.” Xander knew the words would more than likely bring about another whipping, but he preferred that to causing Carlos’ death. Instead of the whip, a cool hand landed on his shoulder.

“Not goin’ to forgive that easy. When I find him, we’ll see if I can forgive at all.” He watched as Spike reached up for the chain and unlocked it, but instead of leading him back to the living portion of the room, Spike simply chained his hands lower so that he could sit on the ground. He did, ignoring the cold that seeped in from the concrete. Then, with a swirl of leather, Spike left and Xander was left to think about how many ways he had royally screwed up.

Spike returned much quicker than he expected. He figured Carlos had more sense than he did, so he assumed the man would have taken off for parts
unknown, but Spike couldn't have been gone for more than an hour or two when he heard the door open. When Spike appeared and dropped his coat on the chair, Xander had to hug his legs just to keep teeth from chattering with cold. He knew how badly he'd messed up, so he really expected to be left in the cold, but Spike came over and unlocked the chain from the wall, pulling him to the bathroom and waiting while he took care of his human bodily functions. Oh yeah, this didn't bode well he told himself when he came out to find Spike still waiting. He washed up quickly, listening to the chains rattle against the ceramic of the sink basin as he rubbed his hands. When he finished, he turned to face Spike who simply grabbed the chain and walked out to the bed where he fastened the chain to the wall with about six feet of slack.

He just wanted the answer to one question, but he didn't know how to ask it, so he quietly sat on the bed and watched as Spike dug through duster pockets until he came up with a cigarette. Oh yeah, still pissed vamp. Suddenly Spike's coat rang, and Spike pulled out a cell phone and tossed it at Xander so fast that he had trouble catching it with the heavy weight hanging on his hands. He opened the phone while still keeping his eyes on Spike.
"Hello?"

"You alright, Xander?" He heard Carlos' voice and he almost cried. Probably would have except he had cried so hard when Spike left that he didn't have any damn tears left in the reservoir.

"Carlos?" he asked, almost scared to believe that Spike would have spared the man.

"Yeah, a little sore but still here."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry. I shoulda listened to you, but I just went all alpha male stupid there for a while and I really wish I could just take it all back 'cause you totally didn't deserve whatever Spike did to make you sore, which was probably a whole lot less than he wanted to do what with the whole talking thing you're still doing, for which I'm very grateful..."

"Xander," shouted the voice on the other end. "God, breathe." Carlos' voice took on a more concerned tone. "I assume you're okay," he asked almost tentatively.
"Yeah, mostly. Didn't lose any skin cells I really need or anything. Can't say I didn't have it coming, but I'll be damned if I'll actually admit to having it coming since that would be unmanly."

"Unmanly?" Carlos asked, this time obviously amused.

"It's in the man-code. We never admit when we're wrong," Xander explained seriously, and this time Carlos laughed outright.

"I assume you're really okay then."

"Yeah, but I somehow doubt I'll make work on Thursday," he admitted as he peeked over at Spike. The vampire had on his 'bloody right' look, so he took that as confirmation that his working days were over, at least until Spike trusted him far enough to let him off a leash.

"You injured?" The concerned tone returned in Carlos' voice.

"Nope, just don't expect to be unchained by Thursday," he admitted with a shrug. Why he shrugged, he couldn't say since Carlos obviously didn't see, but the man must have heard his nonchalant attitude in his voice.
"Well, don’t say I didn't warn you. Just try to talk him into letting you call T. Boss man is going to kill me for this."

"Yeah, but at least T only kills metaphorically; Spike tends to take the whole death threat thing a little too seriously," Xander pointed out as he watched the vampire standing by the armoire smoking furiously.

"Tell me about it. I'm hoping my demon blood will help my backside heal up a little faster or else I'm going to be taking a few days off myself. You take care, Xander."

"Yeah, will do," Xander promised before he hit the disconnect button and lay the phone on the bed.

"Thank you," he softly offered. The demon in his head goaded him, but he couldn't quite figure out what it wanted. Spike stood there unmoving except for the cigarette that moved from his mouth to his side to the ashtray in the cabinet. Mouth. Side. Cabinet. Oh yeah, it was going to be a long night. Mouth. Side. Cabinet. He was almost relieved when Spike broke the pattern to light a new cigarette.
"Spike, please?" he held up his hands with the chain. He knew that the demon begged to be closer to Spike, and he couldn’t do that from the bed.

"Ya can't need the loo again so quick," Spike said without moving even his head.

"I don't. I just need..." Xander stopped, not sure what he needed, but sure he couldn't do it from the bed, well at least not without Spike here. Spike put out the cigarette and came to stand by the bed, but Xander kept his eyes lowered. He found himself scooting off the bed before he realized what he was doing, but he followed his instinct and slid down to his knees at Spike's feet.

Part of him railed against such a dehumanizing act, but another part of him insisted on following through. He felt humiliation warming his cheeks, but he couldn't decide if he was humiliated by kneeling at Spike's feet or humiliated for disappointing Spike so badly. He lowered himself until he felt his forehead touch Spike's feet.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, sure the vampire could hear him, but Spike didn't comment, and he remained frozen, waiting for Spike's response. He knelt there for several minutes before he heard Spike's reply, and only then did
he realize that he had held his breath, leaving him slightly dizzy and happy he was already on the floor.

"Don't want an apology. Want to know I can trust ya."

"It was stupid. I wasn't thinking of Angel as a vampire. I won't do it again." Xander surprised himself by stopping there; no babbling, no begging.

"Need ya safe. Can't trust ya to go out on your own if I don't know you'll be safe."

"I'll be safe, promise." That must have been the wrong answer because Xander felt himself being pulled up to face an angry Spike. One glance and he sent his eyes back down to the ground.

"No, ya won't. You value every life except your own." He didn't answer the charge since he really didn't have an answer. "Bloody hell, I've got to have the last selfless human in the whole bleedin' world as my pet. Not bloody fair." Spike released his arms, and he sunk back down to his knees.

"Spike," he whispered, still not sure what he needed, but trusting that Spike understood his instincts better than
he did.

"Ya think ya had enough already. Ya think you deserve back in my good graces?" Spike asked, and the pieces suddenly made sense. Yep that's what he wanted, Xander decided. Life was really too complicated when the different parts of your brain didn't communicate well. Hell, his one brain didn't always work well, and this did seem like a case of too many cooks in the kitchen.

"Please," he reached out a hand towards Spike's leg, but something froze a centimeter away from the fabric of Spike's jeans. He held his hand there for some time, before moving his hand back to his own thigh. The cold of the concrete made his knees ache, but he remained kneeling, unwilling to give up the chance that Spike might just forgive him.

"Oi, balmy git, get off the floor," Spike finally ordered, and Xander struggled to rise, his legs not willing to cooperate for a moment as the concrete had limited the blood flow. He felt Spike's arm slip around his waist and lift him to the bed.

"Please," Xander asked again and he let his fingertips touch Spike's arm.
"Ya even know what you're askin'?" Spike asked, his expression suddenly amused. Xander had to think about that for a minute.

"Not exactly. Kinda playing by ear here, but I faked my way through so many book reports, I figured I have this covered," he finally admitted.

"It's a vamp thing. When ya anger the master, ya have to make it up to him."

"Oh god, please don't tell me you made up with Angel because there are some things I am just not prepared to hear." Xander's eyes crept up as high as Spike's chest before the demon demanded he stop.

"Usually just brought him a screamin' girl or two." Spike shrugged.

"And yet again your idea of comforting is less than effective." Xander flinched at the discomfort in his own mind.

"Ya hurt, pet?"
"Nope, just an unhappy demon voice that wants to show his master he's sorry before cracking more jokes." He looked up into clear blue eyes that shone with a fierce possessiveness he hadn't seen before. The demon cried for him to drop his eyes, so he did and then he felt the cool fingers work through his hair.

"Go on, then," Spike said, and he reached out for the vampire's arm, touching it lightly for a second time. This time Spike reached down and used a key to unlock the chains.

"I don't...I'm not..." Xander stopped, unsure of how to do this. "I know I’m not very good, maybe you just want to..." Oh boy, that was smooth, Xander thought to himself.

"You're just fine, pet," Spike offered as he walked around the bed to lie down.

"I know...I couldn't even... You finished yourself off to avoid..." Oh god, he really couldn't say this out loud without losing what little self-esteem he had managed to collect.

"Ya thought I didn't want ya to touch me?" Spike
guessed, and Xander could only silently nod. "Some days you're as loony as Dru," Spike sighed. "Been decades since I felt a warm body under me. Never have felt a warm, willing human. So, I finished a mite earlier than I planned, and we're not goin' to discuss it any more." Xander didn't know whether Spike was telling the truth or trying to give him a way to save face, but it didn’t matter. Either way meant that Spike cared about his feelings, and that's what mattered to him.

"I can do better," Xander promised as he reached over and undid the button on Spike's jeans. "If you want, you can use the chains," he suggested, wincing at the uncertainty in his own voice. Either that, or he was wincing at actually publicly admitting that he found the restraints sexy as hell. He slipped the zipper down on Spike's jeans.

"Oi, you're supposed to be makin' it up to me. Means you get to do the work this time," He looked up to see if Spike was teasing him, but the vampire looked back with crystal blue eyes as Spike lifted his hips. Xander pulled the jeans down and tossed them off the bed, looking at the naked perfection below him. He could quickly become addicted to this body, he decided as he looked at sharp collarbones and hip bones showing through the
layers of sinewy muscle.

Thoughts floated up to his consciousness, and either the demon had a few suggestions or Xander had just discovered that he was a bit of a perv. Of course, it didn’t really matter since the demon was part of him; no matter where the thoughts came from, they were part of him now. He ran a finger down the middle of Spike's chest down all the way to the soft cock, exploring the loose skin and sliding his hand up and down, amazed at the unfamiliar movement beneath his palm.

As Spike's cock stiffened and grew, Xander released it and leaned over, groaning slightly when the pull at his back aggravated the lash marks, but he didn't let it stop him from lowering his mouth to Spike's neck, nuzzling into the soft skin and running a tongue along the muscle before biting down sharply. Spike made a groan of his own, and Xander took that as encouragement, repeating the maneuver before kissing along the chest down to the nipple where he took the flesh between his teeth and sucked. Definite reaction from Spike.

Remembering what Spike had said about a warm body, he lowered his weight onto Spike's recumbent form, resting his knees on the outside of the slim vampire,
leaving their cocks touching as Xander returned to worshiping Spike's neck. He knew he had succeeded when the vampiric ridges appeared and Spike looked at him through yellowed eyes. He reached up and explored the features with his tongue, this time not bothering to be as gentle but instead nipping once or twice, each time causing the body under him to respond passionately.

Wordlessly, he stood and went to the cabinet where he pulled out the oil, and he could see Spike's raised eyebrow, but Xander simply straddled the vampire's thighs, turning his back to the vampire so that Spike could watch as Xander oiled his own finger and then reached around to open himself up. As quickly as possible, he added a second finger, the stinging in his back providing more pain than the quick preparation. Knowing he had to be stretched for the coming event, he created a tight triangle with his three middle fingers, forcing them past the complaining ring of muscle that couldn't quite compete with the complaining damaged skin on his back that definitely disapproved of the awkward bending. Would a vampire consider the whip marks sexy? Have to ask later, he thought to himself.

As soon as he had inserted the third finger, he worked to
separate and straighten the fingers, widening the hole. He could hear Spike taking unneeded breaths behind him, either because of the show or because he anticipated Xander's next move. He removed his fingers and turned, lowering his mouth to Spike's cock even as he reached back to finish the stretching. The one arm holding all his weight trembled, but he continued, teasing and sucking and nipping at the head of Spike's cock before lowering himself until he could feel the cock touching the back of his throat. Pouring more oil into his palm, he smoothed the oil onto the stiff organ and then he shifted upward. He tried to impale himself but he couldn't seem to get the angle right. After two tries, he would have given up except he felt slim fingers suddenly holding the cock and a firm touch at his waist guiding him.

With guidance, he managed to sink onto the shaft, his legs trembling with the effort to go slow enough to avoid really hurting himself. He looked down and saw Spike's ridged features, and suddenly the familiar reddish brown filter slipped over his vision, the dark corners of the room suddenly appearing in perfect detail. He felt Spike start below him, and he looked down to see the wide eyes of his master watching.
Lifting himself up, he used his inner muscles to squeeze briefly before reaching the apex, relaxing slightly to avoid damage and then allowing himself to basically fall onto Spike. The vampire moaned, and Xander repeated the procedure. On the third lift, he reached out and grabbed Spike's nipple, pulling sharply as he fell onto Spike's cock, and this time he could feel Spike's hips rise to meet him, the vampire unable to remain still. Xander rose up again, this time tightening his inner muscles as he fell, and suddenly Spike thrust up so hard that he was lifted from the bed.

"Turn," Spike hissed. It took a second or two for Xander to catch up to the vampire's meaning, but then he lifted half way off and carefully rotated so that his back was to Spike when he thrust down. Steel arms grabbed at him, and he dropped his head to one side as he felt Spike sit up. Instantly, two points of fire burnt his neck and he could feel Spike make short powerful thrusts as the vampire came, but the cock remained hard, and Xander remembered Spike's words about staying hard as long as he wanted. Sitting in the vampire's lap trapped between Spike's cock and his fangs with strong arms wrapped around him, Xander couldn't help hoping that Spike wanted to stay hard a long time. He dropped his head back onto Spike's shoulder, relaxing into the grip.
Spike wasn't feeding anymore, but the fangs didn't withdraw. In fact, the only movement came from one hand of Spike's which now wandered over his body. For the first time, he noticed how his own cock begged for release, dripping pre-cum down the shaft. Spike's fingers traced up the milky substance and then the fingers approached Xander's mouth. He didn't hesitate but simply opened his mouth and began to run his tongue over the slim fingers even as he sucked enthusiastically. Spike growled, but from the twitching of Spike's cock still inside him, he guessed it was a good growl and he responded by tightening his inner muscles, massaging the intruder. The hand retreated, gathering more pre-cum, but this time Xander watched as Spike detached from his neck and began sucking the fluid from his own fingers.

"So, ya think you're forgiven then?" Spike asked.

"Please," he muttered, his head still resting on Spike's shoulder, his neck still exposed. Of course, none of that made him feel as fundamentally helpless as the fact that an ancient creature with supernatural strength held him impaled on a cock.
"You're stayin' with me, by my side 'til I tell ya otherwise."

"Yes."

"You're stayin' away from Peaches or I'll leave stripes on your back that won't ever fade away."

"Yes."

"You'll bloody well use that brain for something other than holdin' up your hair next time you get in a tight spot. You'll remember that your life's worth just as much as some soddin' moron on the street?"

"Yes." He felt a cool hand close around his cock, and he tried to thrust, but the angle and his own position trapped on Spike's cock made that impossible.

"Don't ya trust me to take care of ya?" Spike asked, his breath tickling Xander's ear, and he realized what Spike wanted. Spike wanted his trust, his willingness to allow Spike to take care of things. After Spike had spared Carlos, he would trust the vampire in anything. Spike had rejected his own instinct and his own fury because he wanted to take care of Xander, so Xander found he
could trust this to Spike as well. He stilled and tried to control his breathing as Spike slowly moved his hand up and down the shaft, using his own pre-cum to lubricate the motion. Spike's fangs slid back into the channels they had carved just moments ago, and Xander found that he really couldn't move without causing a dozen little sore points, so he simply surrendered into the embrace. It only took four or five strokes before he felt himself come, his muscles twitching, his ass tightening almost painfully as he came, and then the feeling of Spike twitching within him as the vampire either ejaculated or had a dry orgasm. He felt lightheaded as Spike lowered him to the bed.

"Sleep, and heal up that back," Spike ordered as he curled up behind.

"Yes sir," Xander said and his vision suddenly returned to normal color, the sharpness of the edges and the details in the darkness just gone. Well, if that was how they were going to end their fights, he just might not mind being such a screw up he thought as he drifted off to sleep.
Xander woke with cool limbs tangled around his own and blue eyes watching him. For several seconds he lay there unmoving as Spike simply watched him.

“Mornin’, pet,” Spike finally said, and Xander realized that the vampire was waiting for some sort of explosion. Well, he would have to keep waiting because in the cold light of day he realized that Spike had a right to be upset and that his back had already healed, so clearly the vampire had not hit him nearly as hard as it had seemed like the night before. He was actually more pissed about Spike getting the Safari clients worked up and then leaving him.

“Morning,” he answered.

“Your back’s healed up,” Spike commented.

“Yep,” he answered, and then the long silence revealed Spike’s true meaning. “You didn’t expect it to heal-you
wanted the marks to stay a while,” he said quietly.

“Wanted you to have somethin’ to remember, something to make sure that you didn’t make the same mistake a second time.”

“Won’t do it again,” Xander said and then dropped his gaze. He had thought when they went to bed that all was forgiven but obviously not. He froze on the bed, waiting for Spike’s next move, but Spike simply pulled himself up so that he sat leaning against the headboard and waited. After a couple of minutes, Xander slipped out of the bed and went to the cabinet. He bent down and grabbed something off the shelf he normally didn’t even like to look at, and he went back to the bed where Spike waited with a raised eyebrow. He handed the whip to Spike.

“It’s okay, really,” Xander tried not to let his hands shake as he remembered the pain from last night, but he had told the truth when he’d once said he’d rather have Spike get it out of his system than stay mad.

“Ya want me to?” Spike asked curiously.

“Want, no. Definitely no. Rather take a trig test nude
type no. But it’s better than having you mad at me.”

“Not mad, pet. Ya made it right with me.” Xander hadn’t realized how upset his demon was until Spike said those words and the creature calmed down and stopped circling uneasily.

“But you wanted the punishment to last longer.” Xander said.

“When I had ya up on the wall, yeah. Expected it to last a couple of days even with you healin’ up faster than a human. But I also didn’t expect that you’d understand the concept of makin’ up with your master.”

“So you don’t want...” Xander gestured helplessly toward the whip Spike had laid on the bed.

“Once a master forgives, punishment’s over. No goin’ back. Fact is, pet, it works out better anyway since I really don’t want you cringin’ around with a sore back. I’m surprised is all.”

“So is this another one of those how weird I am moments? Cause the whole no sex rule is now back in play since I actually did stake Angel.”
“Wot?” Boy that got Spike’s attention. The vampire sat straight up on the bed, yellow eyes locked on his own.

“He kinda came up behind me during the fight, but he’s a little faster than the average vamp, so I ended up staking him in the stomach.” For a moment, Xander wondered if Spike were angry, his blank face and motionless yellow eyes focused on him. Then Spike began to laugh.

“Bloody hell, if the pouf’s stupid enough to walk up to somebody durin’ a fight, he deserves a stomach ache, but what in the bloody hell did he say to ya for doin’ it?” Spike leaned forward eagerly, and Xander found himself responding to the pure delight in Spike’s face.

“Well didn’t really say much except something along the lines of ‘Stop it.’ Of course, at the time he was rolling on the floor.” Spike’s eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline, and Xander hurried to explain. “Carlos decked him from behind with a stool or something, so when I felt this vamp who had grabbed me start stumbling, I pulled up my feet and threw all of my weight on him, sending us both to the ground before I even noticed it was Angel.”

“Oi, glad now I didn’t kill the soddin’ Largis demon. That
must have been a treat.”

“Yep, kinda fun,” he admitted. “It felt nice not to be the bumbling idiot for a change.”

“Ya aren’t an idiot; thought we had this discussion already.”

“I’m not insulting the pet, Spike. I’m simply pointing out that when it comes to fighting I take after the Keystone Cops more than Kung Fu.”

“Pet, ya took down a 250 year old vamp. Don’t know any other humans who ever did that single handed, so I’m thinkin’ you need to change that attitude of yours.”

“I didn’t really take him down,” he pointed out but Spike’s uplifted hand stopped him.

“Oi!” he snapped. “Not goin’ turn into some bloody poof always makin’ supportive comments, so bloody well take the compliment and shut up.” Spike swung out of bed, and Xander sat there, shocked and not really knowing how to deal with Spike’s version of emotionally supportive. Strangely enough, it actually was more emotionally supportive than his parents. He smiled and
picked up the whip to put it away. While he had the cabinet door open he looked at the pile of his clothes. He had no idea how to dress or even if he should bother getting dressed.

He sat on the bed naked and wondered what his life would be like without a job. True, his job had only been three nights a week and like most of his other jobs, he had lost it before he really even got used to being there, but what was he supposed to do all day while Spike was out doing his ‘vampire things’? He went into the bathroom and found the familiar towel thrown over the sink, so he finished his morning duties and took a quick shower.

Surely Spike wouldn’t want him along while he and Ajani took out Cassidy’s minions, so that left him locked in the lair, hopefully just locked in now that Spike trusted him because the chains were not nearly as fun when Spike wasn’t there, and oh god, he had not just thought of chains and fun in the same thought. Nope. Na uh. He was not going to admit that even to himself.

Chains bad, he chanted as he dried off and opened the laundry room to toss in the towel. Well, if nothing else, he could do laundry; Spike never used a towel more than
once, and he was picking the habit himself. Oh god, he was turning into a housewife. A kinky housewife. Xander tried to mentally scrub the image out of his mind as he walked into the main room.

“Oi, hurry up, pet,” Spike complained as he came in the room.

“What? Where are we going?” He reached in for a faded pair of jeans and a plain white t-shirt. When Spike growled, he tossed the t-shirt to one side and grabbed a button up greenish-blue one instead.

“Ya get hit in the head too hard last night? Told ya, helpin’ Q.”

“Ajani,” Xander corrected absent-mindedly. “You’re taking me with you?”

“Yeah, punishment's over.”

“I know that. I just thought you wouldn’t want me tagging along.”

“Ya fight better than Q, why wouldn’t I take you?” Xander turned in surprise to look at Spike’s confused face
as he buttoned up his shirt.

"Hate to break it to ya, Fangface, but Ajani kicked my ass last time I took him on."

"Oi, where the bloody hell were you fightin'? In the fight I watched, ya got in a good hit, and then surprised yourself so bad ya lost your balance. Then, injured leg and all, ya tried to hide the injury and still managed to get in a couple of good hits. Ya might a killed the git if you'd had a stake."

"Really? I was good?" Xander thought back to that night, the pain of his leg, the feeling of being a wounded animal circled by a predator. He tried to reconcile his memory with the fight Spike described.

"Up until you completely lost your mind and charged him like some bloody mindless minion. Now, get your boots on and don't forget your soddin' weapons this time; I feel like dusting some fledges." Spike walked away without another glance, heading up the stairs and out the door which stood open, allowing the lights from the parking lot to shine in. Xander pulled on his boots, tucked his knife into the one boot and a stake into the back of his jeans. A large crucifix from his days of hunting with Gunn
went in one pocket, and he snapped off the lights as he went up to join Spike.

Xander was surprised they didn’t take the motorcycle, well, at least until he saw Ajani and two strange vamps sitting on a low brick wall outside a car repair shop. He tried to suppress the shivers he felt as they walked closer to the three waiting vamps. Logically he knew that the three in front of him were far less dangerous than the one walking next to him, but logic had very little to do with his feelings of revulsion at the two dirty, subservient minions milling around a far more confident-looking Ajani.

“Master Spike.” Ajani inclined his head as they walked up, but he didn’t project the obsequious cowering he’d shown the last time.

“Q,” Spike acknowledged, and Xander felt a cool hand reach out and pull him closer. Feeling a little like a toddler whose mother doesn’t want him to wander too far, he had to suppress the urge to shake off the hand. Instead he reminded himself that the alternative was being chained in a basement, and he inched closer to Spike. The inner demon obviously approved because it
sent little thoughts of relief and safety up through his mind. He quickly nodded at Ajani and then returned to studying the minions. Pretty standard cronies, really the only surprise had been Ajani bringing them.

Xander didn’t realize he'd been released until he noticed that Spike had started walking again, and he had to quickly trot to catch up.

The five of them walked in silence for some time, and Xander wondered at his own sanity for walking in the middle of a pack of killers that considered humans food. The minions would certainly attack him given a chance, and Ajani probably would. Funny enough, the 120 year old serial killer stood between him and certain death, and he just had to mentally laugh at that irony.

No wonder he’d nearly flunked out of school; his teachers always expected him to understand stupid examples of irony with hairbrushes and watches. If his English teacher had asked him about the irony of seeking protection from a serial killer he might have made better grades.

He realized he was mentally babbling, but he couldn’t come up with any other diversions as they walked
through increasingly run down neighborhoods. He realized that they were only blocks outside of Gunn’s territory, and he prayed that they didn’t turn east.

“Through dere,” Ajani said and he gestured toward a store front. It didn’t have any of the signs Xander associated with vampires—no broken windows or boarded up doors or even any signs that the building was abandoned. The front window of the store advertised a special on computer repair, and a cardboard sign hanging in the door announced that the shop was closed.

“Right. Need to check it out,” Xander stood so close to Spike that he could feel the vampire tense up. He glanced over at Spike in time to see him glaring with yellow eyes at the two minions now standing by a giant trash bin. He suddenly understood Spike’s dilemma.

Spike and Ajani needed to check out the lair, and minions couldn’t be trusted to do it, especially if these minions had been Ajani’s for as short a period a time as he suspected. The weak demons would be easily turned, so they couldn’t be trusted around another master unless Ajani were present. And as minions, their ability to act stealthily was limited at best. Of course, as a human he would have alerted every vampire around with his smell
and heartbeat, so he needed to stay outside too. Spike wanted to stay with him and protect him from the minions but he also wanted to go into the building and investigate the lair. He wanted to object to being treated like an invalid except he really did worry about being alone with two possibly hungry minions and he didn’t want to challenge Spike in front of the other vampires. He suspected it might prove deadly.

“Master?” he asked, making sure he said it loud enough for Ajani and the minions to hear.

“Yeah, pet?” Spike’s eyebrow did a quick twitch, but other than that he kept a neutral expression.

“The minions aren’t yours, master. If they bother me should I disable them or dust them?” Xander did his best to look innocent. One of the minions growled, and Xander’s vision went red as his demon responded to the threat with a growl of his own. He turned, determined to stare down the minion, and the vamp flinched back. When the second minion also dropped his gaze, Xander felt the world shift as the blues and greens returned and the world once again looked slightly out of focus as was normal for human eyes.
“Try not to dust Q’s property, pet, but if they give ya trouble, do what you think best,” Spike shrugged and then made a jump for a second story window sill. Xander had to give a low appreciate whistle for the athletic prowess as Spike easily pulled himself up. Ajani gave him a strange look and then leapt for the sill as Spike pulled up onto a ledge and moved over to a second window. Ajani made it, but only by one hand and he had to swing himself to get a second hand on the sill and then scramble with his feet against the wall trying to pull up. Yep, Xander thought to himself, his vampire was definitely better.

He turned away from the building, suddenly much more interested in keeping the two minions in sight. When he looked over, one growled at him, and Xander panicked for a second before he felt the rising growl from his own chest. So, his demon recommended bluffing? He could do that.

“Back off blood breath,” he snapped, and the second minion’s eyes now snapped over to him.

“Human,” minion one growled.

“Well no duh.” He rolled his eyes. “Vampire,” he
announced, pointing a finger at the complaining minion.

Vampire number two dropped his gaze again, but vampire number one now slithered forward, fangs bared in a National Geographic sort of way.

The vampire stopped about four feet away, and Xander leaned back against the wall even as he reached back in his waistband for a stake. Without backing up or losing eye contact, he looked at the vampire without flinching.

“You are so bucking to be dusted ‘cause one more step and your buddy’s gonna be washing your remains out of his hair--or not. He doesn’t look big on personal hygiene.” He watched as the minion opened his mouth to reply only to close it and back off to stand with his friend. Co-minion? Whatever.

He hadn’t let go of the stake at the small of his back when a familiar figure reappeared at a second story window and dropped down. Xander felt a moment of panic that Ajani had returned without Spike, but he reminded himself that Spike could take care of himself far better than Ajani and would easily sacrifice the younger vampire to save his own hide. And wow, betraying allies should really not be a comforting
“Ajani,” he said with a quick tilt of his head. He may not want to challenge the vampire, especially in front of minions, but he also wanted it clear that he didn’t feel any particular loyalty toward him either. He liked Ajani, but that wouldn’t keep him from staking the vamp. Ajani looked at him for nearly a minute—a minute during which Xander grew increasingly uncomfortable until the vampire finally turned his attention to his minions.

“This massah’s out, so we be waitin’ for him.”

“And Spike?” Xander asked, half expecting Ajani to see the question as a challenge, but Ajani answered without emotion.

“Guardin' de sewah, too many minions for us both to stay and he wants de massah dead fore the minions done get riled.” Xander could understand that vamp logic. If the minions start doing their mindlessly destroying minion thing, the poor little human in the middle could very well get hurt. Probably didn’t trust Ajani to take care of whatever prep work needed to get done.

Then something else occurred to him. Spike had left him
with three vampires, and he suddenly knew that Spike was trusting him to take care of himself. It was more than Gunn ever did, but then again with his little passenger hitting the brakes in the middle of fights, he couldn’t really blame Gunn for thinking of him as a total screw up not even worth training. He just wished Gunn had looked past that to see whatever had make a century old vampire trust him.

He leaned back against a chain link fence, feeling the cold thick wire digging into his back. Okay, he just needed to wait for Spike. He could do that. He shifted against the fence. No problem waiting. He was the mighty waitin' man. How long could this new master take to get back anyway? He’d just wait for Spike. Oh who was he kidding; he couldn’t stand the quiet.

“So, Ajani, do you ever remember your life, I mean the life before you got... um... well... vamped.” Wow--that really came out bad. Hopefully asking about life before undeath wasn’t some sort of vampire taboo. Ajani turned and considered him with a curiously blank expression. “Don’t remember?” Xander finally asked just to fill the silence.

“Jes’ been awhiles since I thought about it, but I kin
‘member ever moment.” Ajani moved toward the street so that Xander found himself between the two minions standing next to the dumpster and Ajani who stood watching the street from the edge of the alley.

“So you still know who you were? You remember dying?” He shifted slightly so that he leaned against the building and could keep an eye on the minions even while talking to Ajani. He might be stupid, but even he wasn’t *that* stupid.

"Sho enough. Went to a stomps ovah in de next county to meet up wid a woman, met a vamp instead. Fore I knew it, I b’longs to the vamp, and I follow him north. Fuhgot m’self for a while truth be told."

Xander thought about that, well, to be more accurate, he tried to decipher the vampire’s thick accent. He’d gone to a ‘stomps?’ Well he wanted to meet up with a woman, so party maybe. Yep, Gunn and the crew had staked more than their share of vamps at parties, maybe because people were just so willing to invite anyone in during a party. But Ajani had forgotten himself? He obviously remembered now, so what had changed? He briefly considered the possibility of vampire psychology classes just to try and understand his life, but Ajani
continued talking.

“I ‘members dis one time, these white folks eased up on a group of boys day aftah a squall. Lynched ‘im all. Three bodies swingin’ jes’ cause dey’s worked up over some niggah who’d passed one a dey’s tests—de type dey used to keep us from votin’.”

“Holy shit,” Xander responded. Sure he’d studied the violence and racial killings in the south, but he was standing with a man who’d watched friends get hanged because white people were angry about a black person casting a vote. Ajani was like a living textbook, or an unliving textbook anyway.

He looked at Ajani’s face and wondered if the vampire still cared about those three dead boys. Yeah, if he met three boys now he’d probably catch a snack and would kill them without regret, but did he still remember being a human and watching innocent people die? Did he remember caring? Ajani continued after a brief pause as if the vampire couldn’t stop talking now that someone was listening.

“B’longin’ to a vamp didn’t seem too bad. My massah, when some older vamp ketch him and dust him, I’s a bit
lost. De other vamp, he don't wan' me"

Xander couldn’t come up with a more intelligent response than “huh.” Ajani seemed to have finished because he wandered back toward his minions. Xander watched him thinking again how little he had understood on those nights when he had followed Gunn. A blonde head suddenly appeared in the window, and Spike leaned down holding out a hand. Without even questioning, Xander jumped up and grabbed for the outreached hand. He felt Spike’s grip lock onto his wrist and pull him steadily upward until his feet landed on the window sill. He ducked down and crawled into the building without talking, moving to one side while Ajani made the jump and then reached down to help his minions.

Spike stood to the side and gestured Ajani over to him, and the two talked before Ajani gestured to his two minions and started out the door. Xander waited as Spike walked over to him and watched the three leave.

“We gonna help?”

“Not if we can bloody help it; it’s Ajani’s job to take them out, innit?” Spike walked up and stood at the door and
Xander moved in just behind him.

“Then why are we here?”

“Already took out a couple of older vamps, one was childer for sure. Now it’s time for him to take charge and take over the soddin’ nest. Can’t do that for him.”

“And if he gets killed?”

“Then we find another vamp to make master. Only doin’ this to get the minions off the streets and back under control, pet. Don’t really care of Q bloody gets himself killed or not.” Xander knew that Spike was telling the truth, but he had grown to like the red-haired vampire and he really didn’t want to see him killed. On the other hand, he could see that if Ajani didn’t fight for himself, he would never hold power and never demand obedience from his minions.

“I really hope it doesn’t come to that,” Xander said, and Spike instantly jerked around and glared at him. It only took Xander a half-second to process that look.

“I like him in a totally human don’t really want to see him dead type way and not in any sort of feeling loyalty or
wanting to serve him type way.” He watched Spike’s features go from infuriated to amused in a blink.

“Don’t know how to take ya half the time,” Spike acknowledged.

“Yeah, don’t know what my own brain is doing three-fourths of the time, so no problem.” They stood in silence for several minutes, and Xander had almost reached the limits of his ability to stay quiet.

“Ajani’s done, pet.”

“Done as in finished or done as in done for?”

“Oi, think I’m daft enough to still be here if he’d lost?” He had to admit Spike had a point. He also had to admit that he was relieved that Ajani instead of the other homicidal monster had won. If Gunn could see him now, he’d probably run a stake right through his heart.

“Come on then,” Spike called, and he realized that Spike had started down the stairs. He hurried to catch up, passing through several doors and passing Ajani’s two minions at the entrance to the basement stairs before descending into the main lair.
The vampires had obviously chosen this building for its huge basement, which looked like most lairs he’d seen—a little cleaner than normal, but not the cozy retreat Spike kept or the sheer decadence of Cassidy’s warehouse. This place had a little trash scattered across the floor, old newspapers and tossed clothing. The furniture was clearly picked from the garbage, and a half dead human hung from chains on one wall. Xander looked closer at the hanging human.

Xander almost froze at the sight of a black man hanging from chains: bruised, clothes half torn away, eyes closed, neck torn and seeping blood. It's not that he'd never seen a human half dead in a vampire lair before, it's just that he never expected the half dead victim to be Gunn.
"Oh God, it's Gunn." Xander grabbed Spike's arm hard enough that the vampire growled softly.

"Oi, watch the leather." He knew that Spike recognized the hanging prisoner because his eyes never left the injured man. Obviously Spike hadn't forgotten their last meeting, but Xander wasn't about to let one little homicidal vampire stop him from helping Gunn. He started forward, but Spike's hand snagged him and pulled him back.

"I'm helping Gunn," Xander gave a good impression of a snarl as he tried to pull free, but when his various tugs didn't help, he had to admit defeat and allow Spike to pull him back to the vampire's side where Spike's arms wrapped around Xander's waist.

"We had this discussion this mornin' pet. Your life is worth just as much and if ya go around riskin' yourself, I really will put bloody stripes on your back and chain you in the lair," Spike hissed into his ear, and Xander didn't doubt the veracity of the statement for one minute.

"I can't walk away," he whispered back, desperate and afraid Spike would make him leave, and Gunn clearly couldn't save himself because he hadn't even raised his
head at the noise.

"Soddin' white hats, always think they have to save the bloody world. Some days I think you and Peaches deserve each other," Spike sighed into his ear even as his eyes darted around the room. Minions still crouched on the floor toward the corners, and Ajani randomly walked from group to group, sometimes staking and sometimes biting into necks and sometimes running a hand through some fledge's hair.

"No one's eatin' him right now, pet. We wait."

"Just tell Ajani to hand him over."

"Said we wait, pet. I'm not tryin' to get your mate killed, but I'm about to put a bloody leash around your neck." He looked into Spike's eyes and saw that he had exceeded any patience the vampire may have once possessed. Dropping his gaze and biting his lip to keep from saying something stupid, he followed as Spike walked closer to Gunn.

Xander watched vampire after vampire walked past Gunn, ignoring the suffering human, for which he was uniquely grateful. As he followed Spike over towards
Ajani, he lived in fear that one of the vampires would grab Gunn and finish draining him, or even worse, turn him. Xander looked toward Ajani who had settled into a chair and prayed that the young master had enough minions to keep him happy because he couldn’t live with himself if he allowed Gunn to get vamped. Ajani now sat in a relatively decent armchair, obviously the nicest in the basement, and Spike walked over and perched on the edge of an old oak table.

He nearly jumped at the sound of Spike’s soft growl, and when he turned from Gunn’s half-naked form to Spike, he could see the aggravation in the vampire’s eyes. Spike’s eyes darted toward the floor and then to the room of vampires, but he simply gave Spike his best confused look, not hard considering his confusion.

Spike’s hand darted out and snagged his shirt, pulling him closer and, he finally figured out, pushing him down. Dropping to his knees as he had at the demon bars, Xander tried to play the part of the good little pet without staring at Gunn. Nearly 40 minions clustered in small groups, several near Ajani’s chair, and Xander knew that even Spike couldn’t fight his way through this crowd.

“Massah Spike,” Ajani called, but Spike continued lighting
his cigarette without acknowledging the call. He took a couple of deep pulls on the cigarette and released a cloud of smoke before responding.

“Yeah, mate?”

“I owes ya, Massah Spike. Me court, it’ll always be open to ya.” Xander watched the minions shift uncomfortably at that news. Several pairs of eyes turned to consider them, and Xander dropped his gaze to the floor to avoid accidentally triggering some fight in the increasingly tense atmosphere.

“No problem, mate,” Spike said, and Xander glanced up to see minion eyes bounce from Spike to Ajani. “Just need one favor.” Spike stopped to continue pulling on his cigarette, seemingly unconcerned by the minions that now shifted nervously and the gold tint in Ajani’s eyes. Spike continued to smoke for several minutes as the tension built.

“The human there, he thinks my pet owes him somethin’. Challenged me in front of my sire before runnin’ out like a coward.” Xander felt cold fear flowing down his back as Spike nodded toward Gunn. Oh god, please don’t let Spike kill Gunn. Xander glanced toward
the motionless man. Glancing back, he could see both Ajani and Spike watching Gunn with undisguised disgust.

“I’s happy to give him to ya,” Ajani waved a hand, and two minions moved in on Gunn, freeing his hands and allowing his body to fall to the ground.

“Oi, don’t want him dead before I can kill him,” Spike complained, and the minions picked Gunn up more carefully and brought him over to Spike, laying him out so that his bruised body rested inches away from Spike’s foot. Xander struggled not to reach out and check for a pulse because the body lay motionless and he couldn’t even be sure Gunn was breathing.

“Dat all, Massah Spike?” He spared Ajani a glance and he could see the vampire leaning forward in his chair, his eyes flashing gold and his body poised for a fight.

“Yeah, mate. Mind the warnin’ about my sire, though. He’s a wanker who’ll stake ya as soon as look at ya.” Spike reached down and pulled Gunn’s arm, dragging the body high enough for Spike to tuck an arm around Gunn’s waist so that Gunn’s head dangled near the floor and his feet drug along the concrete. Xander stood behind Spike, wanting to reach out for Gunn but
not wanting to risk the man’s life.

He honestly thought Spike was saving Gunn, but he couldn’t be sure, and he didn’t want to anger Spike by showing too much concern for his former friend. So he simply followed as Spike walked up the stairs, Gunn’s head perilously close to each step as Spike climbed. On the street, Spike tossed his cigarette and got a shoulder under Gunn’s arm.

“Oi, not carryin’ the wanker alone here.” Xander quickly slipped under Gunn’s other arm and followed Spike’s nodded directions as they walked down the street toward the abandoned basement the crew called home.

“Um, Spike?” he finally worked up the nerve to ask, “Is he going to…. Is he dying?”

“Bloody hell no. Never did have the luck that soddin’ Irish bastard always seemed to have. Only luck I ever get’s the bad kind, innit?” Spike cursed. He wasn’t quite sure how to answer that so he stayed uncharacteristically silent until he noticed where Spike led them.

“How do you know where the guys hang out, Spike?”
“He hurt ya, pet. Hurt ya and would a killed ya if he’d had half a chance.”

“Gunn wouldn’t...” he saw the look in Spike’s eye and stopped. “Okay, he might have, but only in a really not thinking straight in the heat of the moment and thinking I was a demon kinda way.”

“Wouldn’t make ya less dead, pet.”

“And how does this explain your ability to navigate down here?” Xander suspected he knew where this led, but he really wanted to be wrong. He’d never wanted to be wrong so much in his life.

“The lot of them are lucky to be alive. The pillocks don’t cover their trails.”

“And were you planning on doing anything other than looking?” Xander shifted as he redistributed Gunn’s weight so he could walk more easily. Luckily in this neighborhood the sight of two men carrying home a drunken friend didn’t even cause turned heads.

“Might a been, but the pouf’s been down here, talkin’ to them and lookin’ out for them.”
“Whoa, Luther and crew talking to a vampire? Okay, that’s just a little surprising as in waking up to find the Carolina Panthers winning the Superbowl kinda way.”

Gunn groaned and that ended the conversation. Of course, Spike’s constant and steady growls mixed with occasional curse words also tended to impair the conversation. Xander resolved to look up dangleberries, wassock, pilchard, and nit. Arsewipe and tosser he could pretty well figure out without a dictionary. Yeah, Spike obviously didn’t like saving Gunn and he could only hope that didn’t reflect on Spike’s desire to kill Gunn. He was suddenly discovering the benefits of unemployment; maybe his vampire needed a little vampire sitting.

“That’s it,” Xander said as he nodded toward the familiar building. Why he didn’t know because Spike obviously already knew which building already. Spike stopped across the street, and Xander had to stop or risk dropping Gunn who now made small groans on a semi-regular basis. As they stood looking at the building, he found himself wondering just how they could manage this. After Spike’s confession about the whole spying on the crew thing, he certainly didn’t want to offer Spike an invitation, but he couldn’t carry Gunn by himself.
“Go on then, get a couple of ‘em to do the carryin’.” Xander felt Gunn’s body pulled away from him as Spike took the weight and freed him to go get help. He looked at Spike, his face totally blank as if he hadn’t been cursing up a storm earlier. From his comparison of Gunn’s whole crew to dangleberries on Angel’s arse, he had to guess that the vampire didn’t like any of them, but here he was helping one, hopefully. He didn’t *think* Spike would take the opportunity to finish Gunn off, but he had to admit it as a possibility. On the other hand, they couldn’t leave Gunn here and they had to get back to the lair soon, so waiting was out. Right, facing the guys alone was the plan then. He took one step and Spike’s voice stopped him.

“They lay one finger on ya, and the lot of ‘em’s dead, make sure they know that, pet,” Spike commented casually as if he hadn’t just threatened murder. He nodded to Spike and then ducked between cars as he dashed for the familiar entrance.

The basement hadn’t changed, he noticed as he walked in the door. Guys who’d obviously just returned from hunting repaired weapons while others stretched out on thin bunks. Casey’s Playstation buddy was Lou this time,
and Luther stood staring at something pinned to the wall. He wasn’t sure how to announce his presence when a voice solved his dilemma.

“Look who the cat drug in,” Luis called out, and Xander forced a smile on his face, a smile that faltered when Luther spun, crossbow in hand.

“Whoa, ya know most people just make excuses to get rid of company,” Xander tried joking as he held up his hands, but he noticed that Luther didn’t move the crossbow and now the other guys were silent, watching the scene. Gilly took one step forward as if to defend Xander before she stepped back and stood next to Gwen.

“ Heard ya changed sides. Always were a demon magnet, so we shoulda figured you’d end up a demon,” Luther snapped.

“Hey, no more demon now than the day I dropped that plate of pizza on your favorite shirt, and I’m thinking I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that when you’re all Rambo-guy with the weapons.” Xander shuffled back, his hands still held up in surrender. He never expected them to welcome him back, but he honestly hadn’t expected violence. He wondered for a minute if Spike
could hear; if so, some of the crew might end up as walking to-go meals.

“What you want?” Luther demanded.

“We were out and about and ran into Gunn hanging around, thought we might bring him home.” Xander quipped, starting to truly panic at the expression of disgust and hatred in Luther’s eyes.

“Where is he?”

“Outside with Spike,” Xander answered, and then Luther closed the distance before he had time to react, Luther’s large hand pinning him against the door as the point of the crossbow dug into his stomach.

“This ‘we’ wouldn’t be the vampire you’re hanging with now, would it?” Luther’s voice dropped into a near whisper, and Xander found himself shivering at the sound.

“He got Gunn out of a lair. He’s guar...” Xander would have said more, but he found himself bodily thrown into the room, Casey and Lou catching him inches before he stepped on the Playstation. “Hey!”
“Shut up,” Luther said as he gestured for the others to grab weapons. Xander tried to step forward, but a hand landed on his arm and he turned to see Casey holding him even while the man refused to meet his eyes. “Come on then,” Luther demanded, and Xander felt himself pushed forward, not a single member of the crew objecting when the shove from either Casey or Lou sent him off balance and struggling not to fall.

When the group reached the street, Xander almost fainted with relief to see that Gunn now stood beside Spike, the fingers of one dark hand tangled in the chain link fence and the other hand gripping the vampire’s arm. Spike, as usual, simply looked bored as if nothing in the world was important enough to bother him.

“Gunn, you alright?” Luther called without crossing the street, and Gunn nodded shakily. Luther motioned for the crew to follow, but Spike’s voice interrupted him.

“Ya don’t need more than two wankers to help him; leave the rest over there,” he ordered with a flash of gold in his eyes.

Luther took a deep breath as if to argue, but Gunn raised
a hand and gave the signal for two members to move forward. Luther let out his breath in an exaggerated sigh and touched Lou on the shoulder. Xander found himself pushed forward as Lou grabbed his arm and ‘escorted’ him across the street. He tried not to show the pain he felt that they wouldn’t even listen to him; he didn’t want Spike to come back and kill them all, so he steeled himself and pretended that it didn’t matter that the guys he had grown to see as some sort of family were using him as a hostage.

As they crossed the street, Xander could see the fatigue in Gunn’s face, and the guys must have seen it—either that or they saw the blood, torn clothes and bruises because Lou’s hand tightened until Xander had to intentionally ignore the pain, and Luther’s hand gripped his shoulder.

“Let Xander go; he and Spike saved me,” Gunn ordered as soon as they crossed.

“Don’t look too saved to me,” Luther pointed out.

“Yeah, well my boy and I gotta have a little talk.” Xander walked over, and Gunn leaned against him heavily, still obviously having trouble walking. “We’re just gonna go
down to Culligan’s,” Gunn announced, and Xander found himself helping Gunn stumble down the dirty sidewalk to the stairs Gunn had mentioned. There he helped Gunn sit. Looking back, he could see Spike leaning against the fence in a pose that suggested to prey that he didn’t have a care in the world and suggested to Xander that the vampire was inches away from eating someone. Luther and Lou had taken classic attack positions relative to Spike, but he knew they didn’t have a chance if it actually came to a fight.

“Ya know, we probably shouldn’t leave the sheep guarding the wolf very long. Not healthy for sheep,” Xander pointed out.

“Is that what we are now? Sheep?” Gunn snapped, and Xander could see Spike’s eyes suddenly meet his. Obviously Spike heard that and the odds of getting away without mayhem had dropped. He turned to look at Gunn.

“I was joking, Gunn. You know the old saying about foxes and henhouses and sheep and wolves, although now that I’m thinking about it, the fox was guarding the henhouse and the wolves weren’t guarding anything. They were just doing the whole kinky species cross dressing with the
sheep’s clothing so I guess I shouldn’t have used sheep.”

“God, it still sounds so much like you,” Gunn’s voice sounded suddenly tired.

“It is me.”

“That’s what Alonna said. She wanted me back in her family.” Xander fell silent, waiting for Gunn to continue, but he didn’t.

“You mean after she…” he let his voice trail off. Alonna’s death still hurt him, and he knew Gunn had to be destroyed over it.

“Got vamped? Yeah.”

“If she was vamped, that wasn’t her. You know that.” Xander now sat down on the cold concrete, trying to offer some comfort to the man who Xander had seen as an older brother.

“And you? How are you any different, man?”

“I always had this demon, well not ‘always’ as in always, but always since I knew you. The whole blood mixing
with the blood—it gives me a touch of something not human, but it doesn’t change who I am.”

“Right. Sounds a lot like Alonna’s line.”

“Did you talk to Angel? Didn’t he explain the difference?”

“Yeah, can’t believe I’m takin’ a vamp’s word for anything, but the problem is that Angel says you aren’t like any pet he’s ever seen. He doesn’t know what you are.” Gunn gave a dry laugh, and Xander could hear a pain that he had never known in Gunn before. The man who had always laughed off everything now had a laugh that screamed in pain.

“Great, one more reason to stake Angel,” he quipped.

“What? Cause he don’t lie about what you’ve become?” Xander looked over in surprise at the sudden defensiveness in Gunn’s voice.

“No, because he won’t stop calling me weird, and coming from a vampire with a soul, that’s pretty pot calling the kettle blackish.”
“So your vampire,” Gunn nodded toward Spike who’s stance had relaxed quite a bit in the last minute or so. “Any soul there?”

“So what?”

“Spike? Hell no.”

“So he’s evil, and you’re hanging with him. You can see why I might question your humanity.” Gunn leaned back against the step, but Xander suspected it had nothing to do with Gunn trusting him and something to do with Gunn being so weak he couldn’t sit up well.

“He’s not evil.” Xander paused, unsure how to explain himself. “He’s…morally ambiguous.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he’ll eat you without thinking twice, but he also has another side, a side he shows when we’re alone.” Oh god, when had he turned into a girl that he could say a sappy line like that and actually mean it?

“So, it don’t matter who dies as long as you’re getting your end off?”

“Whoa, okay, can we please never say it like that again,
and no, I’m not okay with random death and Girl Scout snacks when the snacks are actually the girls.” Xander rushed to explain. “Spike doesn’t do that when we’re together, and I’m the first to admit he might if I’m not around, but doesn’t that suggest it might be better for me to stay with him. You know, saving innocents by putting Spike on a Xander-approved diet?”

“You’re okay with him killing *some* people then.”

“Oh boy, so didn’t intend on going there with you.”

“Well you have now, so you better start talking, boy.” Xander thought about that line for a long time. Gunn had always told him what to do, and Xander had never challenged him. Gunn called him “boy” and “my boy” when Gunn was only a year older, yet Xander had never challenged it. Was he just really pathetic or could he blame this willingness to get pushed around on his guest? Either way, he wouldn’t get pushed around any more.

“No, I don’t have to start talking. I don’t answer to you Gunn, and I don’t think I ever will again. I don’t want us to be enemies, but maybe I’m figuring out that we can’t be friends.” Gunn took a sharp breath, and Xander
braced himself for the explosion

“Damn it. You and him, this ain’t right,” Gunn shouted.

“It feels right to me.” That stopped the conversation cold, and they sat there watching old cars go by on the road. Finally Gunn sighed.

“And what does the Magic 8 ball say?” Gunn asked in reference to a game they used to play. They would sit on the stoop, watch some woman walk by and then ask the Magic 8 ball about some sexual act. Would the red-haired woman in the mini-skirt give Xander a blow job? Outlook not so good. Would the short Hispanic woman ride Gunn like a pony? Try again later. Xander looked at Gunn, the tired eyes and the slumped shoulders, much of it from sheer blood loss. He looked over at Luther and Lou still threatening Spike, who now looked mildly amused. The vampire kept shifting slightly, causing the two humans to constantly readjust their own stances. He’d get tired of that game soon, Xander knew. He looked at the faces on the far side of the street, most of them closed to him, showing masks of anger or distrust.

“The magic eight ball says, ‘Definitely yes’.” Xander said
softly, “and I never contradict precognizant plastic.”

“If you ever want to come back...” Gunn left the statement unfinished, but Xander knew what he would have to give up to earn the right to start over with Gunn, the right to go back to the beginning and fight for every inch of respect in the group. He also knew he couldn’t ever do it. He offered Gunn another option.

“Not enemies?” he asked.

“I can deal with that,” Gunn replied and he held out his hand. Xander grabbed Gunn’s forearm, and Gunn clasped his in return. They sat there on the stoop, and Xander knew they were saying goodbye. Without another word, he stood and started walking away from Gunn and Luther and Lou, sure that one person behind him would follow. In less than a block, a familiar arm slipped around his waist.

“Ya alright, pet?”

“No.” Xander tried not to cry as he walked away from every person who’d ever ditched class with him or covered for him on a test or protected his back in a vamp fight or commiserated with him after a break up. When
his mother had been so lost in the divorce that she talked to her lawyer more than her son, those people had given him a place to go and now every single one of them had turned away from him. “Spike, make the pain go away,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Let’s get home, and I’ll do that,” Spike promised.

“Just promise me this doesn’t involve killing.” Xander had to ask, he knew Spike’s version of comfort well enough to be suspicious.

“If it’d make ya feel better, I’d torture and kill every one a them pillocks with rusty roofing nails, but seein’ as how that’d probably just make ya nuttier than Dru, we’ll skip the murder and vengeance, and I’ll just make ya forget they ever existed.” Xander didn’t know if Spike truly had the power do make that happen, but he allowed himself to close his eyes against the threatening tears, and he followed Spike’s lead.

13

Fun and Games

As soon as they had reached the lair, Xander felt Spike’s arms wrap around him, nimble fingers undoing each button even as a mouth nibbled the claim mark. Xander
let himself lean back into the embrace and believe that he had found a place to belong.

“Trust me?” Spike asked even as the vampire stripped the shirt and began work on the pants.

“Always,” Xander agreed as he felt himself moved toward the end of the bed. Spike nipped his scar, and for one moment, he did actually forget Luther and Gunn, of course he also forgot to breathe and lost all of 10th grade there for a minute too, but it was a definite improvement over remembering. He felt his jeans pulled down to his ankles, and then hands positioned him on his knees at the end of the bed before disposing of the jeans all together.

“Stay,” Spike whispered and Xander knelt there, watching as Spike opened the cabinet and retrieved the leather restraints. The vampire leapt up on the bed and hooked the leather lead to the ceiling before dropping the wrist cuffs so that they dangled slightly above his head. Xander shivered as he realized what Spike planned. Spike knelt in front of him, pulling up his hands and locking his wrists into the leather straps before standing again and shortening the lead so that his hands were held comfortably above his head. Xander could feel
himself breathing harder as he knelt with his feet off the bed and his knees supporting his weight as he pulled at the restraints. Spike walked to the edge of the bed and stepped down, just watching.

“Ya done yet?” Spike asked when he had finally decided that the straps weren’t going to pull loose. Of course he could stand up and undo the fastenings from the ceiling, but he doubted he’d have time before Spike stopped him. So he simply waited, his arms flexing slightly against the leash. “Stay,” Spike ordered again before leaving the room. Xander had just enough time to worry about how stupid he looked when Spike reappeared carrying a box.

“Goin’ to make you forget,” Spike promised as he opened the box, but Xander couldn’t see the contents. When Spike reappeared, he saw the black fabric and his eyes went wide. He trusted Spike with his life; he trusted Spike with his friends’ lives, but there was something primal in his brain that railed against the thought of being blindfolded. Spike must have heard his heart because a gentle hand ran down his side and around to his stomach.

“Goin’ to make you forget,” Spike repeated as he teased a nipple, and Xander felt himself buck, humping the air
and yes, he found himself right back to the thought that he had to look like a fool. “Oi, you’re thinkin’ too much.” The black fabric closed in over his eyes before he had a chance to register a complaint.

“Hey, not so okay with the whole blindfold thing.”

“Do ya trust me?” asked that sexy, thick voice, and Xander had to answer with a slightly breathy “yes.”

“Who do ya belong to, pet?” came next, and Xander could hardly believe himself when he whispered, “you.”

“Time to let me make the pain go away,” Spike said, and Xander found himself willing to agree to anything when a talented hand reached down and fondled his balls, one at a time, even as a single slick finger slipped inside and firmly pressed his happy button. Xander humped the air again, and this time he didn’t care how foolish he looked. Spike’s fingers repeated the maneuver three or four times before disappearing, and he had to fight an urge to mewl in protest.

The next thing he felt was cool soft lengths of material rubbing over his back. When the sensation moved to his chest, Xander could smell the leather and feel the soft
texture as strands slipped across his nipples. He hadn’t yet figured it out when the material disappeared and suddenly his back tingled and heated, and then it became abundantly clear what Spike held. The whip fell again, the soft strands momentarily stinging before the sensation reduced again to the same tingle and heat. Xander couldn’t resist thrusting his hips into thin air as the third strike hit, this time warming his butt and falling hard enough to leave him gasping. The fourth strike hit the back of his thighs, and Xander swallowed a scream, trying to gain some control.

“Go on, then, pet. Let it out,” Spike said softly, but his tone belied the strength of the fifth strike, a sensation something like coolness immediately followed by warmth that engulfed his right side. A small sob slipped out, but Xander found himself wishing he could beg for more even while feeling foolish for enjoying such pain. He could hear Spike walk away, and he bit his tongue to avoid the pleading words that struggled to come out of his mouth.

“Pet, tell me what you need,” Spike voice appeared in his ear.

“I…” Words failed him as he found himself unable to say
“Ya want to let go?” Spike asked, and he could only nod. “It’s okay to like it, pet.” Xander heard the words, but he couldn’t get over the thought of what Gunn would say. He knew Gunn couldn’t be part of his life any more, but the thought of the man’s disapproval wrung a small sob from his throat. “Let go, pet,” Spike counseled, but he fought to slow his breathing and bring his words back under control before he let them fall out into the world. He heard Spike sigh and a cool hand traced the pattern of heat on his back.

“Sometimes forget just how young ya are. Don’t really know how to let go, do ya?” Xander didn’t answer, not really sure what qualified as an answer and unable to judge Spike’s mood with the blindfold in place. Suddenly lips met lips, and Xander opened to Spike’s exploration, but before he could begin to truly enjoy the contact, Spike’s lips disappeared and something cold and cylindrical slipped into his mouth, pulling his lips back and pinning his tongue to beneath it’s cool, smooth surface. Xander tried to push it out, but he could feel the strap lock behind his head. He tried to curse, but his protests came out as moans and grunts without the use of tongue or lips.
The soft leather of Spike’s whip now returned, the material teasing his cock. For a moment, the whip stopped and he thrust against it, the leather strands falling around his cock like gentle fingers, and he could feel his need mounting. The whip moved, and before he had a chance to even stop thrusting toward it, a blow fell on his calves. Xander screamed into the gag, free to beg for more now that the intruding plastic distorted his words beyond meaning. The warmth spread upwards, joining the now fading warm from his thighs, and suddenly a flurry of strikes hit his back, the pain edging toward the unhappy side before settling down into a definite happy sort of tingly pain. And since when did pain have a happy side?

The answer was driven from his mind, along with everything else when the strikes moved to the front. The first hit took him just under the rib cage, and Xander screamed again when the fire encompassed the softer skin of his stomach. The next two hits were softer, each taking in his chest and a nipple. Xander now squirmed as he tried to push forward into the contact. He babbled fiercely, but the bit in his mouth destroyed the words, leaving him free to say whatever he wanted, no censure required.
When the whip strikes stopped, Xander complained into the gag, causing a series of grunts which ended when strong arms circled him from behind and a naked body slipped between the legs that stuck out past the end of the bed, forcing his knees apart. The hands slipped down and pressed against the inside of the thigh so that he spread even farther, until his inner thigh muscles complained and his arms stretched tight above him.

A strong, slick finger slipped up into him, and he let his arms carry his weight as he all but collapsed under the force of the desire building in him. A second finger joined the first, and now the two fingers twisted in unison, stretching him quickly enough to cause tremors of pain up his back, but still definitely on the good end of that newly found scale. Just as the third finger joined the other two, sharp fangs slipped into his hip, bringing two points of fire. Helpless to do anything other than scream nonsense and writhe, he screamed nonsense and writhed with everything he had. Once Spike pulled out, he could feel the warm trail of a drop of blood slither down his skin before a tongue pursued the refugee and then laved the wound.

The fingers pulled out and in the next heartbeat, he felt
Spike slide in, arms around his waist pulling him back as the vampire stood behind him. He felt the familiar sensation of stretching and pulling before he adjusted to Spike’s size, and then each thrust came with the tingling of a fingernail running over skin. His thigh, his chest his stomach, he never knew where, he only knew that the pleasure of feeling Spike filling him, pushing against his prostrate and possessing him would be countered with the tingling pain of these scratches as he hung, helpless to do anything other than make impotent fists as Spike pounded into him.

He could feel his whole body alive, every skin cell announcing its presence and warmed by the stimulation, and he yelled, cursed, begged, whined, and demanded in words that the bit broke and turned into animalistic grunts. Spike sped up now, the scratches replaced by a bruising hard grip on his hips, holding him in place as Spike thrust harder and harder. Finally, a hand reached around and grasped Xander’s cock just below the head and all movement stopped.

Willing to do anything to continue this moment where nothing existed except need and passion, Xander thrust forward and then pulled back. Of course, in pulling back, he impaled himself on the hard, motionless cock behind
him. He again forced himself forward into the hand and then back onto the cock. He sped up, slamming his body as hard as he could forward and then back until he felt his muscles start trembling, announcing the beginnings of release, and then he felt Spike take over again, hard strokes that pushed him into Spike’s fist over and over until he felt Spike’s release just at the vampire fiercely whispered “Mine” in his ear and plunged fangs into his claim mark, triggering his own release as he felt his cock twitch in Spike hand several times, the pleasure overwhelming everything as he hung limp.

He could feel Spike slip free of his body about the time he pulled out of his neck. Xander had to admit that Spike had the power to rearrange the world because Xander didn’t think he could even care about apocalypses or Girl Scouts as thoroughly sated as he felt. Spike lazily licked his claim mark, and he could feel the corresponding tremors go through his body. Hands tangled with his hair before releasing the gag.

“So, pet, does the club have sewer access?”

“Huh?” He stretched his lips, grateful that Spike had taken that out.
“The club, ya know, that place where ya use to work, they have sewer access?”

“Don’t really know, why?”

“Thought I’d stop by there and pick up my music,” Spike calmly announced.

“Uh, well…um,” Xander froze.

“Articulate as ever, pet. Where’d ya leave them?”

“How could you…”

“Oi, ya pressed so tight against me on that motorcycle that I could feel the CD’s even through the jeans. So, where they at? Locker? T’s office? Better not be with Carlos ‘cause I already cut that wanker slack once.” Xander thought about asking Spike to take off the blindfold so that he could watch for any homicidal activity, but then he decided he really didn’t want to see his imminent death.

“I gave them to Angel,” he admitted, and the hands that had been roaming over his body froze.
“Oi, you bloody well took that joke about 50,000 leagues to bloody far, ya pillock.” Spike complained loudly, but the hands resumed their aimless groping, so Xander assumed he wasn’t going to die soon. “So, ya like the practical jokes?” Spike hands disappeared, and Xander found himself increasingly worried.

“Spike?” he called without receiving a response. “It was before we had the ...uh....talk about Angel and all,” he defended himself.

“Just remember, ya started this, and you’re makin’ me go to the pouf to get my music back,” Spike said in a slightly scary voice, but the hands that now put something around his waist moved gently.

“What ya doing?” he asked as he felt the thick material around his waist tighten.

“Gettin’ even,” Spike amicably responded. He felt cuffs close around his ankles and he could hear some ominous clinking. He tried to close his legs, not that it would make him any less vulnerable, but it might make him feel less vulnerable. Strong hands stopped him. “You’re not goin’ anywhere.”
“Okay, I know I went too far.” Xander went to stand and release the leash from the ceiling only to find that he couldn’t straighten his legs since some sort of chain connected the ankle cuff to the material at his waist. Oh shit. “Spike?” he called hesitantly.

“Wot? Don’t trust me?” came an amused voice, and Xander just knew that he was going to pay for trying to give Spike a reason to talk to Angel and Angel a chance to talk to Spike without feeling a need to threaten him. Served him right for getting into a family dispute he thought to himself as hands returned and pushed his knees apart again.

Xander didn’t fight as Spike arranged him and something slick touched his hole. He thought Spike was going for round two when the pressure increased until something rigid slipped in and settled with a pop. He could feel himself stretched, and he could also feel the pressure on his prostate when he moved. Hands now worked at the front of the waistband and he could feel lengths of something dangling over his genitals before being pulled through his legs and into his crotch. The tightness irritated him, but didn’t really bother him too much, but it did push the object in his ass farther in, making Xander Jr. struggle to respond even though it was physically
impossible for him to react this quickly. Spike worked at the back of the waistband, and Xander suddenly had a pretty good idea what the vampire had done. He experimentally pushed, straining to get rid of the object lodged inside him and, sure enough, the pressure on his crotch increased, but the objected couldn’t move much at all.

“Isn’t this taking it a little far?” Xander asked as he realized how helpless he was, hobbled, hands secured, a butt plug up inside him and some sort of harness holding it in. And of course the blindfold, which he found more annoying than all the rest combined.

“Givin’ my music to my soddin’ sire was going a little far; this is justice,” Spike commented. Xander opened his mouth to complain again, but the bit slid back into his mouth, and he struggled to push it out before Spike could secure it. Of course he lost.

“Sewer’s a handy thing, pet. I’ll go see the pouf, then drop by Ajani’s and see how things are going. Need to make sure he knows I won’t challenge him.” Spike fell silent for a moment, and Xander couldn’t do anything except tilt his head in the direction he thought Spike stood. “Havin’ to get that wanker out of there made
things a little tense. Having an older master make demands so quick, it’ll make him think I plan to ask for more. Might take him a little ‘takin’ over the nest’ gift to show him I’m not looking for anythin’ from him.” Xander groaned at the thought of being tied up for that long, so he could only hope that Spike was teasing. Not that he could do anything other than hope of course.

“Course, don’t want ya to get bored, pet. Saved this back last time I found your hidin’ place.” He could hear the familiar sound of the stereo opening and closing before the loud strains of Dead Kennedys assaulted his ears. If he hadn’t been gagged, he might have told Spike that didn’t actually mind this particular CD, making it useless as torture. Either way, he didn’t have the choice now as he explored the surface of the gag with the limited movement of his tongue.

“One more surprise, pet,” Spike whispered in his ear and he couldn’t help but jump, which drove the plug farther into his prostate, which caused Xander Jr. to struggle to a sort of quarter mast. He groaned; his only hope of surviving was to keep still so his prostate didn’t get stimulated. He had almost forgotten Spike’s words when he felt a hand between his legs and suddenly the plug began to vibrate sending waves of pleasure through his
body. Xander slapped his legs closed as he tried to deepen the sensation, pulling against the restraints and moaning loudly around the gag. Spike stood with a hand on his lower back for several minutes before the hand delivered one last sharp slap to his butt.

“Oh yeah, don’t tease the master, pet. I’ve had 120 years to develop tortures.” Xander could barely even register the words as he squirmed and squeezed his inner muscles in an effort to get more stimulation. “Have fun,” the vampire laughed as the sound of the hallway door opening and closing told Xander that he was on his own.

By the time he heard the door open again, Xander was beyond all thought. He had tried pulling his legs up and rubbing against himself, but he couldn’t get the right angle or enough pressure, so he had eventually given up. It took longer for him to give up trying to control the urge to move, but by the time the door came open, he twisted and squirmed and thrust and didn’t care how it looked. Almost instantly, he felt a hand at his cock, and he thrust forward wildly even as he felt a hand push the plug up into his body. He slammed himself forward just twice before he came harder than he ever had in his life.
By the time he had gathered enough brain cells to really pay attention to his surroundings, he lay in a hot bath with Spike washing him. He couldn’t concentrate enough to form words as the vampire picked him up and dried him before carrying him to bed. He didn’t even really remember falling asleep. He only knew he had fallen asleep when he started drifting back up into consciousness feeling incredibly relaxed. He felt as if he had overslept and Spike was already awake, a hand wandering over his curled body. Xander lay on his side, and he felt Spike press up behind him, a strong arm curling around his waist.

He sighed as he felt a hand run through his hair before smoothing it away from his face. Then Spike reached down and pulled his top leg up so the vampire could slip between his legs even as they lay on their sides spooning. He hadn’t realized that Spike had somehow managed to prepare him already until he felt Spike’s cock slip into him slowly. Once in, Spike waited a moment before slowly pulling out until only the head remained within in him. Despite the soreness, Xander felt Spike’s fullness rubbing along his prostate and a shiver of pleasure rolled through him.
He tried to thrust back, but a strong hand held him as Spike slowly moved in and out in a steady rhythm.

“You’re killing me,” Xander gasped as Spike rolled his hips and slid in again slowly.

“Ya don’t smell like your suffering.” Spike didn’t vary his unhurried pace. Xander grabbed Spike’s hand from his waist and tangled his own fingers with Spike’s. He didn’t know what had happened the previous evening, but this slow, soft approach certainly surprised him. He shuddered again as Spike pushed into him and started two sharp fangs over the claim mark.

“Suffered last night,” Xander half-heartedly complained. Even though he said the words, he knew that last night had been many things and suffering had not even entered the equation. In fact the equation seemed to be something along the lines of bondage plus sexy vampire multiplied by sexual frustration equals nearly earth-shattering and coma inducing orgasm.

“Oi, didn’t think ya minded. Fact, thought I might stage a repeat performance some time.” Xander groaned when Xander Jr. betrayed him by dripping at the very thought. Damn traitor. Spike just laughed and continued
his slow movements. Spike’s hand slipped free of Xander’s embrace as Spike reached down to take pity by grabbing Xander’s cock as he speeded up. The two of them came at nearly the same time, and Xander noticed that Spike didn’t even bite him. Oh yeah, something’s wrong with his vamp, he thought. Ajani didn’t have the power to disturb Spike so much, so he made his best guess.

“So, what exactly did Angel say that caused this whole reaction?” Xander asked once he could breathe again.

“The pouf has nothin’ to do with it.”

“You’re lying, vampire mine.” Xander rolled over onto his back, wincing slightly at the soreness he discovered.

“’M evil, pet. Supposed to lie.”

“You’re about as evil as...” Xander caught the expression on Spike’s face and quickly edited his statement. “As a tiger. A big man-eating tiger that rips people’s throats out.”

“Bloody right,” Spike agreed, his expression quickly becoming satisfied.
“Which is still not evil. Dangerous, not evil,” Xander pointed out, but Spike only glared. “And let’s stick to the subject, namely, what Angel said.” Spike lay quietly beside him for several minutes.

“He tried to take ya, pet.” Spike finally sighed.

“No he didn’t,” Xander began and then he remembered the dark vampire stepping into his personal space, staring him down. “Um, okay, maybe he did.”

“Ya didn’t know?” Spike turned gold eyes to him, and he couldn’t avoid hearing the disbelief in Spike’s voice.

“I really didn’t; I thought he was being an ass, that’s all.”

“Bloody hell.” He waited for Spike to continue, but the vampire simply reached out and pulled him close so that he now lay on his stomach, half on and half off Spike. Spike’s arms held him tight, so he settled down and wiggled his way to a comfortable position.

“Ya keep that up, and we’ll start up again,” Spike promised with amusement.
“Hey, human here. You start up again and death by fabulous sex is a very real possibility. My cock is sore, my backside is sore, and I’m a teenage male complaining that he doesn’t want more sex right now, so an apocalypse must be coming. And stop changing the subject. What’s up with you and Angel?”

“He told me he tried to take ya. Told me he told ya to leave me.”

“Oh wow, that couldn’t have been a pleasant conversation. He does still have all his body parts attached in correct order, right?”

“Oi, not goin’ to dust my sire, that’s Peaches’ style. ‘Sides, he said that ya wouldn’t budge. Said ya stayed loyal to me even when he called on the demon in ya.” Spike’s voice sounded strange.

“Okay, Spike, I know I can be a little slow, but why in the world would you ever think I might go to the broody Neanderthal when I want you?”

“He’s my sire, pet.”

“Yeah, covered that, but I’m obviously missing a couple
of points because when I try to connect the dots into a picture, I’m coming up with abstract art.” He could feel Spike’s chest rise and fall as the vampire sighed.

“He’s older and stronger, luv. A vampire or even a vampire pet should always go to the stronger master.”

Xander couldn’t resist the urge to snort. “Yeah, right. Strong in that Cordelia can whip him into place or strong in the whole personality split thing or strong in terms of being jealous of you? I’m not seeing the whole ‘he’s stronger’ part of this conversation.”

“Jealous!?" Xander gasped when the arms tightened a little too much and the pressure instantly lessened. “What’d the tosser say to ya, pet?”

“He said that he didn’t like the fact that after you were turned, you still managed to try and create something where he just went around destroying.”

“Wanker pointed out my faults often enough. He’d wait ‘til I’d found something I might like, then he’d take it away, laughin’ and callin’ me weak.” Xander could hear the emotion in the tense voice and heavy accent.
“Angelus may have thought that, but Angel...Angel’s jealous that you control the demon better than he could. That makes you the stronger person... or demon in this case.”

“He said that?” Xander lifted his head and looked into Spike’s shocked eyes.

“Yes. It’s why I gave him the CD’s, so you two would have to talk.”

“Wanker,” Spike complained, but he wasn’t sure whether the insult was meant for him or Angel. The arms tightened again and Spike possessively declared, “Mine.” Xander didn’t even have to consider the answer.

“Yours,” he agreed as he lowered his head back to the muscled chest. “However ‘yours’ has to go to the bathroom.” He felt the chest rise and fall in another sigh.

“ Bloody inconvenient human bodies,” Spike groused even as strong arms released him. Xander laughed and then headed to the bathroom. He was brushing his teeth when the unmistakable sound of a trumpet and drums filled the lair. He finished quickly and went into the main room where Spike had already dressed.
“New CD?” Xander asked with a nod toward the stereo shelf. He had to admit he liked the complex notes and the way that first one instrument and then another took main stage.

“Miles Davis,” Spike agreed. “Must be one a Angel’s; found it in the pile of CD’s he returned, and I’m not givin’ it back.”

“Pretty good,” Xander commented.

“ Heard him in New York in the fifties or sixties, always did like him. Now get a move on, pet. We need to get goin’.” Spike finished lacing up his boots and turned to securing various weapons in his clothes and boots.

“Helping Ajani take down another master?” Xander asked as he got into the armoire and pulled out clothes for the day.

“Not this time. We’re going to see Peaches.” That stopped him in the middle of pulling on his pants, one leg in and one leg raised in the air. Spike’s snort of laughter got him moving again. “Talked to Ajani last night; seems like one a Cassidy’s minions got away with most of the
mojo Cassidy’d collected.” Spike shrugged on his duster, and Xander hurried to button up his shirt. He really did dress faster back when he could throw on a t-shirt and then pull on a button up shirt without buttoning it, but the few t-shirts he’d brought had already disappeared.

“Oh god, please don’t tell me that means that someone is going to finish that whole enslaving all the vampires scheme,” he said as he sat to pull on his own boots.

“Think so, but Ajani and his minions can’t stop them, and we’re not goin’ in there alone, so, we go to Peaches.”

“What happened to the good old days when vampires just randomly killed?” Xander groaned as he finished and tucked his own weapons away. “Now it’s all end of the world this, enslave everyone that.” Despite his jokes, Xander could feel his stomach tense at the thought of someone using magic to enslave Spike or even Angel or Ajani. Before he’d worried about the power and damage a person could do with an enslaved vampire army. Now, he worried about the vampires.
“Ducks,” Spike nodded his head toward Cordelia when they walked through the door to the dim office.

“Oh, don’t even come in here with that whole innocent act. If you’re here to hit Angel again, you can just turn your over-bleached ass around and leave, mister.”

“You *hit* Angel,” Xander demanded, but Spike didn’t even have the grace to flinch.

“Wanker deserved it,” Spike smugly insisted. “But I’ve got to talk to him, so the cheerleader needs to go get him.”

“And you,” Xander did flinch when Cordelia pointed a manicured finger at him. “Exactly where were you last night? I expect you to keep his unholy bleachiness in line.” Xander swallowed and closed his eyes in an effort not to think about where he had been during Spike’s confrontation with his sire. Spike’s snicker proved that the vampire had no trouble remembering the previous
evening.

“Can’t really tell him what to do,” Xander pointed out with a glare to Spike who wouldn’t stop softly laughing. “Besides, I’ve learned my lesson about getting between Spike and Angel.” Xander didn’t even think about what his words must sound like until he saw the instant worry on Cordelia’s face.

“Xander? Are you okay?” she asked as she walked around the desk, a stake in hand.

“I’m fine, Cordie. Just a piece of advice from experience—don’t try to pull a practical joke on a 120 year old vampire. You won’t win.” He shrugged and Spike’s snicker, which had disappeared at the arrival of the stake, now returned.

“Whatever,” Cordelia waved a dismissive hand in their direction. “I so don’t need to know what adolescent games you’ve been up to.”

“Who ya talkin’ to?” asked a voice from a back office and the green-eyed man, Doyle, walked out. “Dinna know we were gettin’ regular visits or we’d a redecorated, maybe something in a nice cross motif,” Doyle
commented as he leaned against the doorframe watching them. Xander really wondered how ugly the confrontation had been the previous evening because everyone seemed on edge. Well, everyone except Spike who had obviously caused the whole mess.

“We really do need to see Angel,” Xander hurried to say before Spike could offend them any more than he obviously already had.

“If he thinks he can walk in here whenever he wants, he’s gone in the head,” Doyle responded without moving.

“It’s all right,” came a voice from behind Doyle, and the man moved to allow Angel into the room.

“Well if it i'nt tall, dark, and broody,” Spike commented, and Xander felt himself pulled tighter into Spike’s side. He resisted an urge to roll his eyes.

“Spike, I thought we agreed to keep our distance?” Angel asked as he moved into the room, taking a position in front of the desk where Cordelia sat and Doyle now leaned.

“Just thought you’d like a heads up, but if ya don’t want
my help, I’ll just take my pet and get far enough away that we’ll be safe.”

“What are ya blatherin’ about now?” Doyle asked from his position behind Angel, and Spike released Xander in order to dig in the duster pockets for cigarettes. Xander retreated to the arm of the sofa nearest the door.

Spike lit his cigarette and stood there, blowing smoke in Angel’s direction while Angel’s expression grew increasingly pained.

“William?” he finally demanded in a half snarl.

“Wot? Just thought to tell ya that some bloody git got his hand on that mojo that Cassidy’d collected. Thought you lot took care of that, but I guess good help’s hard to find,” Spike waved toward the desk, and Cordelia gave out an offended squeal.

“Jaysus,” Doyle swore.

“Where did you hear this?” Angel demanded.

“Oi, you’d a heard too if ya stopped to talk to the fledges instead a pretendin’ ya can kill them all. One of the older
vamps set up shop on the north end, been gatherin’ minions and lettin’ the younger masters kill each other off as he sat back and chatted up those lawyers of Cassidy’s.” The room fell into silence for several seconds.

“And why *exactly* did this minion trust you with this information?” Angel’s eyes narrowed, and Xander resisted an urge to beat both vampires until they stopped this inane game of who can piss higher. It was like watching those stupid rams on National Geographic, the ones that rammed their heads together over and over until they proved who had the harder head.

“You really are playin’ on half a deck these days. The minion trusted me ‘cause I’m a master or have ya forgottin’ how minions act the way you forgot your own childer?” Xander sat up a little straighter, expecting the blows to start, but Angel wilted like a plucked flower. “William,” he said in a far more conciliatory tone.

“Don’t bloody go there, Peaches. Don’t want to have some wanker with mojo strong enough to bring me to heel runnin’ around. I fought to get free a Darla, and I earned my status, so you can soddin’ help me take him down or not, but ya won’t treat me like some underling who hasn’t earned his place.” This time the
uncomfortable silence stretched far longer with the two vampires staring at each other. Spike finally ended the stand off by walking to the door and flicking the remains of his cigarette onto the street.

“So, ya in or out?” Spike demanded from the door without turning around, his back to Angel in an expression of either submission or contempt, Xander really couldn’t tell which. He could practically hear Angel grind his teeth, and that man was lucky he was a vampire; otherwise he might have a serious dental problem. Angel finally spoke.

“Do you trust this minion?”

“He’s got no reason to lie. Knows I’ll go back and torture him to death if he does.” Spike stood motionless, no bouncing, no twitching a cigarette in his hand, no nothing. The stillness made Xander nervous.

“Do you know where this place is?”

“Yeah, Peaches, I do.” Spike turned to face his sire, and now Angel was doing the silent and motionless bit. This was just entirely too creepy. He could see Cordelia and Doyle exchanging glances, so he wasn’t the only ones
getting major wiggins.

“Cordelia, get the holy water,” Angel quietly ordered.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Cordelia’s hand shot up to her waist as her eyes narrowed in rebellion.

“Cordelia, please just get the holy water. Doyle, call Gunn and see if his crew can give us some support later tonight after we’ve checked this place out.”

“Hello?!?! You’re talking about trusting the vamp that blind-sided you yesterday. Can anyone here spell trap because I did not survive a hell mouth just to end up a vampire chew toy.”

“Cordelia,” Angel said wearily.


“Cordelia.”


“Cordelia.”
“Can I get in a word here, Angel? ‘Cause I’m trying to make a point and I don’t think you’re listening.”

“He’s not lying.” Angel finally just started talking over Cordelia’s complaints, and she fell silent as he continued. “We have to stop this vampire, and we have to get whatever magical objects he’s using.”

“And we’re trusting Spike on this?” The second hand now rested on her hip giving her the outline of some ancient warrior... or an angry mother. Scary either way.

“Yes, we are. Doyle—phone.” Angel now turned to completely face his own crew, and Doyle reached for the phone. Cordelia’s hand landed on the handset before Doyle could pick it up and the man looked up at Angel helplessly. Oh yeah, this wasn’t of the good.

“Gunn’s probably not going to be up to anything other than soft foods after yesterday anyway,” Xander said about three seconds before his brain reminded him that he didn’t really want to get into a discussion with Angel, certainly not in front of Spike who had gone a little extremeish last time he’d talked to Angel, certainly not when the topic included Spike’s whole secret plan with Ajani.
Angel swung back to face him, taking two steps toward their end of the room, and he could hear Spike sigh and shift closer to the couch where he sat.

“And I think I’m going back to the whole not talking thing—I get in less trouble that way,” Xander nervously laughed.

“What did you do to Gunn, William?” Angel spoke to Spike, but his eyes remained focused on Xander until Xander squirmed under the glare.

“Nothing. Would of happily killed the wanker, but ended up pullin’ him out of a lair instead. Not going to talk about it.”

“You saved Gunn?” Angel now turned to Spike, confusion pulling his brows into deep furrows.

“Nancy-boy thing to do, but yeah. I did. Enough said.” Xander watched Angel’s eyes travel from him to Spike and back to him. The vampire reached some sort of conclusion because his forehead smoothed out and he nodded knowingly.
“He okay?” Xander didn’t realize that Angel was talking to him until Spike nudged him and he looked up to see Angel watching him intently.

“I guess. He was strong enough to take me on a whole guilt trip, so I’m assuming that means he’ll live.” He squirmed a bit talking to Angel, and the vampire must have realized it because he backed up a step or two, and Spike returned to his place leaning against the door.

“We’ll check the place out and see if we can handle it with the five of us,” Angel announced.

“Never do like this part of the plan,” Doyle complained but he followed Angel into the back and helped him carry out a large collection of weapons.

When they reached the building in question, Xander found himself agreeing with Doyle. The place had once been some sort of utility station with thick concrete walls and wire towers and a steel door. Hell, it might still be a utility station, but God help the utility worker who tried to go in there because vamps slipped in and out of the half-open door with regularity.
“They must have sewer access in there,” Angel commented as he lay on a small hill watching the facility.

“Ya think?” Spike sarcastically snapped back from the convertible. He hadn’t liked coming in one vehicle with Angel and company, but the older vampire had insisted that Spike’s motorcycle with its missing muffler and throbbing engine was just a little too obvious. So that left Spike and Xander in back with a very uncomfortable Doyle. A particularly uncomfortable Doyle once Spike made it clear that he would sit in the middle and Doyle would not be anywhere near *his* Xander.

“Spike,” Angel snarled, but Xander was relieved that the older vampire had returned to using the nickname. When Angel said “William,” he was reminded of his mother’s angry “Alexander Leville Harris,” and that was so not a good memory. The very sound of his full name still sent his manly bits retreating.

“What’s the plan?” Doyle asked from his position next to Angel, binoculars in hand.

“It better not include me getting down in the dirt with you two,” Cordelia called quietly, but she was also pulling
weapons out of the trunk and sorting them by function: crossbows with the stake throwers, maces with the swords. Strange girl. Dirt, no; weapons, yes.

“Right now, we wait and try to get an idea of how many are in there.”

Xander turned to see Spike gesturing to him, and he followed Spike away from the others toward a distant fence.

“Ya stay back in this, pet. Don’t care what Peaches says, you’re mine and you’ll bloody well listen to me.” Spike didn’t even make eye contract with him, instead the vampire stared toward Angel.

“But what if—”

“Oi, no arguin’. Peaches and I can take care of ourselves, and if it comes down to you or those two wankers that hang around Peaches, you’re worth more than them.” Gold eyes flicked toward him before returning to study Angel. Xander turned to watch the scene that fascinated Spike. Cordelia leaned on the car flipping through a magazine while Doyle and Angel lay on the grass.
“It’s not really a matter of w—”

“If ya say one more word arguin’, you’ll soddin’ well stay in the lair until this nest is cleared out. Got it?” Xander felt his demon moving within him, pushing and urging him to obey. Of course, he couldn’t really do much to help compared with Spike and Angel, so he nodded his agreement.

“Promise,” Spike ordered.

“You’d take my promise? What about the whole 'supposed to lie' thing?” Xander asked.

“I’m supposed to lie. You’re a bloody white hat; you don’t lie. Not to me, pet.”

“I promise, Spike.” Xander felt a heaviness in his mind and he wasn’t sure he would be physically able to break that promise. “So no Ajani tonight at all?” Xander whispered.

“Nope.” Spike turned his head as if listening for something but obviously concentrating on Angel more than his current conversation.
“Kinda like him,” Xander commented, and when Spike shot him a disgusted look, he quickly amended his statement. “In a human-friend sort of way which is actually a little disturbing considering he’s a killer and I really shouldn’t like killers, well, except for the obvious...and I am so gonna shut up now.”

“Yeah, well I told ya not to get attached. Masters from different lines don’t share well, so we won’t be goin’ back.”

“Why?” Xander suddenly feared that Spike might have done something.

“’Cause he’s master enough to not want me around. ‘Sides, after we take care of this wanker, that only leaves two or three real masters in the city. Ajani can either make a truce and carve out his own territory or he can try and take the city, don’t really give a rat’s arse one way or the other.”

“But the vampire war...my mother...my friends.” Xander could hear his voice approaching girly altitudes, but he nearly panicked at the thought of Spike abandoning them and making him abandon them.
“Oi, told ya I’d get the city quiet, and I did. With only a couple a masters, they’ll settle things traditional-like, so no more marauding minions.”

“Marauding minions,” Xander laughed nervously, “that sounds like a Gilbert and Sullivan musical.”

“Bloody hell, ya really are daft.” Spike shook his head. “Right, so let’s see what my wanker of a sire has planned.” Spike started back toward the rest of the group, and Xander followed. He appreciated that Spike didn’t want him to get hurt, but when Spike had left him to take care of himself with Ajani’s minions, it had felt so good. Just knowing that someone didn’t see him as the pathetic one, the loser, the demon-bait oaf made him happy. Now Spike had with one sentence relegated him back to sidekick land. Even worse, by forcing the promise out of him, he knew his own demon would fight to enforce it. Xander stopped obsessing when Spike turned and gave him a confused expression right before reaching the others.

“Pet?” he asked softly.

“I’m fine,” Xander answered quickly and then walked by
Spike to lean next to Cordelia.

“Any plan then?” Spike pulled cigarettes out of his duster and started toward Angel. When he got high enough on the hill, he crouched down so that the guards at the door below wouldn’t see him.

“A friend a mine has access to some city plans. He’s bringin’ blueprints now,” Doyle offered. Xander watched as Doyle slid closer to Angel, and he had to suppress a smile. Everyone else reacted to Spike as if he were a killer, and yes, he actually was a killer, but Xander could see the nervous bounce that revealed his desire to *do* something. He watched the cigarette and knew that Spike was uncomfortable and trying to put on his ‘Big Bad’ personality. He listened to the accent thicken and suspected that Spike was upset about the coming fight. The longer he knew the vampire, the more he understood his moods, but he just wished he could find the button to push to make the vampire trust him.

Xander hadn’t come to any conclusions an hour later when a new car arrived and Doyle met with some man, the two of them leaning over a laptop computer and a pile of blueprints weighted down with small rocks. He’d
had no idea that fighting evil could be so boring and had even resorted to Cordelia’s magazines. Doyle, Angel, and the new guy talked and pointed while Spike offered a couple of comments that the others obviously dismissed if he was reading body language right.

“Don’t you ever get bored?” Xander asked Cordelia one article about pores and two boyfriend quizzes later. They had moved to the backseat.

“He pays; I sit,” Cordelia waved a dismissive hand toward Angel as she continued to read.

“But is it always like this?”

“On good nights, yes. On bad nights, there’s more slime.”

“Wow, I just thought fighting for truth and justice would be more...interesting.” Xander threw the magazine down and looked over at the conferencing trio and hovering Spike.

“Is that what you’re fighting for?” Cordelia asked in a suddenly serious tone.
Xander watched Spike animate an argument with a cigarette flick and a quick flash of game face. Doyle retreated, but the new guy ignored the antics. He wasn’t near enough to hear, but he placed good odds that Angel had either just called Spike ‘William’ or sighed heavily. “What?” he finally asked when he realized Cordelia had asked a question.

“Truth and justice, is that what you’re fighting for?” she sighed in obvious frustration at his inattentiveness. Xander looked over to find Cordelia’s magazine forgotten in her lap and a far too serious expression on her face.

“Um...yeah?”

“Interesting choice in partners then,” Cordelia’s gaze slipped over to Spike, but then it returned to pin him to the car seat.

“I’m not gonna sit here and fight with someone who also hangs out with a vampire.”

“Mine has a soul,” she shot back.

“And I’m really sick of hearing that. Does that somehow
change who he is? He’s still a vampire, you know.” Xander tried to keep his voice down, but when he glanced over at the group, Spike now stood staring directly at him, ignoring the other three. Oh yeah, overprotective mode in five...four...three...

“He’s evil,” Cordelia nearly hissed in a good imitation of a vampire herself. “You can tell yourself whatever you want, but he’s evil.”

“And how exactly would you know that?”

“Sunnydale born here. I grew up around evil. I saw what Angel did when his soul went MIA, and it wasn’t pretty. There were dead fish involved.” Xander narrowed his eyes in confusion, wondering if he had missed something because he thought she had just said dead fish.

“You’re worried about the fish of the world?”

“I’m worried about how long you can keep Spike on a leash.”

“No leash here.” He held up his empty hands.
“You really are an idiot, aren’t you? You know, when I first saw you, I thought about calling Willow. You know, telling her I’d found you because she really worried when she tried to call you back after your little fight and found out your phone had been disconnected. But I didn’t know how to explain all these changes in your life: the gay thing, the pet thing, the sleeping with the undead thing. Now I realize that you haven’t changed at all. You were a moron then and you’re a moron now.” Xander sat open-mouthed and speechless as he tried to scrape up enough dignity to even reply.

“You were a bitch then and you’re a bitch now.” Xander was proud of himself; he didn’t babble, stutter, or cry even though he had an urge to do all three.

“A bitch who tells the truth,” Cordelia instantly announced in a regal tone. “That vampire would happily eat us, but he plays nice while you’re around. So what happens when he gets tired of you or you try to find whatever life a person like you considers normal? Hello, he’s going to go binge on the local population because he’s not the cute and fuzzy you seem to think he is.”

“And he’s not what you think either,” Xander growled back. He struggled to keep his voice low since technically
they were still on stake out. “He isn’t Angel. He never ate his family. He never tried to kill every person who knew him as a mortal. Angelus was a sick bastard who got off on other people’s pain; Spike just is, so don’t compare them.” Wow lame ending on that argument, but then he didn’t really expect to win against Cordelia.

“And how do you think he got that name? His pathetically outdated hair?”

“I know all about the railway spikes he used,” Xander snapped back, but he had to admit he was disturbed by Spike’s story of torturing people, one he’d heard shared with a demon over a drink while Xander knelt on the floor by the vampire’s side.

“And you’re okay with that?” Cordelia demanded. Xander thought of Angel and Spike in the office, facing off with one vampire claiming the mantle of “goodness” and “honor” and the other vampire just wanting the respect of his sire. Suddenly a piece slipped into place and Xander realized that he was okay with Spike’s past.

“I’m fine with his past because he did that to impress your boss. Angel is his sire, and he wanted to prove that
he was just as strong, so if he did things that were evil, I’m blaming Angelus. As for him being a vampire, deal with it."

“My god, you really do love him.” Cordelia’s sharp tone mutated into wonder and a soft wistfulness so quickly that Xander felt like he had just jumped realities and landed in a new conversation.

“I...Um...Okay, lost now. You’re supposed to do the bitchy thing and then I do the whole defensive thing, and don’t go changing the rules on me mid-fight.”

“I still think you’re stupid,” she shrugged, “but you just keep in mind that Spike’s only playing well with others because instead of trying to impress Angelus, he’s trying to impress you. I suggest that if you ever want to break up you hire a whole lot of bodyguards and give the rest of us enough warning to update our security.”

“And again with the comparing him to Angel. There’s no comparison.” Xander stood up and stepped over the side of the car onto gravel path. He’d expected to find Spike waiting in full game face ready to eat Cordelia. Instead both vampires and the new guy—car and all—had disappeared. Doyle leaned against the base of a cable
pole, and Xander stomped toward the man.

“Where’s Spike?” he asked when he got close enough to ask without raising his voice. Alerting the entire nest of vampire’s on the other side of the hill didn’t fit in with their plans...if they’d actually formed a plan yet.

“Spike had an anger management issue; he and Angel went back of the shed there,” Doyle nodded toward an old wood shack, and Xander altered direction without another word.

What right did Cordelia have to question him? Her comment about Spike getting tired of him hit a sore spot, but he didn’t think for one minute that she was right about Spike being a sadistic killer like Angelus. Spike killed to eat, which technically people did too. Every sick and twisted story Spike told had either Angelus or Darla in it. Every person he raped had been next to Angelus, and now that Xander thought about it, Spike had described the violence with great detail and joy, but he had described Angelus’ reaction in even more detail. Spike was a vampire with a demon’s sense of family and love and honor, but that didn’t mean he was a monster...okay, it did mean he was a monster, but that didn’t make him less of a person or maybe just not less of
Xander was shaking his head at his own mental confusion when he turned the corner of the shed and stopped dead. Spike’s back was up against a pole, Angel’s body trapping the smaller vampire, which didn’t actually surprise Xander. The surprise came from Angel’s mouth locked over Spike’s neck, and Spike in full game face buried in Angel’s neck. The sounds of drinking and moaning were unmistakable and Xander felt himself react to the raw lust he could practically smell.

Holy shit, what memo had he missed? Yes, he expected to get replaced eventually, but this was a little more than he was prepared to deal with. Part of him gasped to breathe through the agony, and another part of him panted at the basic animal desire swirling around him. He must have made some noise because both vampires stopped, Angel stepping back and dropping into human features so fast that Xander thought for a moment that he hadn’t seen the ridges at all.

“I told you he could handle Cordelia,” Angel said calmly even though he had an even more guilty expression than usual.
“I wouldn’t say handled as much as got verbally ripped apart before retreating,” Xander said as he stepped forward carefully. If he was about to be rejected and destroyed, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be much closer, but he couldn’t seem to stop his feet.

“With Cordelia, you count yourself successful any time you can walk away from the fight with both your wallet and your manhood in place.” Okay, Angel told a joke. He still looked guilty, but he told a joke. Xander looked over toward Spike, looking for some reassurance, but the blonde vampire had turned away, leaning a shoulder against the pole with cigarette smoke rising above his head.

“Um, I’m not sure about the manhood thing,” Xander admitted as he stepped closer.

“I’ll go make a few last minute checks,” Angel answered and then the large vampire actually managed to run toward the car. Actually, he was probably just running away, but Xander appreciated his ability to make the move look work related.

“Spike?” Xander called, unsure how to handle the moment. He knew that technically he was the pet and
Spike the master, so the vampire probably had a right to go sucking on and lusting after others, but that didn’t make him feel any less inadequate. God, he had felt like the loser when compared to Luther, so he sure as hell couldn’t compare to Angel. What if Spike wanted to get rid of him? He couldn’t blame Spike for preferring Angel, and if he had to, he’s share just to not get left behind. But what if Spike didn’t want Angel in addition to him, what if Spike wanted Angel instead of him? And why wasn’t Spike interrupting his internal panic with some sort of comforting comment, even if it was a disturbing sort of comfort.

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked.

“Yeah, be there in a bit, pet.” Xander’s chest physically hurt so much at that first word, that he almost didn’t hear the rest.

“Will you?” He had to know. He couldn’t live with this fear.

“Wot?” Spike turned and he saw the tilted head and funny wrinkle that always appeared when Spike got confused.
“Will you be...” Xander took a deep breath trying to control his breathing, his fear, his pain. Suddenly strong arms locked around his waist, and he swore he never even saw Spike move.

“’S’all right luv. It’s a sire thing, a way of makin’ things...” Spike’s words stopped as the vampire struggled to explain something that he obviously hadn’t tried to explain in words before.

“You need to be okay with your sire. I get that,” Xander answered as the pain tightened until he wondered if he could actually die of grief. “It’s okay, I never expected you to...”

“Oi, we’re makin’ a right mess of this,” Spike complained and Xander could almost pretend to be okay listening to that almost normal voice as strong arms held him. “Not giving ya up, pet. You’re mine and ya stay mine.” The words sunk into his heart, loosening the bands around his chest.

“But you want him,” Xander stated calmly. Funny because inside he was running around and wailing.

“Want my sire, want one of my sires. Want to hunt with
them or share a warm lover with them. Want to have a place in the clan, that’s all.”

“And Angel can give you that?” Xander asked.

“Yeah. Sometimes feels like someone’s crushin’ my soddin’ chest, knowing I’ve been rejected by the whole bloody line.” Xander knew the feeling. He may not have a line with a whole hierarchy of vampires to reject him, but the rejection of the one vampire that meant everything to him? He wasn’t sure he’d survive that.

“It’s okay if you’d rather have him,” Xander whispered because he had to fight to even get the words past his lips.

“If I have to chose, I’ll choose you every time,” Spike said fiercely, and the arms tightened until Xander could feel the circulation cut off.

“He can give you things I can’t; he can give you family.”

“And I’ll rot in Dru’s bloody hell dimension before I let myself in for that grief again,” Spike said, and Xander felt a face nuzzle at his neck. He happily tilted his head and Spike’s tongue played with the scar.
“I chose you, Xander. You’re the one I want, and I didn’t mean ya to see that. That was just a sire’s way of letting childer know things are okay.”

“That’s a vampire *hug*?” Xander asked, unsure if the raw emotion he’s witnessed could really be compared to a hug.

“Sorta. Doesn’t matter, though because it’s not anything that changes what we have. Like you once told me, not going to start chasing the broody Neanderthal. But we gotta take care of this master or both us vampires’ll end up serving some bleedin’ little runt. Besides, you don’t want your precious Ajani comin’ up here, ‘cause the info Doyle’s buddy brought, it shows some bad mojo goin’ on.” Xander could hear Spike practically begging him to let it go and let things return to normal. He smiled.

“The little runt’s mojo isn’t nearly as bad as these two bad-ass vampires I know.” Xander allowed Spike to guide him back to where the others waited, but he couldn’t pretend away one simple truth that now colored his whole world. Spike needed something that he couldn’t give him, at least not without giving up his humanity.
Xander knew he was obsessing when Angel covered the attack plan, but then he didn’t really need to listen. He could sit and watch the others while he thought about things like life and death and families and how screwed he was because he would never be enough for anyone in his life. Cordelia and Doyle would dust any vampire’s fleeing out of the building. They expected a few fledges might decide to run for it, but most would stay to protect their master. Spike and Angel would attack from the sewers shortly before sunrise when the vampires were full and tired. Since most of the minions were young and still undisciplined, both vampires insisted that they could clear out most of the nest with no trouble.

Of course Spike had been absolutely gleeful once he discovered that Cordelia had packed his new favorite toy: a flamethrower. Angel had rolled his eyes and begged Spike to please remember that they were just as flammable as the fledges, but Xander could see how much more friendly the two were now. It hurt him because it just reminded him what he couldn’t give Spike. He did have to admire Angel’s crew though. The plan had no more come out of Angel’s mouth before they started moving into place. Of course he got the all-important job of guarding the car. He had to say that in
an entire history of being left behind, this excuse was the flimsiest.

At least that’s what he said that until he discovered himself surrounded by fledges all alone at the convertible. The first two he easily tricked into overextending themselves, slipping a stake in at the right angle to turn the guys to dust. The problem came when three of them jumped him at once. He dealt with blue shirted one in front of him, but that left two others free to grab his arms and wrench the stake from his hand. He tried going into hand-to-hand combat mode, but that only lasted the three seconds it took the vampire holding his left hand to twist it up behind his back. Before he could really even think about what a screw up he truly was, he found himself marched down the hill toward Doyle and Cordelia, a knife at his neck and a vampire at each arm.
He could see Cordelia react first, her hand snapping up to her hip as though she could intimidate the vampires into letting him go. Of course, she did have some practice what with the whole intimidating Angel thing. His foot caught on a piece of discarded pipe, and he stumbled, the vampire behind him pulling his arm damn near up to his shoulder at the same time the knife at his neck dug in slightly. He gasped and tried not to stumble again.

He watched as Cordelia pulled on Doyle’s jacket. The man turned, and Xander could hear his Irish cursing as Cordelia pointed toward his journey down the hill. Of course they were very near the bottom now, so it wasn’t all that difficult to hear Doyle’s colorful response. One minion went ahead, and Cordelia and Doyle backed away from the door they supposedly guarded.

“No need for anyone to get hurt here,” Doyle pointed out. Yeah, right. Like the minions thought they’d shown up with stakes in hopes of finding a whittling class. At least Xander now knew that he wasn’t the only to say stupid things under pressure. The minions didn’t even bother to answer. The one opened the door and the whole mob, Xander in the middle, entered the giant bunker-like building.
Xander tried not to choke on the dust and smoke in the air since one really good cough and he could decapitate himself. He squinted in the dim light before it dawned on him that he had better options. Ignoring the hands that pushed and pulled him, he closed his eyes in order to concentrate. When he opened them again, the burning sensation had disappeared and the smoke seemed to vanish in the sharp-edged demon vision. Of course now the smell of gasoline nearly made him vomit, but at least he wasn’t working blind.

The minions stopped, and Xander could see Spike and Angel in a corner, fighting like archangels in this book his grandmother had once bought him, and could you go to hell for comparing demons to archangels?

“Stop,” roared a voice, and the minions all stopped as though they were puppets on strings. A short round vampire who looked more like an accountant than a master vampire stepped forward with a sword in hand. Angel shifted to one side holding his own sword, and Spike gave his battle axe a twirl as he took up a position next to his sire. Xander could tell from the bounce in Spike’s knees that the vampire was enjoying himself.
“Drop your weapons or you’re precious pet will soon be screaming in agony.” Xander watched as Spike’s eyes scanned the room until meeting his own.

“Yeah, the whole leave me at the car thing didn’t really work out well,” Xander would have shrugged and played it off like nothing except the knife now dug into his throat so he had to strain to look at anything except the ceiling and he couldn’t really shrug with his arm twisted nearly out of the socket.

“Let him go,” Spike snarled, and Angel reached out and put his free hand on Spike’s arm. Xander knew that he was dead. No matter what happened, the asshole at his throat was going to kill him.

“Surrender first,” accountant-vamp ordered.

“You won’t free him either way, so that’s not going to happen. I’m sorry Xander.” Xander could see the honest pain in Angel’s eyes, and Spike’s bounce had turned into a deadly crouch. Yep, this wasn’t ending well.

“It’s okay, I know the score. Just make sure you take these bastards down for me.” Xander kept his eyes on Spike even though it required him to tilt his head down
just enough for the knife’s point to prod the sensitive skin under his chin. That pain just didn’t matter any more, but he knew Angel was doing the right thing. If they dropped their weapons, this master would kill both of them, and Xander could face his own death, but he couldn’t bear to watch Spike dusted.

“I heard you’d gone soft, but maybe I heard wrong. Kill the pet.” Xander had trouble telling the exact order of events, but within a couple of seconds, Doyle and Cordelia appeared tossing what appeared to be water balloons. As he tried to process the image of bright blue and red balloons in the middle of the battle, the balloons started hitting and smoke rolled off vampire arms and faces. Screams echoes off the concrete walls and he ended up on the ground minus the guards.

Doyle appeared near Spike and Angel, and Spike dusted two vampires lunging at the human with incredible speed even as the blonde vampire moved toward the middle of the room. Xander realized that Spike was fighting to reach him at the same time he realized that Cordelia had gotten separated. She fought far better than he ever expected, but she clearly wasn’t holding her own. He reached for a shard of wood that had fallen to the floor and pulled himself up to go help Cordelia.
His arm didn’t really work right yet after being twisted so sharply, and his knees felt weak either from fear or from breathing gas and smoke although he did notice that the air was quickly clearing. Obviously someone had propped open some doors. He blamed all these circumstances for what happened next.

Xander grasped the wood and stepped toward Cordelia when a vamp stepped up in front of him. Xander feigned to the right and then tried to stake from the left, but he had practiced against short weapons, and he couldn’t get around the broken pole the vamp waved as a weapon. Realizing that the weapon’s long reach made it almost impossible for him to stake the vamp himself, he backed up with his opponent in pursuit hoping to reach Spike who he could hear shouting advice from the other side of the room. When he felt a strange tingling behind him, he spun and staked a strange vamp trying to get him from behind before turning in time to see his first opponent drive forward with the length of the wooden pole.

Xander watched the impromptu spear slide into his body with the surrealistic feeling that it wasn’t his body. The grinning vamp jerked the wood back with a wrench, and
he could feel himself pulled forward into that grinning face. With arms that had already begun to feel cold, he pulled up his stake and drove it into the vamp’s heart at nearly the same time as the wood pulled free from him, sending him to his knees in a cloud of dust.

He put his hand up to his stomach and felt the warmth around his chilling fingers. Funny enough, all he could seem to focus on was that the vamp had just ruined one of his favorite shirts. He would have wanted to be buried in this shirt, but he suspected the blood would never come out, much less the hole torn when the vamp drove the broken pole through his middle.

Around him, the fighting continued, but he slid from his knees to his side, no longer capable of tracking which side was winning. He could see vampires dissolve into dust, but he could only hope that wasn’t Spike-shaped dust. Spike. Shit. He suddenly realized how hard Spike would take his death; the vampire spent five years getting over his last lover. But then again, Xander sighed as he felt the pool of blood under him grow, he was no Dru. Besides, Angel would be there to comfort him.

He had trouble breathing now, his chest hurting with each inhaled breath. He almost wished he could just die
now, just stop the pain.

“Xander!” he heard shouted from a distance. “Be alright, pet.” He couldn’t decide if Spike was asking him a question or giving him an order, but all he cared about was having the vampire’s hand to hold as he died.

“Spike?” he called, his voice weak and thready to even his own ears. The vampire appeared in his dimming vision, the ridged features and yellow eyes suddenly comforting.

“Bloody hell, no,” Spike whispered and Xander could see the pain and fear even in the vamped out features. “You bring up the demon,” Spike ordered roughly. Xander tried to laugh, but he couldn’t get enough air to finish the gesture.

“Don’t work that way, Fangface,” he coughed.

“Don’t you tell me how it works, ya bloody git. I told ya to pull up yer demon, and you’ll bloody well obey me or I’ll beat ya senseless.” Xander tried to laugh at the image since a wet noodle would probably do the job at this point, but he felt the stirrings of the demon answering Spike’s call anyway.
“Ya hear me? You’ll bloody well do as you’re ordered or you’ll be soddin’ sorry.”

“William!” He heard Angel shout from far away, as though a veil slowly descended over his senses.

“Stay outta this, Pouf.” Spike turned again to Xander, “you listen up and get yer sorry arse out ‘ere before I soddin’ beat ya black and blue.”

Xander could feel the demon moving, and he intentionally stepped back, allowing the demon access to the world. For the second time in his life, he felt the wind of the demon rushing by him to take control. Suddenly he watched though someone else’s eyes as the world appeared bathed in reddish light. He wondered if he would see his eyes if he looked in a mirror now or if vampire eyes would prove as invisible as vampires, leaving his face with two empty sockets according to the mirror. Wow, he could still mentally babble at the point of death. Of course, by pulling up the demon Spike had made the pain go away, and maybe that was the point, he mused. He watched as the demon’s nose twitched in response to some delightful smell.
“Drink,” Spike ordered, and he felt an arm at his lips, the most delightful, richest, warmest taste ever hit his mouth, but it wasn’t his mouth; he simply sat in a dim corner and watched and felt from his self-exile. Or exile in the self. Whatever.

“Childe, you will stop,” ordered some deep voice far off in the void. He couldn’t care as long as that taste remained. He could feel his own lips close over the source and suck.

“Not turnin’ him, ya idiot. I’m savin’ ‘im.”

“No human can drink that much.”

“Didn’t drain him first, did I? Case you’ve forgottin’ how to make a childe, ya gotta drain ‘em first before feedin’ ‘em.”

“If you don’t turn him, you’ll kill him. Let him go NOW.” Xander felt the source of the wonderful taste ripped from him, and he could feel the growl in his own chest. Strange feeling really, like being in the passenger side seat of your own car. His eyes swung over to glare at Angel, and he didn’t fight the impulse when he felt his
own lip lift in a growl.

“Oh my god. What did you do?” Cordelia shrieked, and he felt his head swing over to her. She stood in the far corner, which was now empty of vampires except one cringing minion that huddled on the floor. Cordelia walked over and calmly staked the creature.

“Stay down ‘n let that stomach heal,” a voice ordered, and his eyes swung back toward the sound, unable to turn away. He inched toward voice, pulling his own body along the floor, once he saw Spike being held back by Angel.

“Boy, what have you been up to?” Angel demanded, and he could see the shock on the older vampire’s face which had fallen back to human features even though Spike’s ridges remained.

“Not anythin’ I’ve done,” Spike argued as he obviously struggled to pull the arm away from his neck. “He just needs to stay like that ‘til he heals.” Xander felt his own head cock to one side as he watched the two vampires.

The demon inside him panicked, confused at why the master of the line and his master would fight. Xander
sent comforting thoughts from his dark corner, now realizing what Spike had done. Spike had called up the demon so that the demon would heal him. But the demon complained of the wound. The wood had struck deep; the wound caused pain, but the demon didn’t want to show weakness, so he remained silent. Xander sent more comforting thoughts, promised the demon that both vampires would help if they only knew the pain. He pushed and cajoled and encouraged until he felt the demon let out a whine of pain.

At once, both vampires turned yellowed eyes to him, and Xander could feel the demon struggling to retreat. The weak were killed, the demon thought at him, but Xander pushed back from his corner. Trust Spike. Trust Spike, he sent back as loudly and strongly as possible. The demon reached out toward Spike, and the blonde vampire pushed away from his sire to kneel down and gather him into his lap. Xander settled, sure that Spike would take care of the upset demon. He felt his head cradled in Spike’s neck, a wonderful smell tantalizing him, and he could feel the demon hoping. Hoping for what? Xander didn’t know what the demon wanted, but he suggested a means for the demon to get his way. He heard his own voice beg, “Please.”
Spike had been rocking him gently, but the word made him stop. Xander waited confused while the demon waited impatiently.

“Go on, then,” Spike commented as he began the rocking again. Xander could feel himself biting down on the neck, his teeth sliding into the flesh, enjoying the taste of old, rich vampire blood that made the pain go away, made the torn flesh mend. After feeding, Xander felt his mouth detach and the demon begin to purr as the pain and damage faded under the influence of Spike’s blood. Suddenly Xander understood. He sent the thought to the demon, and the demon rumbled back a happy affirmation. He pushed forward and felt the demon yield and step back so that Xander could whisper the one word that made everything right again.

“Sire,” Xander whispered in Spike’s ear, and he felt Spike tremble.

“Yeah, ‘m here,” Spike agreed, holding even tighter. Xander retreated again and let the demon have its moment with its sire, knowing that when the time came he would be able to regain control, but for now he was quite happy to wait. Besides, the demon babbled less than he did, so hopefully he would be smart enough
to avoid commenting on the stupid expression on Angel’s face.

---Epilogue---

Xander finished packing his bag. Dinner tonight with his mother and then the open road. He had expected to leave most of his things behind as they hit the road on the motorcycle, but Spike had appeared with an old Desoto, the windows blacked out. It didn’t look safe to him, but then riding behind Spike on the motorcycle wasn’t exactly safe either. He reached inside, and could feel the demon happily curled within him, so he went back to packing his duffle.

He remembered the night when everything had fallen into place, and he still didn’t like the answers Spike and Angel came up with to explain the presence of the full grown demon hiding in him. Spike suggested that Cassidy shared too much blood; Angel countered with the possibility that the lack of other vampires to keep the small piece of demon in his place had caused the demon to grow. Spike argued that Xander might be one of those people who just naturally corrupted any magic cast on
him, including the blood magic used to make a pet; Angel rebutted with the possibility that the magicks that Cassidy had used might have affected the vampire’s blood.

He had stayed out of the debate until Doyle had suggested that he might have demon blood that interfered, and he had protested at that...well he had until he discovered Doyle’s own heritage, then he just tried to pry his foot out of his mouth.

Cordelia had just calmly walked around the dead master’s alter destroying the magic objects while complaining that she was getting calluses and would never be able to work as a hand model if they didn’t stop worrying about it and help her destroy things. The only real conclusion Xander came to was that Angel and Spike would never agree. That and that he did actually carry a full demon. He still had lots of questions. Would they eventually merge? Would he age? Would he be able to stay in control or would the day come that he found himself locked in his own mind? Unfortunately, no one had the answers, so the three of them would just have to work that out, just Spike, Xander, and baby demon.

He felt the stirrings at the nickname. Little

“Oi, no goin’ loony on me,” Spike complained as he came down the stairs for another load.

“Nope, no looniness here. Just teasing myself.”

“Not bloody fair, that’s my job, Spike commented with a lewd leer and a cocked eyebrow.

“Oh not even! We’re supposed to be at my mother’s, and I am so not going to turn up with those thoughts on my mind.”

“Move your arse, then. If I have to put up with human in-laws, I want this evenin’ started and over quick as possible.” Xander followed Spike up the stairs with duffle in hand. Everything else had already been thrown into the car. Thrown with enough force that Xander slightly worried about the CD collection.
“Hey, I have to put up with Angel,” Xander pointed out.

“True enough,” Spike conceded. “So, any thoughts on where we’re headed?”

Xander waited until Spike had locked the door to their abandoned lair before answering.

“Been thinking of visiting the hell mouth.” Spike looked at him with his confused, head cocked to one side expression for a couple of seconds before shrugging.

“Wherever, pet. One hell mouth coming up. Right after we survive dinner with your mum.”

The End

Book 3

Out of Tune

by

Litgal
Welcome back to Sunnyhell, pet,” Spike said as he drove past the roadside sign.


“So, three ways to kill a Gy’phan,” Spike demanded, and Xander felt his demon circle in his mind, anxious to prove himself.

“Have I mentioned lately how tests and me are like peanut butter and vinegar? I tried that once as a kid, not a good combination,” Xander joked even as he closed the heavy book.

“About every five bloody miles, but considering the types of nasties that settle on the Hellmouth, I need to make sure you can take care of yourself. Won’t risk losing my childe to some random demon.” Spike still smiled every time he said the word 'childe' and Xander felt his own demon practically purr. And really, even his soul loved knowing that their connection went deeper than pet and
master, but the whole childe reference still gave him a bit of the wiggins.

“Okay, considering the things we have done together, calling me your childe is really doing bad things to my psyche.” Xander snorted when his own demon sent up its own unhappy grumblings making it clear that it wanted to be called childe. Xander ignored this inner voice in favor of watching the familiar buildings through the hole he'd scratched in the paint covering the windows of the De Soto.

“So, you havin’ some sort of private conversation over there?” Spike asked as he sent the car around another corner fast enough to make Xander grab for the dash just to keep his balance.

“Just disagreeing over the whole childe issue,” Xander hissed as he shut his eyes for just a second to avoid seeing Spike dart around a semi with the recklessness of an immortal creature. Spike exchanged obscene gestures with the other driver.

"Your demon likes bein’ called a childe,” Spike smugly answered once he had hit a relatively empty stretch of road or at least empty enough there was no one for him
to curse at.

“Yeah, well he didn't grow up with teachers explaining about naughty touches and news reports about pedophilia or would that be incest? Well, sex and children... really not of the good.”

"Bloody hell, you're not exactly some little ankle biter. I may not want you off challenging random demons on the Hellmouth, but you're the fighter who eviscerated Angelus himself."

"I accidentally stuck a stake in his stomach," Xander pointed out dryly.

"Gotta learn how to tell the story better than that, pet," Spike sighed and rolled his eyes. "You're Xander Harris, first and favored childe of William the Bloody, accepted into the line of Aurelius by Angelus the grandchilde of the Master himself. You staked Cassidy, Master of all of LA, you can claim the hospitality of Master Ajani, and you once eviscerated Master Angelus during a fight.” Xander felt the demon that shared his body rise up to the naming, not struggling for control as much as just twisting in near orgasmic pleasure at the sounds of his sire’s approval.
“You keep doing that and we aren’t going to make it to the warehouse,” Xander warned as he could feel his cock respond to his demon’s desire to prove his worth to the sire who so accepted him.

“Havin’ a problem, luv?” Spike snickered, and Xander had no doubt that the evil vampire knew exactly what he was doing. God he hated vampire noses, especially since Spike always managed to sniff him at the most embarrassing times. He hadn’t had so much trouble controlling Xander Jr. since seventh grade when he sat between Cordelia Chase and Suzie Smythe for reading class. He had been caught somewhere between heaven and hell all year, and no wonder he wasn’t any good at reading.

“Depends on how you define a problem. Would you have a problem if I slid down and tasted your cock as you drove?” Xander made himself blush with his words, but he knew better than to back down to Spike. Give Spike an inch, and he would take the whole damn continent, so if he didn’t stand up for himself now, Spike was going to talk dirty to him in the middle of Wal-mart next. Nope, no more public displays of horniness for the Xan-man, especially since lately his horniness had been
accompanied by definite signs of demoniness.

Xander smirked as Spike shifted in his seat. Oh yeah, time to teach his sire a lesson. Xander unbuttoned the first couple of buttons on his silk shirt and pulled the collar down to expose his claim bite which now constantly showed red against his tanned skin.

“No problem, pet, come on over,” Spike invited him even as Spike reached over and turned off the punk music currently blasting through the car speakers.

“I wouldn’t want to distract you from your driving by running my tongue over your balls, feeling your cock brush against my cheek.” This time Xander was rewarded with a groan as Spike reached down and pulled at the denim over his crotch. Of course, Xander had to shift in his own seat to accommodate his increasing tight jeans, but at least he was no worse off than Spike.

“Bloody hell, no distraction at all. I can drive even as I pierce your neck with my fangs, pulling the blood from you so slow that you’ll feel it down to your toes. I can drive as I work my hands into the back of your jeans, exploring your tight...”
“Mercy….uncle…enough,” Xander squealed as his cock made a Herculean effort to break through the denim and stand at attention. He whimpered as he pushed himself up on the seat and tried to adjust himself. Spike snickered his victory, but Xander also noticed that the vampire had slipped a hand down the front of his own jeans to try and find a more comfortable position. “Truce,” Xander offered.

“Truce my arse, I won that round, so don’t give me any ‘truce’ crap.”

“A draw with you slightly in the lead.”

“A bloody outright victory.”

“A negotiated surrender.”

“Unconditional capitulation.”

“Tyrant,” Xander huffed, and Spike only laughed.

“Seems like someone never answered my question, though. No more distractions.” Xander sighed. He wanted to please Spike, but there were so many damn demons.
“Okay, Gy’phon: horned demon with blue skin. Kill it by taking off the horn and stabbing it into the demon, fire, or the ever-popular beheading, and why is it that beheading seems to kill everything?”

“It doesn’t, pet. Pyleans just stick the head right back, Goran’s can regenerate, and beheading a Gy’phan’ll just piss it off. The whole lot of cousins from the G’an family die the same way...the Gy’phans, Gulans, and Gurelians all die by their own horns, fire or drownin’, but beheadin’ is a good guess if ya don’t know what else to do.”

"And we're back to, how about I hide behind you while you rip apart anything that looks at me wrong?" Xander tried his best helpless wide-eyed stare, but the demon part of him circled in distress, angry at the thought of sire seeing him as weak, and Xander really had to agree. He didn't want to be the sidekick any more. "Or, how about we stick to just killing vampires?"

"Oi, where we're going, ya won't be stakin' any of the vampires, not unless we absolutely have to. Soddin' Anointed One has most of the demon community bowin' and cringin' just because of some cock up of a prophesy."
"But if it's prophesy..." Xander pointed out. Angel had explained how the Master of the Aurelius line had chosen his heir, turned a young human who the prophesies said would hold great power and free the Master from his prison under the city. Xander was still trying to get his brain around the idea that demons and vampires had lurked right below his feet while he played with toy cars in the back yard. Even worse, when his parents had fought, he would take a sleeping bag outside and sleep under the stars, and just how stupid had that been?

"Lived with Dru long enough ta know there's prophesy, and then there's prophesy. Like the bit about the Anointed One freein' the Master. Old Bat Face got free and ate his slayer like the prophesy said, but the git couldn't keep her dead. 'Course Angel put the bird in a coma, but she's still breathin'. Then the next soddin' slayer just dusted him. So, ya can't count on prophesy."

"But all these other demons, they're submitting to the Anointed One because of the prophesy."

"Yeah, which only said the boy could free the Master and lead the Aurelius line to destroy their enemies."
"Right, so best to not be an Aurelius enemy. Oh." Xander froze as he realized what that meant. "We're Aurelius."

Spike smirked.

"Well, figure I don't want to take on the pipsqueak until we get the lay of the land. Don't figure on settling down in the same town as the slayer, and I don't bloody well want another vampire war."

"So, we play nice," Xander nodded. His demon still sulked, wanting to take power and lay it at the feet of his sire. Of course, his demon also had little fantasies about dragging screaming virgins to the lair and laying them at sire's feet like a cat offering up little mouse bodies, so Xander really didn't trust his demon instinct all that much.

"Best thing," Spike agreed.

Xander watched the familiar ice cream shop appear and then disappear in his little spot of window. "My bluffing skills are at an all time low here, that being the case, why don’t we just skip the whole dropping in on the in-laws thing? Visits to the in-laws always go wrong, as evidenced by the oh-so-lovely snarkage at my mother’s.”

“You two insulted each other through three courses and a birthday cake.”

“Yeah, and she got in some good ones too. Ballsy lady, your mum.”

“Well I’m sure she’d love hearing how my undead gay lover thinks she has balls, but wait, you already told her that, and as I recall her reaction was less than positive,” Xander pointed out with a disgusted expression.

“Meant it as a compliment,” Spike said with a twist of his mouth that Xander suspected might mean guilt, but Spike felt guilt so rarely, Xander had trouble pinning down what that expression looked like on Spike.

“So, since our in-law record is less than sterling, any chance of skipping it this round?” Xander hoped that he could turn that possible guilt into a bit of manipulation, but Spike turned a suspicious eye to him for so long that Xander started panicking and gesturing toward the front window where the car continued barreling down the street. “Road... driving... watching the road while
driving,” Xander sputtered. With only streaks of clear glass in front, driving wasn't ideal in any conditions, but he definitely didn't want Spike's eyes off the road.

“Not bloody likely. This town has more cemeteries than schools, and more bloody vampires and demons than humans, so since we can't avoid 'em, we visit the court and play good little vamps."

“Stupid vampire rules,” Xander muttered.

“Bloody right, now you know why I avoid the soddin’ courts. Nancy-boy bowin’ and scrapin’ and sucking up to some bat-faced master. Not my bloody idea of a good time, but someone wanted to come and visit his friend.”

"Well, someone was all ready to go run off to China just to get away from Angel," Xander pointed out.

“Can’t believe Angel actually worked with a slayer, bloody unnatural that. Should be eatin’ slayers, not havin’ tea and crumpets with the bints,” Spike complained for the millionth time, and Xander just rolled his eyes.

“Wait…. Why did Angel get away with helping the slayers
if the court is so powerful?” Xander asked as he watched the streets darken as more and more of the streetlights stood broken and useless.

“Angelus was one of the Master’s favorites, at least once the Master got over hatin’ him. Even with the Master dead, the Anointed One wouldn’t go after such an old vamp especially since Angel and the Master seemed to have a bit of a truce of their own.”

“He told you that?” Xander turned to look at Spike surprised, but the vampire had an amused expression on his face.

“Didn’t have to, pet. Angel talks about Buffy goin’ into the lairs alone even though he’d already helped her out plenty of times. He didn't go down in there until after he saw Batface go wandering off. Only one reason for that.”

“Coward,” Xander huffed, and the vampire next to him growled at the same time as the vampire in his head.

“Angel’s a wanker, but cowardice isn’t in the line, luv. Two things ya never call a vamp of your own line: coward and weak.”
“So you can call him a pouf and hairboy and captain gel but not a coward?” Xander demanded skeptically even as he tried to send comforting thoughts to his own distraught demon.

“Bloody hell, yes. Those other things are left from when he was human, that’s Angel I’m insultin’, but whether or not a vamp is a coward or a weakling, that has to do with the strength of the demon.”

“And....” Xander let his voice trail out. His own demon had been just as unhappy with his comment, but he and baby demon didn’t actually have the whole communication thing down yet.

“We aren’t related through our human side, pet. But we’re all part of the Aurelius demon, the old Master’s even more bat-faced sire. So you don’t bloody insult the demon’s strength since we all carry a part of the same demon.”

"But my demon came from Cassidy," Xander protested. His inner demon roared a protest as a flash of Cassidy-hatred rolled through him. "Hypocrite," Xander snapped at his demon considering the thing had crawled at Cassidy's feet.
"Wot?" Spike demanded.

"Sorry, internal fight. But I'm still saying Cassidy demon here, whether he wants to deny it or not," Xander snarled as the demon sent a rage through every cell in his body, making him clench his fists.

"Not even, pet. Your demon is Aurelius. I bloody well chased Cassidy's demon out and shared mine, so you're just as much a part of the line as I am. We're Aurelius demons, and so we don't insult the demon that connects us." Spike insisted with a growl that showed his displeasure. Xander flinched as Baby Aurelius scraped distress down his backbone.

“I know he’s not physically a coward considering he let you play with a flame thrower in the same room with him, which, no offense here, kinda scary. I actually meant that he was an emotional coward for not wanting to face his vampire needs.” Xander defended himself.

“Some days I think the pouf isn’t a vampire anymore,” Spike commented as he pulled the car up to a dark warehouse and parked in a spot where only the light of the half-moon and the distant streetlights faintly
illuminated the abandoned building. "Wanker."

Xander took that as forgiveness. Or at least Spike had moved on to being grumpy about Angel. Xander watched Spike's profile, and part of him wanted to say something supportive, especially since he knew how much it hurt when the person, or vamp, you saw as a father turned out to be a big turd. His own father had written him off, and looking at Spike's tight jaw, Xander wanted to eviscerate Angel again.

As the car rolled to a stop, Xander rolled down his window and checked out his new home... well, at least for as long as the visit lasted. A few windows remained intact with blackened glass set high on the warehouse's metal walls, but most of the glass had been replaced with wood boards and squares of corrugated metal, and he really hoped the inside was nicer. The car eased up to a giant door obviously designed for semi trucks to deliver their loads.

“He just doesn’t want to face the vampirey bits he’s got inside.” Xander finally replied absentmindedly as he looked around at the squat buildings and the trash gathering in the corners and the graffiti and then at his sire who stared at him curiously. “What?” he asked,
wondering if he had a booger on his face or something. He ran a hand over his face just in case.

“Vampirey bits?” Spike asked with a raise of an eyebrow.

“Yeah, like these bits I feel in me. Some I let out like when I needed to ask your forgiveness childe to sire after the whole thing with the me being stupid in the club. Some bits I just ignore, but I don’t see Angel doing anything vampirey-like, so I just think he ignores it all.”

“So you feel things from your vampire inside, things you don’t act on?” Spike reached into the back seat and dug around in one of the bags.

“Uh, yeah. Thought that was kinda obvious.” Xander watched as Spike finally fished out the key and got out. Xander eyed the hood of the car....

Xander sat for a full minute as Spike unchained the huge door and pushed it open, and then he decided to do something that he had always wanted to do. He rolled the window down and then pushed himself up and out the car window.

“What the hell?” Spike turned with a confused
expression.

“Look out ‘cause here I come,” Taking a deep breath, Xander started running at the car, jumping at the last minute so that he butt-slid across the hood. His goal had been to slide to the other side, but he somehow got turned around so that his back was to Spike and his feet still trapped on the hood even as he started falling head first toward the ground. Just when Xander braced to hit, he felt hands at his shoulders scrambling to pull him away from the car so that he could get his legs under him so that he squatted with Spike still holding him under his arms.

“You bloody idiot,” Spike snarled, and Xander looked over with is best wide-eyed expression.

“It worked for Bo Duke...looked really cool when he went sliding over the hood, and I don’t remember ever seeing him fall on his ass, not that I actually fell, and thank you for that.”

“Bo Duke?” Xander felt Spike let him go, but he couldn’t catch his balance before he fell the foot or so to the ground and let his breath out in a gasp. Okay, that hurt. It hurt less than falling on his head would have, but still.
“Hey, not nice. And Bo Duke as in the Duke boys as in Bo and Luke Duke...Dukes of Hazzard. Don’t you have any culture?” Xander asked as he reached under and rubbed his sore butt.

“Never mind me, pet. The only things I know about culture I got from soddin’ Shakespeare and Victorian literature. Musta missed the Duke boys, but if I see them, remind me to eat them for puttin’ those thoughts in your head. Spike held out a hand and pulled Xander to his feet right before popping Xander on the back of the head.

“Hey!” Xander complained. “Just having fun,” he pointed out playfully as he walked into the warehouse leaving Spike to pull the car in. The inside was dark, and without any effort, Xander switched over to his red-tinted demon vision complete with yellow glowy eyes.

The sharp detail of his vision showed him a large room with one wall lined in doorways. He went over and tried the first doorknob...storage. Empty storage, well except for the legions of mice that obviously called this place home. Xander wrinkled his nose in disgust since pulling up demon vision called up demon super-smell too. Behind him, the car pulled into the big open space and
then shut off again as Spike parked. Xander ignored him in favor of continuing his exploration.

“Want the door closed?”

“Yeah, and use the padlock,” Spike said with his butt up in the air and his head down near the carpet in his search for CDs. Xander had a naughty thought that almost sent his demon into apoplexy. In fact, his demon was so scandalized at the idea of taking such liberties with sire’s body that his vision dropped back into the blurry grays of normal human vision.

“Traitor,” Xander whispered to himself as he went to lock the large double doors with the bags still slung over one shoulder. “Don’t tell me you haven’t at least considered it.” He pulled the door closed and padlocked it before slowly working his way blindly back towards the car. Luckily he knew the room was empty except for the car which should be right about….he kept moving forward into the darkness expecting to feel the car at any time….any time at all….

“Ya goin’ somewhere?” Spike voice came from behind him and to the right. Xander turned as he moved slowly in the direction of the voice. “What’s the matter with
your eyes, pet?” Xander now spotted the two yellow beacons that gave away Spike’s location. He adjusted and moved more confidently toward his goal.

“Baby demon got all pissy and took his toys and went home,” Xander said, and he had to smile as he watched Spike’s eyes tilt slightly. God, no wonder they’d freaked out Cordelia in that dark theater...watching vampire eyes floating in the dark was a little creepy.

“Right, well I don’t want you breakin’ your neck so you can just get your demon vision back on line right now, childe of mine,” Spike ordered, and at the word childe, Xander felt his vision shift again. Suddenly Xander could see Spike clearly even if the colors had been washed out in favor of a crystal sharpness that made even a spider web in the farthest corner visible. Spike stood with the remainder of their stuff thrown over his shoulder in a ratty old bag and a handful of CD’s stuff under his arm.

“So, this is home.”

“This is the garage, ya ninny,” Spike said as he headed for one of the doors.

“So, telephone? Television? Playstation?” Xander asked
as he followed Spike into a living area and dropped his own bags next to Spike’s. The room had a stale, sour smell that Xander hoped to god would clear out with some open windows. The windows were high enough to be on the second story of a house, but he would be able to reach them from the scaffolding that ran along the inside walls and across the width of the warehouse at several points.

“Telephone right there, pet.” Spike said, and Xander turned in the direction of the nod.

“God, haven’t you ever heard of cordless?” Xander asked as he walked over to the 1960’s rotary phone that hung on the wall.

“Bloody things die too fast. When you live as long as we do, ya might leave a place empty for thirty years, and ya want to come back to machines that still bloody work.” Xander picked up the handset and listened to the dial tone for a minute before putting it back down.

“Do you really think I’ll live that long?” Xander asked curiously.

“If ya don’t, I’ll turn ya,” Spike said amicably. Xander
froze. Sure, his demon loved the possessiveness, the neediness in those words. The demon wanted to be with his sire forever, but Xander wasn’t so sure he felt the same. Turn him, and he suspected that the demon would be left alone. He felt a twinge as the demon growled his unhappiness at that thought.

“Oi, ya got that look on your face, so spit it out,” Spike insisted as he began opening bags and randomly tossing items on either the floor or on a long table that dominated the space.

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me. Ya have that look like you and the demon aren’t agreein’ on something, so just bloody spit it out.” Spike paused with a handful of CD’s and Xander opened his mouth to protest seconds before his pile of country music got dropped to the floor. Xander stepped forward in shock and horror only to see the cases had safely landed on top of a mountain of his own clothes.

“Just considering the future...the fact that I really don’t want to go soulless and evil and my demon really doesn’t want me leaving the building even though I seem to really annoy him sometimes like most of the time when I
don’t do the things his little vampire brain says I should do." Xander shrugged. "And does he have his own brain or share mine? I wonder if my brain works any better for him than it does for me.”

“Do I take it from that flood of words you’re askin’ me not to turn ya.”

“That’d be it,” Xander agreed as he stared at his own boots.

“Luv,” Xander almost jumped when a hand came down on his arm. “I told ya I won’t turn ya, and I won’t unless we don’t have any other choice, but if ya start aging, I’m not goin’ to just walk away and let ya die.”

“Yeah, I get that.” And Xander did. Dead was bad, and from Spike’s point of view, totally unnecessary. But Xander didn’t really want the whole soulless gig either because he knew full well that the only reason Spike didn’t snack on random civilians was because he didn’t want to drive Xander off the old sanity cliff. If Xander was all demony, no guilt, and no guilt meant no sanity cliff, and two vampires snacking on random civilians. Yeah, so not of the good. Xander realized he had a worried expression when Spike’s hand started making small
soothing circles on his forearm. He looked up.

“Then get this, I want you... the Xander Harris with the
taste in clothes so bad I won’t let him pick his own and a
taste in music that makes me wish I was soddin’ deaf. If it
comes to turnin’ ya, we’ll go to Peaches and try to find a
way to stick your soul on a little tighter than his.” Xander
looked into the yellowed eyes of his lover, his sire, his
teacher, and the current center of his universe and knew
he was telling the truth.

“Right, if you’re insane enough to want the one who....”
Xander stopped when Spike growled and his own demon
squirmed in an effort not to displease master. “Um, I
guess this falls under not insulting the pet, huh?”

“Falls under not insulting the favored childe of William
the Bloody. So, I’ve exceeded my nancy-boy supportive
shite for the evening so are we goin’ to shag or unpack?

“I vote shag,” Xander said as Spike stepped nearer and a
cool hand reached under his shirt to stroke along his
stomach. Xander Jr. immediately joined the party, but
them Xander reached down and put his own hand on
“Not the answer I’m lookin’ for, pet.”

“Yeah, well unless you want me to lie in bed thinking of Willow while you... and I’m just stopping there because I am so not doing, describing, or considering sexual acts while having Willow thoughtage. That’s just wrong. I mean, she can’t even play doctor right; Jesse and I had to finish the game without her.”

“That was a few years back. My guess is that she’s learned to play doctor, especially considering what the cheerleader told us about her wolf.”

“Yeah, well I still think of her as the little freshman who cried because she came in second in the science fair and who brought a stethoscope to play doctor when we were ten. So, Willow and sex should not be thought in the same sentence, and I really need to call her before I move on to the sex part of the evening,” Xander said as he slowly backed away.

Most of the time Spike respected his space, but every once in a while Spike took his independence as a challenge to pin him to the nearest flat surface, not that he minded, but he really did want to call Willow. Maybe Spike could see that he wanted the time with his friend
because his sire just threw him a salacious look before turning back to the table.

“Right, I’ll just be puttin’ my kit up. Bedroom’s through there,” Spike laughed, and Xander realized that he was lucky that Spike was used to insane lovers because giving up shagging time to call someone he hadn’t talked to in years actually did make him a little nuts.

And why was he suddenly afraid of calling? Okay, reason one was that Willow was friends with a vampire slayer, and that wasn’t really of the good considering he was sleeping with a vampire, sleeping with two vampires if you counted the one shoved in his head, but then again Willow had been friends with Angel and had even been supportive through the whole soulless sending the world to hell incident. Besides, this was Willow. How much could have changed in three years? What could go wrong considering they’d been friends for ten years?

Considering that he was standing on a literal Hellmouth, Xander bit his lip and reminded himself to not even think hypothetic questions like that.
Part Two

Xander reached into his pocket and pulled out the number Cordelia had given him. He watched the rotary dialer click counter-clockwise after every number, which gave him just about enough time to start panicking. He'd known Gunn for years, and he couldn't accept Xander. And Willow might date a werewolf, but Xander had his demon groove on more than three nights a month. He almost hung up when the other end started ringing.

“Hello?” a timid voice answered.

“Willow?” Xander asked hesitantly.

“No, just a minute,” offered the voice, and Xander waited.

“Hello?” Willow finally answered, or at least the voice sounded Willowish only deeper, and louder, and distinctly unWillowish.

“Willow?” Xander asked uncertainly.
“Yes.”

“It’s Xander.”

“Xander? Xander Harris? Oh my goddess, Xander Harris. It’s Xander from Jr. High,” Willow practically squealed, and he assumed she was talking to the other person in her room because he really didn’t need reminding. Well, he didn’t need reminding most of the time, and really there wasn’t any way for her to know that he occasionally needed reminding about who he was unless she’d talked to Cordelia. And Cordy had pinky promised not to tell about the whole inner demon thing. And when had Jewish Willow Rosenberg started talking about goddesses? He didn’t think her rabbi would be amused.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he offered when the squeals had died down. He reined in his urge to nervous babble since he had lots of stuff he didn't want to babble about to her, and suddenly he wished they hadn't come to Sunnydale. He wasn't sure he even knew this person.

“Oh goddess, where have you been? I tried to call you back after that fight and your phone was disconnected and the letter I sent got returned and why can’t you just
be on the Internet like normal people, and I so did not mean that to come out as bitchy as that just sounded because I am so happy to hear your voice, and I totally don’t want to make you disappear again.” Xander could hear soft voices in the background. He guessed that the other woman was talking to Willow, probably about the need to breathe.

“Wow, did Willow Rosenberg just say ‘bitch’? Isn’t that against your geek code or something?” Xander asked. “I thought I was the bad boy rebel in the group.”

“You can be any part of the group you want if you want, and I’m not talking well tonight...too many midterms and lattes I think. And how did you get my dorm number? Did you call my parents?” Willow’s voice suddenly took on a brittle edge and Xander wondered what the story was behind that, but considering his own parental history, he understood the desire to keep friends and parents separate. Separate rooms, preferably separate cities, if possible, separate continents. After Spike had responded to his own mother’s none too subtle hints about safe sex with a detailed description of a sexual act, yep, he got the whole separation of friends and parents idea.

“I ran into a certain cheerleader on stakage duty,”
Xander said. He knew that she knew about vampires, but he didn’t know if she knew that he knew, and he really didn’t know if the other woman knew at all.

“You mean stagage as in her big acting career with the audience and the stage?” Willow asked suspiciously.

“Nope, stakage as in wooden pointy things. She’s taken up with Angel, or she’s taken over Angel, I’m not sure which.” Xander’s demon grumbled again in clear dislike for the woman, but Xander had to admire anyone who could so completely terrify full grown men and Master vampires.

“Angel? You know Angel? Wait, Cordelia’s working for Angel?” That was the same old confuzzled Willow voice; Xander could almost see her expression with wide eyes and a confused wrinkle between her eyes. Xander smiled as he found things hadn't changed all that much.

“Hey, two vampire hunters wandering around L.A.: we’re bound to run into each other sooner or later, and how could I forget Cordelia Chase although I might have let it slip that we had the whole ‘I hate Cordelia Chase’ club thing, so you might want to avoid talking to her for a while,” Xander confessed with a short laugh.
“Vampire hunter? Xander? Oh goddess, I’m confused.”

“Um, Willow, do you mean to be using the “v” word with someone else in the room?”

“What? Oh, Tara. It’s fine; she knows all about vampires. Tara and I live together...I mean roommates, like collegy type roommates what with the dorm.” Willow stopped suddenly and Xander swore he could hear her blush. It couldn’t be. Xander waited, unsure what to say in the face of a possible revelation, or not a revelation. Maybe everyone else knew and she was hiding it from him. Or maybe he was just trying to make the whole world gay after his own gay revelation. “Tara helps with the whole slayage thing; she has some magic. Actually, she has a lot of magic.”

“Like with the witchiness?” Xander tried to get his mind around Willow being down with the magic. Yeah, Cordelia had explained about Willow and the whole spell-gone-wrong that turned Angelus loose, but Xander had this image of 14-year-old Willow accidentally reading a spell out loud. Hanging with a witch made her seem, well, even un-Willowish.
"Um, yeah. You know she and I kinda met in the whole wiccan group, and most of the wiccans are more like Catholics only with the 'blessed be' instead of the… well, whatever Catholics say, but you know, into the ceremony. She and I are more into the magic."

"So you do the witchiness, too. Very cool. Now you have someone to practice spells with.” Xander had only meant to be supportive, but the sudden choking on the other end made him worry that he had just said exactly the wrong thing.

“Um, yeah, right. So, where are you calling from?” Xander heard her dismissal and knew that he wasn’t understanding something. He knew the science-nerd Willow, the Willow who had a crush on Rob Lowe and Albert Einstein, the Willow who played doctor with lab tests and stethoscopes. This Willow with her magic and her Tara….he didn’t know this Willow.

“I’m passing through town with a friend, and I thought we might touch base,” Xander offered, suddenly unsure about meeting.

“You’re in Sunnydale? At the hotel?” Willow’s voice back to bouncing.
“Um, actually staying with a friend of a friend kinda thing. We just pulled in and I’m totally exhausted.”

“Oh, so can you meet tomorrow?” Willow asked, and Xander couldn’t take the uncertainty in her voice. Right, no running without making at least one token visit. Then maybe he should consider Spike's suggestion they wander China.

“Of course, that’s why I’m calling you. I thought we might be able to get together after I catch some sleep. Maybe sevenish at the Bronze?” The silence reminded Xander that he didn’t know Willow the way he had because he couldn’t figure out why she was hesitating.

“Can we make it four?” Willow finally asked. Xander glanced toward the bedroom where Spike slept. He hadn’t been out of the lair alone since Spike had totally blown a gasket over his taking on a roomful of vampires. Honestly he hadn’t asked to go because he really didn’t want to hear Spike’s answer. If Spike said ‘no’ then he would have to deal with knowing that he wasn’t allowed out of the lair, and he wasn’t sure what his reaction would be. Realizing that he had let the silence go on too long, Xander tried his best to sound cheerful.
“I’m really tired and I have some work to do around the place...sorta my way of paying rent. Can we make it 5?” Xander knew that he might have to cancel what with 5 still being well before sunset, but maybe he could convince Spike to let him go.

“I’ll meet you out front; it can be so hard to find people inside,” Willow bubbled, but Xander could hear the strain.

“You think I’m a vampire,” Xander said even as the realization hit him.

“I didn’t say that. Xander I would never accuse you, and I really want us to catch up, just two old friends telling each other everything that’s happened in the past few years.” Xander didn’t miss the fact that she wasn’t denying it, just claiming that she would never be so rude as to say it.

Of course he was also kinda leaving out the part where he was part vampire, but really, it’s not like he was going to kill her fish or something. Xander nearly giggled at that story, and no it wasn’t funny. He just couldn’t get over a sadistic Master vampire like Angelus going after fish. Of
course baby Aurelius was a little less amused with his comments on the master of the line, and Xander’s vision wavered between vampire and human.

“Fine, broad daylight it is. Feel free to bring your crucifixes and holy water because I know I keep mine handy. So, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. And Xander?” Willow paused. “I’m really happy to hear from you. I’ve missed you.”

“Me too,” Xander agreed before they both said goodbye. Xander hung up the phone and stood with his hand resting on it. Why had he come here? He couldn’t make things go back to the way they were. He couldn’t get back the three Musketeers: one was dead, one had a baby vampire in him, and the third had grown very suspicious over the years.

Xander slowly turned and started walking back towards the bedroom. His sharp-eyed vision had stabilized was now drawn to a corner where a mouse trusted the darkness in the room to run the length of one wall and then stop and look around. Xander reached the table and picked up a heavy book as he considered the creature. The mouse, utterly secure in the knowledge that no
human could see in the dark turned small eyes towards him, and Xander stood with the book in his hand before he finally put the book back down on the table with a sigh.

He wandered into the bedroom, and Spike lay sprawled face down in the middle of a four-poster bed, and Xander started shedding clothes as he crossed the large room. By the time he pulled the covers down revealing Spike’s body and started climbing in bed, he was naked and fully expected Spike to jump him.

Instead, Spike rolled to one side and reached around his waist, pulling him into an embrace. Xander found himself struggling to hold off tears that didn’t seem to make much sense, and Spike only pulled him closer, wrapping a leg around him.

“It’s stupid; I don’t know why I’m so upset,” Xander finally said as he pushed the tears back to a point that he didn’t have to worry about actually crying.

“It’s alright, pet. You lost the Willow that was yours; she disappeared under this stranger who sounds a mite bit more suspicious.”
“You heard.”

“Yeah, still evil pet. I don’t exactly feel bad about eavesdropping.” Xander would have gotten angry over the lack of privacy, but the fact is that he was just relieved to not have to explain it all.

“So, can I go?” Xander suddenly flashed on being five years old and asking permission to go visit Jesse.

“Yeah, as long as ya stay put until I come and get ya. Don’t want ya wander around the Hellmouth after dark. We’ll go visit the court after you see your friend.”

“Thanks.” Xander tried to keep the frustration out of his voice, but he knew he’d failed miserably when Spike’s arms gave a quick squeeze.

“Oi, what’s got your knickers in a twist, not that you’re wearin’ any knickers, mind you. You look good all knickerless.”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie, pet. Shouldn’t ever lie to your sire.” The arms gave another warning squeeze.
“Right,” Xander answered sarcastically, “like you never lie to Angel?”

“Angel’s not my soddin’ sire; he never did anything a sire does, except maybe make my unlife miserable on those occasions when we met. But enough about Angel, I asked ya a question, pet.” Xander lay in silence and tried to figure out his words before he started babbling and got himself in hot water. When he pissed off Spike, both Spike and his inner demon got all cranky, and having a cranky brainmate was not of the good.

“Okay, don’t take this the way my mother did when I was twelve and said this, but I really am too old to have to ask permission just to go out with friends.”

“We’re on a Hellmouth, luv. Don’t really want you wandering around after dark considering the kind of nasties you could run into.”

“Willow seems to be doing just fine,” Xander replied about two seconds before his brain pointed out that this exact argument hadn’t worked on his mother, either.

“She’s a witch, pet: a witch who works with a slayer.”
“And I’m half vampire.”

“With only half control of your bloody senses. Don’t want you out there when that demon of yours gets angry and stops workin’ for ya. If this were New York, and ya wanted to walk the park at night, I'd give ya a new knife and tell ya not to get the muggers' blood on your shirt, but this is Sunnyhell, pet. Now I’m a good deal older and a hell of a lot cannier than you, so ya won’t go out without tellin’ me where you’re going and ya won’t go outside after dark alone.”

“I’m not that young,” Xander complained.

“Compared to me, ya are. What’s more, you’re my childe.”

“And we're back to the squicky incest thing, so can we please not bring up anything else that leaves me with a lingering need for therapy?”

“Soddin’ human,” Spike guffawed in his ear, and Xander expected the naughty touching to commence. Instead Spike just shifted and pulled him closer before starting to purr. Xander heard the low rumbling sound and let
himself sink into the demon’s contentment as his own purr began in response. Willow could wait, his frustration could wait because as long as he was curled in his sire’s arms, all was well with the world.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander woke to the sound of punk music being blasted out of a tiny radio obviously not up to the task. He winced when a particularly loud, high note made the speaker screech and whine.

“Oh my god, what are you trying to do, kill me?” Xander clutched his ears as he curled up and tried to block out the noise. The volume dropped and Xander opened his eyes to consider his smirking sire.

“Bloody bored waitin’ for you to wake up, haven’t you slept enough yet?” Spike asked.

“This is incontrovertible proof that you are evil,” Xander moaned as he started to roll out of bed.

“Never said I wasn’t pet. So, you ready to train?” Still naked, Xander started pulling doors open in search of a
bathroom. After two closets and another room infested with mice he finally found it. It was a much smaller room than before, but most of the room was taken up by a claw foot bath that was a near replica of the one they’d left in L.A.

“Pee first, train later, and do you have some sort of bath fetish I don’t know about?” Xander asked as he stuck his head around the corner. Spike was dressed in just black jeans, the top button open and straddling a bench as he polished a sword. He looked up with those beautiful blue eyes and snorted. Xander pulled his head back and took his cock in hand in front of the toilet.

“You try growin’ up in a city full of factories during an age when bathin’ wasn't on the agenda for the working classes,” Spike shouted over the sound of the Xander peeing. “No wonder Darla wanted ta hunt in the fancy homes. One time, Dru dragged me down to a poor section of town, trailing this sewin' girl, and I don't know how Dru managed to feed with the stink. Whole sections of London stunk of factory grit and body odor, so I appreciate hot running water thank you very much ya git. So, you ready yet?”

“Still peeing, as you obviously know unless your horrible
music has caused permanent hearing damage.” Xander yelled back. When his bladder finally emptied, he started the water running into the bath as he slipped on the robe that had appeared on the back of the door. Xander had no more than reached the open bathroom door when a movement out of the corner of his eye made him throw himself backwards moments before a heavy object swung through the air inches from his body.

Xander’s bare feet slipped on the floor, and he windmilled his hands trying to regain his balance before catching the edge of the counter. Spike appeared in the doorway with a long wooden staff in his hand and a wicked smile on his face that made his cheekbones stand out in even more sharp lines.

“That the best ya got, pet?” Spike challenged him in a fierce voice.

“Spike?” Xander demanded in a girly squeak. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Um, Spike... huh?” Xander stood in the bathroom with his heart pounding in his ears. His demon vision had fled the minute he saw Spike, but now it flickered in and out making a whole disco ball effect against the white tile. Spike stood leaning against the side of the open door with a hip thrown out casually...
and his bare chest thrown out and the staff held casually in one hand.

“Here’s the deal, pet. You get past me and you can visit your little friend. You lose and you’ll just have to wait until sundown so I can escort ya like a good little fledge.”

Part Three

Xander narrowed his eyes in challenge. “You already said I could go.”

“Yeah, and I’m evil. Don’t have to keep my word, do I?” Spike unexpectedly brought the bottom of the staff up so that Xander made a manly squeak as he danced backwards to avoid a hit on a part of his body he’d grown particularly fond of. Well, if Spike wanted to play, Xander’d play. He’d get his ass kicked, but he’d play.

Xander threw himself forward once the staff hit the olive green linoleum floor. He aimed a quick punch at Spike’s
face: In and out just like Spike had taught him. When Spike pulled back, Xander brought his foot down on the staff hoping to either break the staff or force it out of Spike’s hand. Instead he ended up losing his balance as Spike brought the staff up and threw him to the side. In fact, he barely caught himself on the counter and now his vision had gone all red.

Right. Time to get out of the wet slippery bathroom. Xander threw himself forward so that he and Spike tumbled to the floor of the bedroom in one heap. Xander used his momentum to spring back up onto his feet, just like Spike had taught him, only Spike moved a little faster. By the time he got up, Spike was reaching for him.

Xander scurried to the side, his bare feet slapping across the cold concrete as he dashed out of the bedroom and into the more open dining room. Shit he was cold. Of course running around naked could do that, but he didn’t have too much time to worry about it as heavy boots followed him into the room. He scanned the room for weapons even as he continued fleeing and threw a tall chair behind him without looking.

From the snarled curses, he guessed that he had at least slowed Spike, but it wouldn’t stop him for long. Xander
rounded the table and gave another chair a glance, but it was really too large and heavy for him to use as a weapon.

Pipe. That was more like it. Xander dashed over to the far side of the room and grabbed a three foot length of pipe before turning to face a game faced Spike. Xander’s weapon dipped for a moment in surprise, and before he knew it, Xander found himself hitting the floor with enough force to drive what little air he had in his lungs right out again.

Laying on the floor with his damp skin clammy against the cold concrete, Xander realized two things: he was not so good at taking care of himself and they really needed to buy some area rugs. He panted heavily, but Spike stood over him, pressing the end of his staff into Xander's flesh and looking completely composed. The pipe lay on the ground a couple of feet away, and Xander flinched when he realized he’d dropped his weapon.

“So, guess that means you’ll call your little friend and tell her you’ll be late,” Spike said. Xander glared up.

He expected a smug expression, maybe even a sneer. Instead he saw open relief, the kind his mother got when
she’d showed up at the hospital to find him in one piece after getting jumped by three older kids at school. The kind Alonna got after he tried to save her and nearly ended up vamp food himself. The kind Gunn got when he’d found out Xander was still alive after being missing for a few days. For a moment he considered just laying there, but he hadn’t been willing to give up his life before, and he wasn’t going to do it now.

“Fine you welsher. Big old Indian giver,” Xander pouted as Spike looked down with a raised eyebrow.

“Got any more ethnic groups you’d like to insult then?” Spike asked as he moved the staff to rest on the floor and held out a hand.

“Just the stupid old English,” Xander said as he grabbed the hand and pulled down just as he swept Spike’s legs out from under him with a swift kick. Spike collapsed into a heap on Xander, and Xander pushed the vampire off his own body as he sprang for his own pipe. Spike snarled but hadn’t made it to his feet when Xander landed square on Spike’s back, metal pipe on the back of Spike’s neck.

“Oi, that's cheatin’,” Spike hissed.
“Oh yeah, and I can’t figure out where I learned that,” Xander answered as he pushed the pipe against the back of his master’s neck. His baby demon was now totally withdrawn and whimpering in some corner of his mind, and the warehouse was dim with dust particles floating through pathetic rays of light coming from the few bulbs still working in the overhead lighting. “So, am I going to meet Willow?” Xander asked.

“Yeah, ya are. You earned it,” Spike said, and Xander looked down suspiciously. That seemed just too easy. He hadn’t figured out the angle Spike was playing before he felt a hand at his knee and suddenly he lost his balance as his one leg was pulled toward Spike’s head and Xander had to put his hands palm down on the concrete to keep from putting his face down on it.

The minute he let go of his weapon, he knew he’d lost. Spike slipped out from under him and flipped him as easily as a dead fish and now Xander found himself under Spike, the vampire straddling him and his hands held in a supernaturally strong grip.

“Shit,” Xander swore. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll call Willow.” Xander felt a need to push Spike off and storm out of the
warehouse even though he knew his chance of making it
to the door was somewhere between zero and nada.
Even worse, his demon now sent up distress signals at
the thought of defying sire, and Xander closed his eyes as
he tried to remind himself that he didn’t have to feel
what his demon felt. He had a perfect right to be pissed
as hell at Spike even if he wasn’t strong enough to do
anything about it.

“Pet?”

“I said I’ll call Willow, don’t push it right now Spike.”

“Pet, open your eyes.” Xander had opened his eyes
before he even realized what he was doing.

“What?” Xander asked, his voice sounding brittle and
sharp even to his own ears. Spike stared down at him
and he stared right back for several minutes.

“You can go, but you take a full set of weapons and you
watch your back.” Spike finally said quietly as he sat up.
He now straddled Xander, but at least Xander’s hands
were free so he could push himself up on his elbows.

“What?” he asked in a completely different tone of voice.
Now he was just confused. He could go, he couldn’t go, he could go. God, it was like living with both his parents again.

“But I catch you outside the Bronze after dark and I’ll bloody strip the skin from your back,” Spike said in a far stronger tone, one that promised to carry through on that promise, and oh yes, this was the Spike he knew.

“Right. No wandering the Hellmouth after dark,” Xander agreed. Spike stood and held out his hand again, and this time Xander allowed Spike to help him up.

“Next time you go attacking me, do you think you could let me get dressed first?” Xander complained as he headed for the bedroom and thank god Spike wasn’t into having minions around.

“Need to learn to keep your guard up.”

“Hard to let it down with an insane roommate.” And there goes baby demon. Xander groaned when the demon squirmed even more at being called baby. This was a Hellmouth; certainly they had a psychiatrist who could handle demonic insanity. If not his two favorite demons were about to drive him crazy.
"Right, because you have the corner on sanity," Spike snorted.

"Oh please. I'm about as sane as that guy who made the singing cop show. That was really dumb—who wants to see cops break down and start singing in the middle of arresting the gang members?"

"You... what?" Spike asked, turning to stare.

"Once again, you need to watch more television, Spike."

"Oi, after hearing you talk, I'm thinking I need to cut you off."

"Oh my god, you really are turning into my mother," Xander complained as he started grabbing clothes out of the closet. "And really, that statement is the biggest ew yet. No thinking mother thoughts when naked," Xander shivered.

"Thought ya wanted to avoid Willow thoughts when naked, pet."

"Stop, stop, stop. Willow, Mother, and Barney are all off
the list of approved naked talk."

"Barney?" Spike asked, settling in on the bed as Xander pulled on black jeans.

"Only half dressed here, no non-approved naked talk." Xander jumped a little to get the jeans settled in place. Really he needed to either convince Spike to buy a larger size or lose weight. Spike might look good in jeans this tight, but he really didn't think the look did much on him, well much in the looking-good way. It definitely did a lot in the endangering his future chances of having children. Xander zipped the pants up and then tugged at the crotch to try and give Xander Jr. enough room to avoid permanent damage.

Xander glanced up, and lost his breath as Xander Jr. grew to a size not possible in the tight jeans. Spike lay naked on the bed with one leg bent and a hand idly playing with his balls. His nose flared and then he smirked, and Xander cursed vampire noses that made his lust even more embarrassing than it had been in eleventh grade when he got a stiffy every time Mrs. Reynolds had walked by him in her miniskirt. He'd spent most of math class with his book over his lap, but with Spike, books didn't exactly help.
"Sure you want to leave? Could just wait until dark and have a few hours to ourselves, pet," Spike offered. Spike’s face morphed into something approximating innocent and cheery, but Xander just laughed.

“Doesn’t work on me, I know full well you use that expression when you’re killing demons, so it’s a little less than comforting.”

"Let you take the driver's seat for a bit then. Let you play with sire."

Xander could feel his demon surge forward at the suggestion, and he closed his eyes as he had a little private war over who got custody of Xander Jr. and the rest of the limbs. Earlier, Xander's impromptu admiration for Spike's ass had sent baby Aurelius into shock, but with sire offering, the demon just wanted to make sire feel good... please sire. Xander struggled as he fought back with his need to see Willow. He needed to be allowed out of the lair, and that meant being able to walk down the street without Spike or some bouncer Spike had intimidated two feet away.

"Spike, you're killing me here. I made plans with Willow,
and I'm going to go meet her, but if you don't stop doing that, Xander Jr. is going to break, and then you won't have your favorite toy to play with."

"Havin' a problem, pet?" Xander cracked open one eye and Spike's hand had moved up to the shaft of his cock. Xander groaned.

"Nothing some ice and a stake wouldn't cure," Xander quipped. The surge of panic and fear that rolled through him made him put out a hand to brace himself on the door jam as he tried to not fall to his knees. Before he could catch his breath, strong hands braced him, Spike's arm sliding around his waist and taking his weight.

"Maybe you'd best stay in, luv, not lookin' so good."

"I'd look better if my silly sire wouldn't tease me into having every blood cell in my body abandon my brain," Xander pointed out as he felt his heart slowly regain its steady beat. "My brain struggles enough without the sudden blood loss when Xander Jr. hijacks the stuff at the pass."

"Let's just get you on the bed," Spike half carried, half guided, and Xander let himself be settled on the bed as
he struggled to blink the world into focus.

"I'm still going," he complained.

"If ya can walk," Spike said sarcastically, but Xander felt cool hands brush the curls back out of his face as his body slowly settled into something that felt pretty close to normal, or at least as normal as he got these days.

"Oh, I'll walk. This is Willow we're talking about... the girl who I shared crayons with, the girl whose Barbies I stole, the one who used to give me the cookie out of her lunch. When things got weird over the phone, I thought she..." Xander stopped, trying to figure out a way to not sound too pathetic. "I just need to know she's still a friend," Xander finally whispered. Spike's hands stopped. Without answering, Spike went over to the closet and pulled out a shirt before handing it to him.

"Pet, ya have to understand something," Spike said seriously. Xander looked up from the deep green silk to the blue eyes of his lover. "If she hurts ya, I won't treat her any different from anyone else. Her bein' friends with the slayer makes things a little awkward, but if somethin' gets out of hand, you make sure that the witches and the slayer know what would happen if it came down to a
fight."

Xander froze, his arm half in the shirt as the words sunk in. "Spike," he said softly.

"No," Spike held up his hand. "Promise me if somethin' happens, if the slayer shows up with a wild hair up her arse, you remember that your life means something, and you make sure they know the price of lettin' you get hurt."

"You think it's a trap," Xander said softly.

"I think I've taken down my share of slayers. If Angel called—"

"He wouldn't do that," Xander hurried to say as he pulled the shirt on and started buttoning.

"Not ta get me staked, but I can see the wanker calling them just to let them know I'm in town and that he and I have a truce. But if he's talked to the slayer or the watcher, I'm not so sure they're going to want a truce."

"And you think they'd use me as bait." Xander hated the thought of Willow doing that to him, but even over the
phone he could feel the changes. In all honesty, he didn't know her any more.

"If they grab you, just sit tight," Spike said seriously, and Xander could feel a knot in his stomach. "Not going to kill your little friend or do somethin' to make the Pouf's hair fall out," Spike promised as he reached out and played with a curl. "And I don't want you doin' anything to make things turn rough. If things go pear-shaped, you just nod and go along, and I'll get Peaches to sort it out."

"You'd call Angel?" Xander said as he looked up in surprise.

"To keep my childe safe, I'd even call Darla."

"You're only saying that because she's dust," Xander tried joking, but Spike didn't laugh, and Xander fell quiet in the deep silence. "Right, if I get taken as a hostage, be a good little hostage and wait for Angel," Xander nodded. "And suddenly I'm wondering why you're letting me go." Xander glanced up at Spike in confusion. "I mean, you'd walk me to work at Safari and deliver me to Carlos for babysitting."

"Different then, wasn't it?"
"Um, no."

Spike sighed as sat on the bed, his hand going to Xander's knee. "Back then, thought you were a pet, thought ya had a bit of demon in ya."

"And now you know I have a full demon for a brainmate."

"Well, yeah. You're a childe, got ta let you fight some of your own battles. But," Spike flashed into gameface and slipped a hand behind Xander's neck. "Ya keep your fightin' to just talking or I will be showing ya how cranky your sire can get."

Xander started laughing softly. "God, Spike, you're starting to sound like me. But I'll keep the fighting to talking, scout's honor."

"Right, get your arse in gear then, need ta unpack and accidentally drop your soddin' CD's into the sewers."

"Uh-huh," Xander nodded disbelievingly. "I'll see you after dark." He ignored Spike's threats against his country music greats as he stood up and grabbed his boots. Once he'd slipped those on, he added the various weapons
that went everywhere with him now. Taking one last look at Spike who sat on the bed watching with yellow eyes, Xander turned and headed for the door. For the first time, he was going to be out there without a keeper two feet away. He just really, really hoped Spike was wrong about Willow, because otherwise Spike might not ever let him out of the lair alone again. Well, that and he would really be hurt that the girl who'd shared his crayons vamp-napped him.

Part Four

Spike slipped out of the sewers into the deep shade of the shadow behind the Bronze. A younger vampire growled briefly, and he flashed a bit of fang to shut the wanker up as he used a rag from one of his pockets to wipe some muck off his sleeve. A huge part of him wanted to charge into the club and grab his childe, but Spike clenched his teeth and forced himself to calmly leap to the first landing of the fire escape before climbing up the rattling metal ladder.
A vampire childe stayed at his sire's side for a decade or more, but Xander had human bits that Spike was a little too fond of, and those human bits meant he had to give his boy some room. Pushing in an upper window, Spike ignored the strange looks a few people gave him as he straightened his coat and wandered into the dark club.

Music throbbed through his bones, and a spidery feeling crawling up his back made him snarl at a couple of hunting vamps, warning them that the Big Bad wouldn't take any shite. For a second, a male held his gaze before lowering his eyes to the floor and a small blonde girl ducked her head and growled back before heading for the window Spike had just crawled in. Great. They really had to make nice with the Anointed One now that he'd been seen.

Another day, Spike might have followed the disrespectful female either to drain her for annoying him with her feeble challenge or to fuck her senselessly happy. Now he focused on the main floor below him, searching the dark corners he knew his childe would instinctively seek. When the tightening in his gut warned him of a slayer, Spike gripped the metal rail just to keep himself from vamping out and charging through the crowd toward his
Xander who sat at a table in the middle of the room.

Three women sat with him, and Spike took only a second to identify the dark haired woman who kept looking around with sharp eyes. The slayer. Spike could feel the metal bend under his hands. Right. Pouf had warned him that the witch was tight with the slayer, so Spike had known she might turn up. Of course, that didn't make him any less homicidal at the sight of the slayer near his childe, but he did manage to keep himself from ripping the bint's neck out as he concentrated on the conversation.

"... looked about ninety and I raised my stake, but just then I started coughing and the stake slipped so that when the point hit the vamp's coat, the stake actually flew out of my hand and back behind me," Xander shrugged and made little self-deprecating noises. Spike rolled his eyes at Xander telling that particular story when the boy had dozens of others where he'd saved the day. 'Course, he did want to give the human side more chance to come forward, and Spike was definitely hearing the human side of Xander right now.

"First rule of slayin', hold on to the stake," the slayer, Faith, laughed. Spike growled and a goth girl who'd been
sizing him up started sliding back away.

"Oh goddess, you could have been killed," the red-haired one gasped, and Spike identified the voice as Willow.

"Nah, Gunn and the guys were there," Xander shrugged, and Spike watched as the boy picked up a peanut and pulled the shell open with a thumbnail. Even from here, Spike could see the distress.

"Thought the big-A said you hung with a hunter named William," Faith said, her eyes now focused on Xander.

He shrugged. "Gunn and me... we kinda had a falling out. Like off a cliff without a parachute falling out. Or if we had a parachute, one of us forgot to pull the ripcord, and I'm thinking I've run out of steam with this particular metaphor."

"Steamage gone," Willow agreed.

"Hey, it's five-by-five. Those things happen," Faith reassured him, and Spike consciously loosened his grip on the guard rail. Faith shrugged and put out a hand that barely touched Xander's arm. Spike watched as Xander flinched away, but Faith didn't seem to notice. "If you
want to hunt with us, you're more than welcome, but you better not try hunting the Hellmouth on your own."

"Trust me, solo hunting is not in the future. William is a little..." Xander struggled to find a word, "overprotective," he finally settled on.

"Well, duh," Willow said as she laid her hand on his arm. "Vampire hunting is dangerous, big with the biting and bleeding and dying, and overprotective is good."

"Even for big, bad witchy girls? So, do you twitch your noses? Or, hey, I would really love to see the whole broomstick trick," Xander teased.

"Xander," Willow complained with a mock punch that sent Spike to the top of the staircase. But then she turned away, silent. Faith stared at the table, and the blonde just kept fiddling with her fingers. Despite the loud music and various conversations, Spike could hear the silence over that table.

"Willow doesn't do much m-magic," the blonde whispered. Spike tilted his head. Angel had explained how Willow re-souled him, a feat that sent tendrils of fear down Spike's backbone and suggested the little
witch had access to some big mojo, which added to little fear feet running up and down his backbone.

Spike turned his back to the table and cracked his back as he tried to force down the fear for both his own soulless and undusty state and for his childe. Normally, his reaction to fear was to kill, but he'd spent enough time with insane lovers. Besides, the human soul had chosen him, fought for him, even when the demon in him lusted after Cassidy. Spike smiled at the thought of someone fighting so hard for him, and the goth girl from earlier eyed him curiously from across the dark room. He ignored her as he concentrated on the conversation from below.

"I'm thinking I just opened mouth and inserted both my feet and possibly the foot of some random passer-byer who must be wondering where his foot is," Xander babbled.

"Nah, 'Lo just keeps it close to the vest. She don't want the world knowing just how fine her witchy self is."

Another silence fell, and Spike lowered his head and gave a wicked smile that made the goth girl slide closer. Her white hair had black tips, and dark eye makeup circled
her eyes. Spike let the tip of his tongue appear from between his lips as he played with his prey. He wouldn't make a kill this close to a slayer, but at least the hunt satisfied his need to do something. Something other than charge down the steps and rip Xander away from the humans who...

Spike paused even in his own thoughts. Truth was, they were pulling out the human, babbling Xander who Spike feared he was losing. The goth girl shimmied her body, making her long black skirt slit up to her privates swirl, and the silver beads at her waist tinkle. Absent-mindedly luring the prey, Spike rippled his own body even as he listened to the conversation.

"I just mainly stick to the wicca with the non-magical type blessings. Sometimes I might do a simple spell with Tara or Giles, but—" Willow stopped. The noise of the club pressed in against their silence.

"And hey, how about those Oakland Chargers?" Xander asked with obviously false enthusiasm.

"Raiders," Faith said.

"What? Where?" Xander's voice had a hint of panic that
made Spike spin around and search the floor for danger.

"Oakland Raiders. Hey, look, we don't need to get so strung out here. 'Lo just gets all weird and guilt-ridden about the magics. We all have our issues. I know I do this weird chicken dance when I get drunk, so let's just avoid the subjects of magic and chickens," the Slayer suggested sharply.

"Willow, I didn't mean,"

"No, Xander, it's okay. Let's not get all weird, and even though Faith is right about the disturbing drunk chicken dancing, I'm okay with the magic. I just know that I can't really do the big spells."

"Two words. De. Nile," Faith insisted, and silence fell again. Spike felt a warm hand run up the back of his coat, and he stood still as the prey stalked him.

"Has Willow told you the zoo story?" the third girl broke in.

"Zoos. I like zoos. I like the monkeys at the zoos, even if they do have a bad habit of throwing their own poo. Poo-throwage can provide some quality entertainment as
long as I'm out of firing range," Xander quickly agreed.

"This is really embarrassing," Willow insisted, and even from his spot on the balcony, Spike could still see her blush. "There was this whole field trip, and Wendell and I saw some of the bullies chase this kid into the hyena house, so we went in there to play savior, and yeah, me and saving people is just not a good combination, because Wendell and I got zapped with these hyena spirits that made us dress really bad and so some serious therapy-worthy things."

"Wendell? Spider geek Wendell?" Xander demanded. "God, you had a crush on him in second grade when he did the book report on that huge book with no pictures."

"You remember that? Of course, I had an even bigger crush on you after you let Larry beat you up instead of letting me give him my lunch money."

Now Spike could see Xander blush. A heat gathered in Spike's stomach that had nothing to do with the warm hands caressing his back. The room tilted into the sharp edged vision of the demon, and he concentrated on Xander. If the girl made one move on his childe, Spike was dragging Xander to Latvia.
"That was a long time ago," he whispered. Spike watched as Willow nodded and reached out her hand for the third girl, the blonde, curling their fingers together.

Another awkward silence left everyone but Faith staring at the table. Spike forced his demon back under when her wary gaze traveled the crowds and the balconies. Spike turned and looked at his admirer, the way her long neck curved into a tiny face that would crack if Spike grabbed it. His demon sent up images of pulling her body to his and sinking his fangs so deeply into the flesh that skin popped and blood gushed. Despite the thrill of pleasure he took from just the fantasy, Spike slipped a hand around the prey's waist and avoided ripping and breaking her.

"So, when are we going to meet this William of yours?" Spike started moving to the music, swaying his body as he pulled the goth girl closer. The girl's arms wrapped around his arms, and Spike let his body continue on the familiar seductive hunt without actually paying the bint in his arms much actual attention.

"Um, well, I don't really, he's really busy—really, really busy with, um, stuff," Xander babbled. Spike let his eyes
fall shut in frustration. Well, he wanted the human, and he'd just gotten the human side of Xander. If the girls weren't suspicious before, they'd have to be idiots to not see through that choice bit of blather.

"Xander?" Willow asked.

"It's just, hey, how about those Oakland Raiders?" he babbled.

"Not that I mind some sports talk, since any excuse for guys to slap each other on the ass is five-by-five with me, but why do I get the feeling you're hiding something?" Spike let his head rest on the goth-girl's shoulder as he tensed for a possible fight. Takin' out the slayer before making nice with the court would put certain people in a paddy, but he'd deal with that later... when he had Xander chained in the lair and the door cemented shut.

"Well, it's just.... Okay, honestly?" Xander paused, and Spike edged toward the top of the stairs, the girl's body still plastered to his own as they writhed in tandem. "My mom was sorta not okay with the gay thing, either that, or she was not okay with the S-William thing. Of course, he did tell Mom that she'd raised one hell of a pushy little bastard, so that might not have gotten them off on
the right foot. And then her with the whole suggestion that he looked like one of those sad little boys who dressed up to look like their favorite rock star. Yeah, not of the good. So, any chance we can skip a repeat because William's a little hard to get to know, and he'd insult you, and you'd insult him back, and then there would be hard feelings and possibly hard concrete and concussions, and I'd rather skip that part."

Xander stopped to catch his breath, and Spike nearly laughed as he pulled the goth girl's body close with a hand at the small of her back. She gasped and smelled of pheromones so strongly that Spike was tempted to sneak in for a quick mouthful of blood.

"Hey, if you like man-meat, I got no problems, well, not unless you go humping on some guy I'm eyeing up." 

"And I'm thinking 'no' on so many levels, the first being 'ew,' and the second being that William is the jealous sort," Xander hurried to promise the slayer, and Spike jerked the girl to him harder as he felt pride at his boy's ability to talk his way out of a meeting.

"Right, so I've got to go hunt down some vamps. Feelin' lucky tonight," Faith said, and Spike twirled his dance
partner so he could watch over the girl's shoulder as Faith stood up.

She had all the right curves for a slayer, larger and more powerful looking than the first slayer he took, but her body had that same cat-like quality. Spike felt a desire to throw himself against her, to prove himself by drinking her blood and feeling her heart stutter to a stop under his hands. He thought of having his childe see his strength, and Spike shook himself free of the fantasy. Xander wouldn't appreciate that sort of display of strength, so Spike pushed the goth girl away even as his demon roared for her blood.

"Go play somewhere else, luv, and be more careful about who ya play with," he suggested with a shove.

"Hey, what's your problem?" she demanded, her hands on her hips and her shrill voice carrying far enough to catch the attention of several people around them.

"Got AIDS, now don't I? Shouldn't be so quick with the invite, luv," Spike said as he walked past her. The girl stood frozen in place, her heart pounding heavily as Spike started down the stairs. Faith had reached the door, disappearing out into the night despite the fact she
had plenty of prey in the club. She was young enough that she didn't know her own body, couldn't feel the tingle of enemy crawlin' under her skin. Either that, or there were so many damn demons around, she got used to the feeling.

"Pet," Spike said as he walked up behind Xander.

"Hey," Xander said, his whole face shifting into a wide smile, and Spike smiled back, wondering if in his entire unlife anyone ever felt such happiness at seeing him. 'Course other masters usually made childer long before a century, so Spike supposed his own loneliness came in part from his reluctance to take them for himself.

"Lonely?" Spike asked playfully as he came up to the side of Xander's chair.

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "William, this is Willow and Tara. Guys, this is William." Spike nodded at the girls even as he cursed the name. William had been weak, and Spike hated even the reminder of that part of his life.

"Hey," Willow said with a shy smile, and Spike gave her his best grin. She blushed and tightened her fingers around her girlfriend's hand.
"Tara, pleasure ta meet you," Spike offered in his most charming voice, the one that lured prey to his fangs. She looked at him for several seconds, ducking her head and looking up through her bangs before offering a shy smile back.

"Pet, got people to see and places ta go tonight."

"Um, if you're planning on h-u-n-t-i-n-g," Willow spelled out the word in hushed tones, "it's not really safe around here." Spike stared at her blankly for a moment, not even sure how to respond.

"Been k-i-l-l-i-n-g for a long time now, luv. Won't get into any trouble big enough to threaten Xander," Spike promised in the same hushed voice. Willow blushed, and Xander gave him a punch on the leg.

"No making fun of the friend," Xander hissed. Spike looked down, blinking for a second. Demons were much simpler to understand than humans, and he found himself having to sort through his human memories of being made fun of in order to translate Xander's comment.
"Not makin' fun of ya," Spike promised Willow. "Just trying to, you know, not brass you off the way I did his mum."

"His mom got frustrated kinda easy," Willow nodded, and Spike understood that as forgiveness.

"So, ya ready, pet?" he asked.

"Willow, I'm really glad we got to talk."

"Don't you have a phone number or an email address, email is really everywhere these days, and if you had an address you could check it from anywhere." Willow reached over and grabbed Xander's hand, holding on as Xander stood. When Xander turned large dark eyes to him, Spike felt his own determination to pull his childe away start to fade.

"We aren't leaving town right away, so maybe you could show Xander how ta set one up later?" Spike suggested. Willow immediately bounced in her seat, and through his hand on Xander's arm, Spike could feel a similar reaction.

"So then we'll see each other and I'll get the email and no more disappearing acts," Xander promised.
"Right and good. We still have things to do, so say goodbye before we're so late someone comes looking for us," Spike insisted as he pulled on Xander's arm. Xander babbled his farewells, and Spike headed for the door with his childe in tow. Instead of watching the boy talk to himself or fall into the silences where he could practically see the soul and demon fight for control, Spike watched a very human Xander babble about all the things that had happened in Sunnydale since he'd left.

As they walked the dark street, Spike watched humans stroll by clumps of vampires standing at the mouths of alleys and other human-looking demons walking in groups that stalked the street with more purpose than Spike really liked seeing. Demons normally did their own thing, each fighting for a piece of territory or food or resources. Minions might cluster up to sleep, but they hunted alone or in pairs.

"Hey, I'm trying to tell you about a mummy who came to life and tried to eat Wendell," Xander said, and Spike shook his head and pulled Xander closer to his side. A vampire leaning on a streetlamp tilted his head and growled.
"Pet, you notice anythin'?" Spike asked.

"Um, either Baby Aurelius has indigestion, or there are way too many vamps around. And I'm betting it's not the indigestion."

"With a slayer in town, this isn't bloody right," Spike swore softly as they passed another clump of four vampires who wore respectable enough clothes to pass for humans. "Slayer or no slayer, they shouldn't be actin' like this," Spike snarled softly as a pair of lovesick humans wandered down the street without being bothered.

"Um, not to complain or anything, but shouldn't someone be eating them, not that eating is good, because it's not. Well, eating is good, but eating people is... stopping now," Xander finished. Spike just shook his head.

"Pet, vamps don't put off feeding unless something bigger and badder makes 'em."

"No offense Spike, but I've seen Gunn take down enough fledges that I'm not impressed by bigger and badder than a fledge."
"How about somethin' bigger and badder than all of 'em together?" Spike asked with a quirk of his eyebrow. That made his childe shut up and look just a little worried. "So, we're goin' to go to the Aurelius court and see if big and bad is sitting on the throne or if we have something new creeping around the tunnels of Sunnyhell." Spike tightened his hold on Xander, and while normally Xander would roll his eyes or have a moment of resistance, this time he moved closer without complaint.

An Ethros demon wandered by with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled down low over his grey skin, and Spike shifted so that he would be between Xander and the threat. The Ethros looked up briefly, nodded and then ducked his head back down. Oh something definitely smelled rotten in the state of Sunnyhell.

Part Five

By the time Spike and Xander reached the crypt with the hidden entrance to the Aurelius tunnels, a dozen minions trailed them, not even trying to hide their presence.

"Look. Dandelions. Did you know dandelions can have roots up to ten feet long?" Xander asked. Spike stopped and looked at his childe in confusion. Xander's brown
eyes focused on the ground, and when Spike followed the gaze, a yellow mop-head flower stuck up from one of the graves.

"Pet?" Spike asked. He watched the various trailing minions scatter and lean against headstones and random trees. Not exactly a subtle lot, but then old Bat Face had always picked losers to turn, and the Hellmouth stunk of his scabby minions. After all, Batface had picked Darla, and that spoke volumes about the wanker's taste.

"I'm thinking this is not good in a Titanic or Custer's Last Stand kinda way. I'm going to say something monumentally stupid as opposed to just normal Xander levels of stupidity." Xander stared at his thumb for a moment before starting to chew a hangnail.

"Oi, just stay by my side and keep your gob closed," Spike said as he turned back toward the crypt. Xander grabbed Spike's arm and stopped him.

"Okay, you tried your best with my mom, and look how well that did not turn out. She barely kept herself from stabbing you to death with the cake server. It was like watching boy scouts build a bonfire in the middle of the Ice Capades and wondering which ice-skating cartoon
Xander stopped to take a breath and Spike reached out, curling his hand around the back of Xander's head and pulling him close. Never before had Spike seen such open distress in those brown eyes. Hell, the boy's heart hadn't pounded so fast when Spike had first dragged him off the street in L.A.

"Pet," Spike kept his voice soft, both to calm Xander and to avoid the eavesdropping minions that circled. Spike used his hold on Xander's neck and his hip to herd Xander into the crypt over the entrance to the tunnels. Silently, Xander's body yielded, and that silence worried Spike more than all the babbling in the world.

Seeking some privacy from the minions still waiting outside, Spike urged Xander toward one of the two sarcophagi in the shadows. Under his hands, Xander's skin felt warm, and the smell of fear made Spike growl at nothing. Xander jumped, and the movement seemed to shake loose his words.

"I'm so going to fuck this up, only I think they're going to have something deadlier than my mother's cake server," Xander admitted in a strained whisper.
"Bloody hell, pet. You've gone up against whole lairs and courts and Master Angelus, what's got your knickers in a twist?" Spike could feel Xander nearly vibrate with manic energy, and he held the boy closer, slipping his second arm around Xander's waist and using his strength to hold Xander still as he leaned in, trapping Xander against the stone.

"Not as your childe, I haven't," Xander muttered, his words muffled as Xander buried his face in Spike's shoulder.

Spike pulled back and held Xander's shoulders, keeping him at arm's length. Despite the darkness, Xander's eyes remained large and brown, without even a trace of the demon's yellow. But obviously the demon was stirring up something that Xander couldn't even talk about without bloody idiotic comments about dandelions.

"Pet, how are ya feeling right now?" Spike asked softly. "Nervous?"

"Well, duh. Big with the nervousness which was the whole point of the Ice Capades metaphor with the fire and the melting ice and the potential for drowning ice-
skating plushies, and I really think being around Willow is bad for my babble gene." Xander bit his lower lip.

"Pet, I'm not announcin' ya to the court." Spike watched the fear shake out of Xander with an exaggerated shiver. The boy was right to be nervous, or rather the boy's demon was. If the Annoyin' One threw around his power like Angel said he did, the boy-king would want a way to disgrace Spike. Spike definitely didn't want his childe—his souled, breathing, warm childe—getting in the middle of that.

"Not announcing?" Xander asked, but even in his confusion, his heart rate slowed and his breathing evened out. Spike tightened his grip, his fingers slipping under Xander's shirt and dancing over the warm skin as Spike felt the panic and confusion fade. Now the boy subtly writhed as his body reacted to the familiar fingers. Smiling, Spike scented the vulnerable neck, opening his mouth to taste the musk of lust. After placing a small kiss over the red claim mark, Spike slowly traced the oval mark with his tongue, holding even tighter when Xander groaned and twisted in need.

As much as Spike wished he could toss Xander up on the sarcophagus and take his childe over and over until the
warm body lay sated and limp under him, he had to deal with the court and Xander's own insecurities about the court.

"Remember how I said we all carried part of the same demon?" Spike whispered quickly. They didn't have much time. Xander relaxed in the confines of Spike's embrace, his body fitting into Spike's curves so their bodies pressed close. He nodded, and Spike continued. "If we want our demon strong, we can't let little bits of it get corrupted with weakness. Minions, now they're just cannon-fodder, not much more than human pets, and they don't bloody count for piss-all. But childer and masters of a line have ta be strong. And if they aren't strong, the others will cut them off before they can corrupt the whole bloody line."

"They're killed," Xander's voice carried no emotion and the body went still. Spike inched back to consider his childe. Now the eyes that watched him were all yellow, their black pupils focused on Spike without revealing anything. In fact, even the lust scent of earlier had disappeared into nothing.

"You think they'd kill me." Even though Xander's voice was barely louder than a breath, Spike could hear each
painfully slow syllable, spoken as though Xander were sounding out unfamiliar words.

Spike knew exactly what Xander thought, and he swore a silent oath to all the gods of evil vampires that one day he'd eat Xander's wanker of a father for making the boy so quick to assume the worst. He just had to deal with his childe first.

Spike captured the back of Xander's head, holding him in place while he leaned forward and stole a kiss. For a second, Xander stood stiff, and then he sighed, his lips opening so that Spike could take what he wanted. Xander tasted of sweetness and musk, and Spike nipped at a soft lip before releasing Xander's mouth. Now Xander had a slightly dopy expression, his eyes brown with yellow bits bobbing to the surface and then sinking again so fast that Xander's eyes seemed to almost shimmer.

"You're the first and favored childe of William the Bloody, slayer of soddin' slayers. You're the one who saved my arse from Cassidy, and ya refused to submit to either that arse wipe or even to Peaches. There's not a weak bone in your body and ya need to get that through your head before I bloody carve it into your back," he threatened. Spike could feel Xander's muscles flex and
tremble in response, the musk returning to his scent.

"Sire," Xander breathed.

"Now, what do I always say 'bout the enemy?"

"Kill them before they kill me?" Xander answered uncertainly.

"Well, yeah," Spike admitted. "But also, ya never let them see enough of the truth that they can figure ya out."

"Like a secret weapon?" Immediately the yellow flecks disappeared as the demon retreated, hiding inside Xander's warm, living body. "But wait, aren't these vamps like family?" Xander asked.

"Oh, pet, no worse enemies in the world than your own family."

Xander's expression turned sour, as if he'd bitten into chocolate cake only to find spinach. "No joke." He paused for a second. "So, do I have to play good little pet?" The expression on his face showed both his disgust and his willingness to play the part.
"Bloody hell no," Spike quickly assured him as he turned to the hidden entrance to the tunnels. "You walk by my side, and cover my back. Let them think whatever they bloody well want to."

A quick pull on a cover revealed the mouth of the tunnel. When Spike ducked down into the tunnel, a warm hand found his back, resting there. Glancing over his shoulder, Spike saw Xander's blind eyes wandering the darkness even as he stepped confidently forward, relying on Spike's guidance. The court really might deny Xander's claim to the Aurelius line and even might want the boy dead, but Spike would rip every one of these court-bound vamps limb from limb before he'd give up his childe.

Turning back, Spike headed into the dark with Xander's warm hand on his back and Xander's heartbeat echoing off the brick walls.

After traveling down far enough that beads of moisture gathered on the stone, the tunnel widened into the cavern Spike vaguely remembered from the one time Darla had dragged him here. When she'd publicly turned her back on him and Dru, denying him acceptance into
the clan as a full childe, Spike knew he had to escape the bitch or wake up to a stake in the back.

Spike slowed down and slid his hand around Xander's arm as they stepped into the dimly lit cavern populated with dozens of demons, and not all of them vampires. Now this really wasn't kosher. Way he remembered it, old Bat Face only let clan in the lair, and Spike had learned on the end of Angelus' whip that ya kept a lair secret from anyone outside the blood.

But now, two Lakshu demons, with their yellow skin and dinosaur-like ridge running up their bald heads, leaned against a far wall and a small cluster of B'lasha crouched over some sort of game... either that or they were crouching over the remains of some previous dinner, he couldn't tell which. Their heads crowded together so closely that their stubby horns almost touched. Three zombies even leaned against another entrance to the chamber, their dead flesh making the air smell heavy and oily. The normal vamps he expected hovered in twos and threes, their status determined by how far from the raised throne they stood.

"Spike." An old vampire growled his name without any title. Spike slowly turned toward the throne with the boy
king and the old one standing behind. The Anointed One sat on Bat Face's seat, his angelic face watching curiously, and the older body guard stepped forward, cutting off Spike's view of the boy. With a snort of disgust at the gesture, Spike strode into the chamber, his hands pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

"You're the one sired by the seer," the boy said in a soft voice, and his body guard, a vamp with dark hair and a long horse-like face, stepped to the side even as he continued to glare at Spike. Spike had an overwhelming desire to just step forward and snap the tiny vampire's neck. He could probably control the other vampires, at least after he killed the old one playing body guard; however, he couldn't predict how the other demons might react.

A Mohra with his forehead jewel shining in the dark waited on the far side of the chamber. Two more Ethros, who both looked exactly like the one Spike had seen on the street, watched with their eyes shining out from under their hoods. The B'lasha shifted nervously, their pointed ears twitching and rotating like aggravated cats. The sheer numbers and variety of demons made Spike want to growl, but he'd be buggered by Peaches in public before he'd show that kind of fear.
"Dru sired me," Spike agreed. He tightened his hand on Xander's arm, but he shouldn't have bothered; Xander pressed closer without any encouragement.

"Where's your sire?" the Annoying One asked.

Spike could feel the court shifting as the subtle fight for dominance started, but he wasn't a fledge who trembled at the threads of power twisting around the boy-king. Instead of answering, Spike tapped a cigarette out before stuffing the pack back in a packet. When he snapped his lighter, casting a yellow pool of light around him, several fledges flinched, their instinctive fear of fire driving them back. Spike smirked as he pulled at the cigarette and felt the warmth stuff his lungs. When Spike started pacing the chamber, circling the throne and studying the various supplicants, Xander followed.

"Made some changes 'round the old place," Spike observed without answering the boy's question. The body guard vamp growled, making Xander jump. Then again, most of the fledges in the room jumped at the murderous tone.

"Things change," the boy responded. Spike pulled deeply
on the cigarette and then blew a warm cloud into the air as minions shifted nervously. Boy king lost points by answering. Spike tilted his head and considered the tiny vamp. Even with the power flowing through the demon, the demon still only had access to the boy's memories, and that meant that he didn't understand the verbal power games. Spike could feel a twitching need to throw himself against the boy, but he simply stopped in his pacing and cracked his neck first one way and then the other as he soaked in the heat of his Xander at his back and the cigarette between his fingers. The body guard vamp growled even louder, the rumbling threat echoing off the walls and the zombies inched forward, smiling with dead flesh... in one case, dead flesh that looked ready to fall off its face.

"Much like your line has changed--Darla and Dru dead, Angelus souled," the older vamp taunted him, verbally distracting the group from the boy king who had answered Spike without even demanding an answer to his own question.

"Seems like Angelus did well enough against you lot, even with his bloody soul," Spike offered after another drag of his cigarette. "But that's history... bloody borin' history. I prefer to live in the here and now." In his
peripheral vision, he watched minions taking up position around him. Without even needing prompting, Xander separated from him, turning to take up a position covering Spike's back. Spike smiled darkly.

The Anointed One stood up, stepping down off the throne, and the very fact that Spike had to look down at the ankle-biter made him want to snap the little vampire's neck. "And in the here and now," the Anointed One commented, "you have no recognition as a childe or a master and no sire to speak for you. Are you worthy of our line?" The child's words made Spike painfully aware of the sheer numbers that surrounded him.

Spike took a slow drag on his cigarette. "Been a Master for long enough. Besides, seems like standards have dropped a bit around here, mate." Taking the half gone cigarette, Spike flicked it toward the zombies. A few fledges scattered away while others growled at the spark that arced through the air. Right, this wasn't going to plan at all. Spike tucked his hands into his waist and prayed that Xander recognized the signal.

After decades of painting Eastern Europe with the blood of innocents, Spike hadn't expected a challenge to himself. Yeah, the clan might be a little put out with one
more souled demon joining the line, but unlike his childe, Spike wasn't souled. His own demon roared at the challenge, at the suggestion that he needed a sire's protection or that he wasn't worthy of the clan. Spike ignored the white-hot fury and focused on tracking his enemy. The zombies and fledges moved forward while the other demons faded back to the walls. Spike smirked. So, not everyone bought the party line and backed the boy-king then.

The boy-king turned his back, and at some signal that Spike didn't see, the fledges and zombies leapt forward. Spike snapped the knee of the first attacker, leaving him howling on the ground as he pulled his long knife. Sparing one glance for his childe, Spike watched the boy neatly stake the first reckless vamp to rush him. With his own demon screaming in pride, Spike concentrated on his end of the fight, determined not to let anyone get past him to attack Xander's back, and trusting Xander to do the same.

Three fledges attacked in a flurry that might have distracted a younger vamp, but Spike ignored their flailing and decapitated one with a sweeping cut before lodging the knife deep into the heart of a second. A quick twist and vicious yank, and he ripped the unbeating
muscle out of the body. The fledge had time for one last incredulous look before turning to dust. The third vamp hit Spike's hand hard enough to send the knife flying, but Spike simply twisted his head off with his bare hands, feeling bones crack before the dust exploded all over him.

Snatching a stake out of his duster pocket, Spike spared Xander a quick glance, just in time to see the boy rip an arm off a zombie and use it as a club against a fledge. The fledge hadn't yet decided what to do with the rotting arm in his hands when Xander jammed the stake into its heart. Xander turned back to the attackers with the vamps ashes settling like snow over his dark curls.

If there hadn't been so many enemies, Spike would have stepped back and allowed Xander to fight while he reveled in his childe's ferociousness; however, one of the zombies crashed into him, sending him stumbling sideways before he could regain his balance. He ripped at the dead flesh, feeling it tear like rotting fruit under his fingers. Two more minions rushed into the fight, and Spike had to settle for crippling one with a roundhouse kick while he focused on the second minion, an older one who moved in more cautiously.
"Enough!" a tiny voice bellowed, and while the volume and girlish pitch might be easily dismissed, the threads of supernatural power backing the order sent the remaining vamps cringing back. A mist of fine ash floated through the air, slowly drifting toward the ground, and two of the three zombies lay in so many tatters that they would never rise again.

"Master Spike," the boy-king offered as he climbed back up to his throne and took a seat, "what brings you to the court?"

"Just passing through. Figure ta be here a few days, a week at most," Spike answered calmly as he brushed the dust from his coat. He'd made his point, and he trusted that he didn't need ta make it again. Scenting the air, he checked Xander, but all he could smell was his childe's excitement. Hell, boy looked ready to vibrate out of his own skin as he returned to Spike's side, his eyes still scanning the room.

Spike didn't bother looking at the others now that he had officially claimed his title. He focused on the miniature head of the line.

"And will you be staying with the court?"
"Wasn't plannin' to. Have a place already, something Angelus laid claim to back when the old Master still ruled and he'd come ta town from time to time," Spike casually answered. The court shifted at Angelus' name. The old vamp who played body guard just as Luke had once guarded the old Master stepped forward in full game-face.

"And do you take Angelus' side in things? You bring a human here; your line is corrupted with humanity. Darla often said that you stank of humanity and stupidity, and now you try claiming the title of a full Master."

"Not claimin' anything. Took it, didn't I? Left the dust of your soddin' minions scattered over the floor. I've tasted the blood of two slayers, and the title's mine!" Spike growled as he vamped out for the first time, his demon's fury pushing forward.

"Colin." The boy-king stopped the body guard with a single word. "Enough."

"Yeah, Colin, enough," Spike mocked the body guard. He hadn't liked Luke, and he didn't like this newer version any better. Colin growled, and then his eyes shifted to a
spot behind Spike.

"Do not look at me, human," he snapped. His eyes returned to Spike. "Your pet seriously needs training."

"I know you're not talking about my Xander because I've never told ya he's a pet." Spike felt the warmth as Xander moved closer, and he reached back, urging Xander to step up beside him.

"What else would he be? He's human," Colin sneered.

"Ya hear that, luv? Wanker thinks you're a pet, that you're weak and helpless and not worthy of fighting by my side." Spike could feel Xander's anger gathering just under the surface, but the eyes that glared up at Colin who stood beside the Anointed One's throne remained brown. Spike reached up and gave a dusty curl a sharp jerk. Yellow flecks appeared before the demon emerged. Colin's eyes widened, and he gave a low, deep warning growl.

In return, Xander gave his own small growl in response, and Colin might never have even heard the small rumble except that Spike encouraged it with a growl of his own. Xander raised a lip and small fangs appeared as he
growled louder, clearly still worked up over the fight. When Xander pressed forward, Spike tightened his grip to keep Xander beside him. They didn't need another fight.

"He's not human." The boy-king sounded more curious than anything else, but then for the head of a vampire line and a newly made vampire, the boy always seemed remarkably calm.

"Never said he was, mate. He's young and excitable, but he's not a soddin' human."

"What type of demon is he?" Now the Anointed One leaned forward.

"One that passes as human easy enough ta go places I can't. But don't mistake it, he's a demon who's fought by my side and proved himself, and he's mine."

Spike watched at the other demons considered Xander with a new interest. At the very least, he'd make them worry about Xander and take the boy off the menu if anyone had any more thoughts about challenging them.

"You offer an..." the Anointed One paused... "interesting
diversion."

"Yeah, and you're plannin' something mighty interesting here. So, want ta let me in so that I don't muck up some plan you got brewin?" Spike pulled out another cigarette as he considered the remaining court.

Fewer vamps now, and only one zombie watched... the one Xander had ripped the arm off of. He sat cradling his severed limb and glaring. The B'lasha had in a dark recess, or maybe it was the mouth of another tunnel. They weren't fighters, and Spike dismissed them altogether. Instead, Spike focused on the Mohra who watched with narrowed eyes. Hard to kill those buggers, and they normally didn't work for vamps. Then again, the B'lasha normally avoided all violence, preferring the financial and moral corruption of humans over the blood lust.

"What makes you think I'm planning anything?" The Anointed One's false innocence made Spike's skin crawl. Colin retreated a step to his master's side where he glowered.

"Let's just say I'm followin' a trail of breadcrumbs here," Spike snorted as he waved a hand in the direction of the
various demons. The two Lakshu demons nodded their agreement, but the Mohra crossed his arms over his chest and simply glared.

"We have plans," the boy-king nearly whispered.

"I'm not thick as pig shite, think I figured that out." Spike lit his second cigarette and wandered over to a pillar where he leaned his shoulder into the stone.

"If you are not going to stay, I would not ask you to get involved." The Anointed One leaned back, his hand dangling over the arm of the chair, and Colin sat. Slipping back into his human mask, he leaned against the chair and allowed the boy's fingers to play with his hair. Spike could hear a small gasp from Xander, but then the boy hadn't ever seen the courts where shows of dominance and submission were the norm, even between two full vampires. Bloody hell, if he were presenting the boy proper like as his childe, he'd throw him down and fuck Xander until Xander could only lay helplessly spent and sprawled all over the floor. 'Course, other demons weren't usually around to see it. Spike watched as the Mohra's face curled in disgust before a mask of indifference covered the expression.
"Just don't want to go stumblin' into some mess of your making," Spike shrugged as if it didn't matter to him, and it didn't. He just wanted to make sure Xander was safe, and if his childe wanted the witch safe, he'd fight for that too.

The Anointed One looked at him, his small head tilting as he considered. "Avoid the slayer and the humans who hunt for demons on the Hellmouth and the Vahrall who have recently appeared."

"Demon hunters?" Spike lowered his cigarette and looked at the boy-king in surprise. Those lot should have been hunted down and either killed or turned.

"Stay in groups and they are cowards who will not bother you, but they are useful in keeping others out of our plans." The boy leaned back, his fingers still playing with Colin's hair.

Spike would have asked a dozen other questions, but the scent of excitement from Xander was slowly souring into something weary, so time to head for safety. Besides, for this many demons to come together, it really could only be one more attempt to open a bloody Hellmouth, like that stunt hadn't screwed every other Aurelius vamp
who'd ever tried it. That's what got the Master trapped in this rat hole. Angelus had gotten his soul shoved back in him when he'd been so distracted with some soddin' statue that he forgot to take care of his enemies. Even Darla had given up her jewels and silk to sit by scabby's side and dream of hell on Earth. It just got her a stake in the heart from her own favorite childe.

Well, let the little nipper try; he'd get his arse kicked, especially with a slayer in town. Spike could feel a thread of shame that one more of his line would go down, but ending the world wasn't high on his agenda. Now if country music ever took over the media, he might consider it, but he liked the world pretty much the way it was now, no gaping Hell mouth to bring in hoards of hungry demons.

Without a word, Spike turned and headed for the tunnel. The minions at the tunnel's entrance stiffened, but before Spike had covered half the distance to them, they retreated so that Spike and Xander could pass. This time when they walked the dark tunnels, Xander's demon eyes allowed him to follow, and Spike missed the warm touch. Smiling, he just planned on getting more warm touches once they got back to the lair.
Out in the cemetery, Spike waited while Xander closed the entrance to the tunnel and followed him out into the night air. A breeze stirred the treetops, and as dawn approached, the night had gone absolutely silent. An early bird sang a couple of hopeful notes and then went still.

"Well, that went... moderately better than I expected. Of course, anything short of me dead or in chains is actually better than I expected," Xander said with a shrug as he closed the heavy door to the crypt.

"Told ya. Nothin' to worry about," Spike answered as he picked a direction and started walking to where he'd left the car. Tomorrow he'd need to hunt early; the faint scent of human on the air reminded him of his own hunger, but they didn't have time to hunt down prey, and Spike didn't want to just grab some mother off the street, at least not with Xander right there.

Spike opened his mouth to ask Xander if he smelled the odd human scent on the breeze, an almost dull or masked smell. He hadn't even gotten the first word out when silver bits flew through the air. Spike wheeled, dodging out of the path of the first set, when a jolting pain ran up his back and driving him to his knees.
Immediately, Xander turned toward him, and Xander's confusion turned to agony as his own body stiffened and collapsed. The last image Spike saw was a camouflaged leg step out of the bushes. Then nothing.

Part Six

"Where do we put this one?"

"Let's drop him off at emergency. Bastard's lucky we didn't find him two minutes later."

"Yeah. Sometimes I think the people around here deserve to get eaten; it's natural selection. If you're too dumb to realize what goes bump in the night actually does bump around here, you shouldn't be allowed to breed."

"Graham," a voice snapped.

"Just the truth," a third man offered.
Xander struggled to control his body, but the voices came from the far side of a tunnel, and he seemed paralyzed. Inside his mind, Baby Aurelius took the little seed of panic Xander felt and turned it into a whole fucking crop of hysteria with a side order of terror. With his mind whirling, the sudden sensation of his body moving without his permission left Xander with the nauseous feeling of falling.

"If that vamp had eaten him, it'd be one less civvy to worry about. This shit is fubar, and you're still trying to save every Tom, Dick, and Dumbshit Donna in this town, Riley."

"Forest, you are one word away from an insubordination charge," voice number two threatened.

"Chill, guys."

Fighting to gain control over anything—a pinky finger, an eyelid, anything—Xander finally had to admit his helplessness as someone dropped him onto something scratchy and hard. Something thumped next to him, and Xander could only pray it was Spike and that Spike wasn't dust on the ground back there.
The very thought of sire dead made Baby come screaming to the front, clawing at the invisible bonds that seemed to trap Xander inside his own body. Wonderful. Xander sank under the demon's fury realizing that not even Baby could get his limbs moving. Even knowing that Baby would snap the necks of whoever had captured them, Xander found himself hoping he'd wake up to dead humans and a live sire.

When Xander woke again, he could feel Baby demon slinking through the back of his mind like the creepy feeling you get when someone glares at the back of your head, only with glaring from the inside. The demon's resentment forced Xander into movement, his arms only twitching when he commanded them to move.

"Fuck," Xander breathed, his movement stopped by a familiar weight around his wrists. Cracking open an eye, he didn't see a familiar ceiling. Instead rectangles of white light blinded him. "Double fuck," Xander said a little louder.

"Mr. Harris?" a voice asked, and Xander tilted his head that direction without opening his eyes. "Mr. Harris, how
are you feeling?"

That made Xander crack one eye open wide enough to glare at a tall nurse who stood a couple of feet away from his bed. In the history of stupid questions, Xander had never heard one quite that dumb, and he was a connoisseur of stupid questions. And what was up with the Mr. Harris stuff because he sure didn't see his father anywhere around. Xander only figured out that he was the mister in question when he spotted his billfold on the table next to the bed.

"Peachy," he managed to croak, his voice dry and cracked.

"I'll get the doctor," she said as she quickly backed out of the room. Xander tugged at the restraints that held him to the bed, and while he could shake the whole frame, he couldn't free himself. A definite feeling of 'told you so' floated up from Baby.

"Mr. Harris," an older woman said, and Xander cracked his eye open again to glare at her. She looked back with a disturbing curiosity that reminded Xander of how Willow's new bud Wendell used to stare at spiders. And Xander didn't like being on the spider's end.
"Yeah?"

"Good to see you coherent."

Before Xander had a chance to even question that, the doctor stabbed a light beam his eye. He flinched back, but strong fingers followed and pulled his eyelid open. Xander fisted his hands and focused on controlling Baby as the light swept back and forth over his eye.

"Hey, still recovering from getting... okay, what did happen?" Xander paused as he reviewed his memories. Court. Check. Spike going down. Check and a growl from Baby. Searing pain. Check and still feeling the ache. Weird guys talking. Sorta check. Xander blinked as the doctor released his one eye and moved to torturing the other one.

"What do you remember?" she asked as she repeated the flashing, stabbing ray of light right into his eye.

"Walking. Someone attacked me and my friend. Is my friend here? He's got bleached hair and an English accent and gets really cranky when you play country music."
The doctor stepped back and flipped her light off. "You were brought in alone; I'm sorry. You seemed to have some sort of seizure, and some serious eye damage. Do you remember anything splashing into your eyes?"

"No," Xander said slowly as he tried reaching for Baby's memories.

"Any congenital eye disorders?"

"No." Xander got a flash of panic and the memory of flailing out an arm, only half in control of a body that seemed to jerk into motion in stops and fits. The resentment of food holding him down, warm hands pinning him to the floor, flooded his mind. Oh yeah, Baby had definitely been a bad boy.

"Any history in your family of amblyopia, presbyopia, or astigmatism?" the doctor interrupted his search of his memories.

"I have a cousin with dyslexia, but that's about as close as we come." Xander tried patented stupid grin number six.

The doctor stopped and really looked at Xander for a moment before continuing. "Any history of seizures?"
She pulled back the blanket, and Xander discovered the joy of knobbly knees with a short hospital gown. The doctor must not have minded because she started using strong fingers to poke at his legs.

"Okay, I'm getting a little cranky with the poking and prodding and lack of information here. And my cranky levels are even higher about being tied to a bed!" Xander bit his tongue before adding something stupid about not minding bondage from his gay, undead lover.

"How is your neck feeling?" the doctor asked as she abandoned Xander's legs in favor of searching the sides of his neck. Now he could see the name tag with "Dr. Goddard" in block letters. A short fingernail poked at his claim mark, and instead of the tingling lust he normally felt from the mark, Xander cringed in pain.

"Ow. Hey, didn't you take an oath to not go poking at people or something?" he demanded as he hunched his shoulder and tried to protect the tender skin. Baby flared up, projecting an image of Dr. Goddard ripped to bloody pieces, her grey hair laying in a clump on top of a disemboweled stomach, and Xander shivered in revulsion before he could push it back down.

"Mr. Harris, you're very lucky. You don't seem to have
any after effects of your attack," Dr. Goddard said as she walked over to the window and pulled the blinds open. Xander narrowed his eyes at the bright light that spilled over his legs, ankle restraints holding him in place. Oh yeah, no way was that coincidence. He could only glare at the doctor as she came back to the bed and started unbuckling one of his feet.

"You had some sort of severe seizure last night. I can't tell you anything about who dropped you off at the emergency room, and I don't know what happened to your friend, but I will say that Sunnydale is not a safe town. You may want to go back to LA or go anywhere as long as you keep moving." At that bit of advice, Dr. Goddard stared at Xander with bright blue eyes behind wire glasses. Even knowing that she obviously wanted to help him, Xander still resented her telling him what to do, especially when the telling did not help him get sire back.

"I grew up in Sunnydale, so I know there's a seedy part of town, but I won't leave without William," Xander insisted. Her lips thinned, but she unbuckled his second foot.

"Your friend may be harder to find that you think," the
doctor said sadly as she unbuckled a wrist. Xander pulled his hand free the moment the restraint loosened, and he went to work on the buckle that kept a leather strap over his chest while the doctor walked around to undo the last restraint.

"My friend is tougher than you think, and no way would any of the creepy crawlies around here get him," Xander said firmly as he sat up in bed and dangled his legs over the side. "So where are my clothes?"

Dr. Goddard sighed. "You had a number of items not allowed on hospital property."

"I wasn't planning on coming to the hospital. It was definitely an unplanned stop, and there aren't any laws against being prepared." Xander considered the eight-inch knife he'd had stuffed in his boot. "Okay, there might be laws, but like you said, Sunnydale's not a safe town." Xander corrected himself as he stalked over to a cupboard door. Shit--medical tubing and thingamabobbers.

Dr. Goddard opened a second cupboard and Xander's clothes hung on wire hangers. "You can get the weapons back from security on the first floor. You might want to
apologize to the guys on your way out," she suggested. "You gave them a pretty hard time last night." With a last look and a shake of her head, the doctor left.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

By the time Xander knocked on Willow's door, he had his clothing and his weapons back in place. Now he just needed to find his sire. The warehouse had been empty, and even going back to the court led to a few random growls without any useful information at all. Either they hadn't taken Spike or they were lying about taking Spike, and Xander wasn't really sure what to do in either case. Baby seemed in favor of just randomly attacking someone, but Xander didn't think that would actually help anything. It might make him feel better, but the whole getting killed end of things might not be of the good. Besides, if he got himself killed, Spike really would be cranky.

"Xander?" Willow asked, and Xander shook himself out of his day-nightmare and gave her his best goofy grin. "Oh goddess, what happened?" Willow immediately asked as she stepped back to allow him in without actually issuing an invitation.
"Still need to work on the poker face, huh?" Xander asked as he stepped inside the room.

"Definitely, but you wouldn't be my Xander-shaped friend if you had the lying down," she agreed. Xander dropped onto one of the twin beds, his knees not really up to holding his weight any more.

"I can't find William," Xander blurted, and her warm hand on his shoulder almost brought the tears of frustration to the surface.

"Oh goddess."

"We weren't even hunting. We were walking along and someone attacked us, and next thing I remember, I was in the hospital, except for this really weird part where these guys seemed to be saying that anyone who walked around Sunnydale at night deserved to get eaten, but I might have hallucinated that part."

"Oh goddess." Willow plopped down next to him on the bed.

"And I'm really wishing you had something more
encouraging to say," Xander said as he glanced at her. Willow scrunched her face up.

"Kinda out of encouragement, but if you tell me what you want to hear, I'll say it," she offered softly. Xander pulled a comb out of his jacket, brilliant white hairs still clinging to its teeth.

"Say you'll find him," he said as he held it out. Willow's mouth became an 'o' as she took the comb with the precious hairs. Xander pulled a Sex Pistols CD out of another pocket, Spike's favorite, and a skull ring Spike had left next to the sink. Willow still sat staring at the comb in her hand, and Xander added the new items to the pile.

"You did the magic that gave Angel his happiness back, and while the whole going soulless was kinda of the bad, you couldn't have known about the clause in the curse. But the point is that if you're big enough with the mojo to give a vampire happiness and then shove the soul back in him, you're big enough with the mojo to find one lost person." Xander took a breath, and Willow turned to him with eyes bright with tears.

"Xander," she whispered, her voice small and tinny.
"You have to, Wills. Please. I can't--" Xander stopped before he started sobbing.

"Xander, I want to, really, I do. I just can't." Willow held out the precious pile toward him.

"You can. I can't, but you can. You've done bigger stuff than this." Xander insisted as he used the flat of his hand to push Willow's hand away. He needed her to keep Spike's personal items; he had run out of other options. "Please. I have to find William before something really bad happens to him."

"Xander, I just, I don't do that any more." Willow put the items down on her pink bedspread, scooting back away from them.

"Wills. I can't lose him. I know you can do this; it's a simple location spell." Xander could feel Baby pressing him to attack, to force Willow to help. Baby seemed to think that if she wasn't actively helping then she was an enemy. Xander gritted his teeth as he fought back against the rising fury and resentment.

"Xander, it's not. Not for me."
"Damn it. If you can put Angel's soul back in, you can--"

"Kill people. I can kill people. I can't find your friend," Willow blurted as if those sentences naturally fit together. Xander stared at his crying friend, open-mouthed, while he felt his demon pressing forward angrily. Seems that Baby didn't care if Willow wanted to kill the population of the entire campus as long as she found sire.

"Willow?" Xander asked gently, ignoring the rage as he reasoned that Willow would help him faster if he helped her first. Baby didn't like the logic, but at least he growled off to a dark corner of Xander's mind.

"Xander, I just can't use magic."

"I know you can, Wills," Xander countered, "and I really need help. William could be out there lost or hurt or waiting for me to save him, and he was big on the saving me thing when I got kidnapped, and I just can't walk away. Please, Willow, I'm not asking you to kill anyone, just to do a little spell. For me."

"I know, but you don't know what could happen if I use
magic. I'm not well grounded, and last time I used magic, things didn't go exactly right."

"Angelus?" Xander guessed. Willow just snorted as if the answer amused her.

"Goddess, that was puppies and kittens compared to what I did to Wendell."

"Wendell you had the crush on? Spider Wendell?" Okay, Xander had definitely missed something.

Willow worked her fingers nervously, pulling at the hem of her blouse and twisting the fabric. Reaching over, Xander let his hand rest on Willow's restless fingers. She looked up at him with tear-brightened eyes.

"Spider Wendell," she agreed. "Wendell who I had a crush on and who told me it was okay for me to have a crush on Paula Abdul instead of the Backstreet Boys and who was brave enough to go to prom with Larry and who went to therapy with me when we accidentally ate the principal."

"He went to prom with Larry?" Xander practically yelped. It must have been the right thing to say because Willow
made a strangled laughing sound.

"They were pretty handsome together," she agreed. "But then there was this whole ascension thing with the major and the Anointed One sent minions to break it up and we got in the middle and there was this box with all these really big spiderish demons and it broke open." She took a shuddering breath. "I only wanted to squish the spiders, honestly."

Now tears ran down Willow's face, and from the way she said 'squish,' Xander had a really gruesome idea of what had happened. He closed his fingers around Willow's hands, trying to take some of that pain.

He stared at her tiny hands for several minutes before he could find an answer. "I understand, I really do. Someone died because I made a mistake. But I'm not going to stop trying to do the right thing just because I fucked up, not even when I fucked up bad enough to get Frederick killed," he said quietly. He could feel oily guilt sliming up his spine, and he truly didn't want to manipulate her, but he needed his sire back.

"I'm sorry. Tara will be here soon," Willow apologized.
"How soon?"

"Um, a few hours?"

Xander tightened his hand as he felt his rage surge. Spike might not have hours; he might not even have minutes. "Willow." He poured all of his desperate need into that one word.

"Jenny. We could call Jenny and have her do the spell," Willow suddenly burst out. She popped up off the bed with the energy that only an over-caffeinated Willow could manage. Immediately, the pain and loss disappeared under the patented resolve face, and oh yeah, that wasn't even near mentally healthy land. Xander watched as Willow punched the numbers for this Jenny, and he could only hope she would help because Xander was quickly losing the battle to keep Baby calm and under control.

Part Seven
"Are you sure this is a spell?" Xander asked as he looked at the computer screen. The dark-haired woman in front of the computer just smiled. Willow, however, seemed to be in high babble gear since leaving the dorm room.

"Jenny's a cyber-wicca. This one time a hunter was hunting Oz just because he does the whole werewolf thing, and Jenny created this computer program that tracked him using a satellite image connected to a tracking spell, and I bet she's doing something just like that now." Willow paced between the stairs leading up to the second floor and the kitchen door. Since Jenny had her computer set up on the dining room table, the path left Willow sort of circling them.

Xander leaned back against the window sill, feeling the warmth against his back even as Baby flinched away from the light. Right now, Xander appreciated anything that could force Baby into the recesses since he wasn't doing a great job staying in control. With his luck, he would go all glowy eyed in the home of a watcher and his cyber-wicca wife with a slayer upstairs. Xander flinched as he regretted even thinking that thought. Baby growled.

"This is similar," Jenny agreed. "I'm using a topographical map to indicate William's location, so it's a fairly standard
spell only slightly modified for the computer."

"See? If Jenny can't find William, then no one... and I'm not going to finish that because that so does not need finishing. Maybe I should just stop now, you know, a closed mouth gathers no feet and all." Willow blushed deep red, and Xander was caught between terror that the worst might have happened and sympathy for Willow--the only person who could out-babble him. He ended up not saying anything as Willow sort of slid sideways though a swinging door, disappearing into a kitchen that appeared in flashes as the door clattered shut.

"She's upset," Jenny said as she typed so fast that the clicks seemed to become a chant of their own.

"Yeah, kinda getting that. I just wished..." Xander stopped. He didn't know what he wished. Part of him felt guilty for never calling her back and supporting her through the weirdness, but another part didn't really know this girl who had squished her best friend. And then add the demon's frustration and fear and almost unwilling respect for Willow's power into the mix and Xander had way too many parts going.
"Life is change," Jenny offered ambiguously. "Okay, here we go." She hit the 'enter' key with a flourish, and the whole computer screen glowed ominously red. Xander leaned forward to get a better look as the white lines of streets and shaded parks slowly faded back to a normal blue.

"Huh."

"Huh?" Willow asked as she stuck her head back out of the door. "What's huh?"

Xander just sat, his fingers gripping the window sill.

"Maybe it's a masking spell," Jenny commented, pushing her black hair back away from her face as she considered the unglowy screen. Her fingers danced over the keys.

"Shouldn't there be something glowing or flashing or doing some magicy?" Xander asked as the two witches considered the computer.

"Someone might be doing the anti-magic type magic, but Jenny is way ahead of them," Willow promised. Xander would have been more reassured if Willow hadn't had the funny wrinkle at the top of her nose.
"Okay, here we go." Jenny stood up and gathered three candles from a buffet against one wall, its carved doors reminding Xander of the Catholic Church back in his old neighborhood. Baby growled, but Xander just ignored the noise since not even he could tell whether impatience or just a general hatred for anything church-like had made Baby grouchy. Hell, he wanted to growl in frustration, but he could only watch as Jenny set the thick candles in the middle of the large oak table in a triangle around her computer.

"Will you help me with a opprimo spell?" Jenny asked, and Willow ducked her head for a moment, pausing before she stepped forward and took Jenny's hand. Xander just gritted his teeth and reminded himself that telling them to hurry wouldn't actually help. God knows he never took out the garbage faster when his mom bugged him.

The candles flared to life, and Xander jumped back, banging his head on the window in surprise. The girls just continued to chant, their voices pulling at him like little pricking pains as the computer glowed white.

Jenny shouted something that sounded like 'fat girl,' and
the screen flared like the world's biggest flash
bomb. When Xander finally pried his eyes open again,
the Jenny and Willow stared at the still unglowy screen in
dismay.

Xander didn't even want to ask. He stepped forward to
the computer, the three candles now mounds of wax
spreading over the wood.

"So, what's the next step?" he asked, refusing to even
name the worry worm that inched through his brain.

"Xander," Willow sighed.

"I mean, Gunn and William would both hit someone until
they gave up information, so if the magic isn't going to
work, we just need to find—"

Xander stopped when Jenny's warm hand rested on his
forearm. Xander just tightened his arms around his own
stomach as he slowly shook his head in denial.

"Are you sure the hair came from William?"

Xander couldn't stop shaking his head even though he
was sure.
"God, I'm so sorry. Xander. I..." Willow stumbled to silence as she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on one of his arm. Xander just continued to shake his head.

"No."

"I know how hard it is to lose someone," Jenny offered gently.

"No. I haven't lost William. He can't just die," Xander snapped as he stepped back. Willow's hand flew to the table as she lost her balance.

"I know—"

"You don't know!" Xander yelled as Willow tried to step forward. He turned his back to the two women and grabbed the banister to the stairs.

"Problem?" another woman's voice asked from above. Baby rose with a roar, and Xander dropped to his knees as the world spun slightly counter-clockwise.

"Xander!" Willow gasped and warm hands touched his
back. Xander shoved at the hands touching him and stumbled to his feet when he contacted warm skin that made his body shiver with revulsion. Slayer.

"Whoa there," Faith said, and strong fingers grabbed at him. Half-blind, Xander lurched back several steps, his shoulder finding the front door. Xander's hand closed around the door knob before he had even checked in with his body.

Yanking it open, Xander struggled through the shade of the porch, throwing himself into the closest patch of sunlight. Falling to his knees, he turned his face to the light and let the tears roll down his face.

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Hours later, Xander couldn’t really bring himself to care about anything as he huddled on the end of the couch in the basement of the Watcher's house. His demon whined in pain, and Xander had nothing to use to comfort the soft wails in his mind. The whole ‘throwing himself in the sunlight’ plan hadn’t worked exactly the way the demon had intended, but Xander could appreciate the thought.
Life without Spike and he couldn’t seem to see a way out of it. Go home to his mother, yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. Find a normal job and just suffer this horrible gaping hole in his soul for the rest of his life, well he didn’t really see any other choice. Xander could hear voices, but he simply curled himself about his demon and tried to sleep, tried to reach some place where he could forget the pain.

Xander could feel Spike’s cool hand slipping around his waist as his sire pressed up against his back. He knew that it was a dream, but he didn’t want to leave this fantasy of happiness, the closest thing he would ever again have to true happiness. He felt ghostly lips breathe across his ear, whispering ‘childe’ in a possessive voice that made his spine tingle with expectation. He squirmed, faintly aware of the couch, but trying his best to throw himself into his dream of his lost sire.

“Xander,” a voice whispered, and he tried to pretend that he could hear an English accent, but the concerned tone of Willow’s voice broke through even as he struggled to ignore it. “Xander, you’re really worrying me,” she continued, and Xander’s dream sire shifted away into the smoke from which he had been formed,
leaving Xander alone again. He whimpered and stirred slightly.

“Xander, you know, impersonating the dead isn’t exactly safe around here.” The friendly teasing didn't even stir Baby, and Xander just pulled into himself, struggling to not fully wake. However, a hand on his shoulder sent him flying off the couch and left him standing next to the wall. Faith sat on the edge of the couch, her hand still suspended in the air where Xander's shoulder had been milliseconds earlier. Willow stood next to the narrow stairs that led up to the main house, staring at him with wide, shocked eyes. For a moment, Xander just stared back, words not even forming in his mind even as he realized he had to cover for his own weirdness. Xander could hear Spike whispering about enemies and weakness.

He opened his mouth a second or two before he could find words that would make any sense at all. “God, don’t wake me up like that.” He tried for a laugh, but from the expressions on Faith and Willow's faces, he hadn't come even close.

“God, chill little man, everything’s five by five,” Faith said as she held her hands up in surrender, but Xander
couldn’t escape the feeling of wrongness that he got every time he was around the slayer, and he couldn’t help but suspect that they could feel the wrongness in him.

“Yeah, not so okay with the ‘little man’ comments,” Xander complained, anxious to discuss anything other than the gaping hole in his heart and the demon that threatened to break free.

“Angel’s here, upstairs,” Willow said from the place near the basement stairs, and Xander knew he must have shown some sort of reaction because the two girls exchanged looks, but for the life of him, Xander really didn’t know what he was feeling.

His demon both railed against the thought of the older vampire because sire would disapprove and at the same time he wanted to be near him. For Xander’s part, he had nothing particular against Angel except of course for driving Dru insane and for abandoning Spike and the whole trying to take him away from Spike back in Los Angeles. Okay, so he didn’t hold much against him.

“I’ll go get him, just to be sure he still has that soul tacked on good and tight,” Faith said with a final look
toward Willow. When the dark-haired Slayer had left, Xander returned to the couch and curled up again. Pathetic much? he asked himself as he realized what a sight he must make.

“Xander, I’m really sorry I couldn’t help you with William. When I called Angel, he said you two were really, really close.”

“Why’d you call him?” Xander asked dully, not really caring whether or not Willow approved of his relationships. He suspected that the whole sire/childe thing would probably shock her a whole lot more than the gay thing ever could.

“You called for him, remember?” Willow asked, and Xander looked over into her wide, concerned eyes and realized that she was telling the truth. Xander cast back into his memories, but he couldn’t remember calling out, and his demon didn’t fess up. “Do you want me to keep him away?” Willow asked. “’Cause he offered to come the minute I mentioned you. You never said you guys were that close.”

“We weren’t,” a deep voice from the stairs answered, and Xander shivered at the sound. His sire’s sire. Xander
pushed himself up so that he sat on the couch and wrapped his arms around his stomach. An unbalanced queasiness in his stomach suggested laying down would be of the good, but Xander welcomed the nausea's ability to distract him just a little from the ripping pain. He kept looking down to see if some demon had slipped in and torn his belly open when he wasn't paying attention. Each time he saw the shirt Spike had picked for him, its buttons still in a neat little row down his middle, he was surprised. It didn't seem right to hurt this much without having huge gaping holes somewhere.

“Oh, you’re here. I thought Faith was going to keep you... I mean talk to you upstairs.”

“She talked, I listened.” Angel's voice carried no emotion as he stepped down the last few steps into the basement. Xander could feel Angel approach as though it were a high pressure front pressing against his skin.

“I’m not sure Xander’s really ready to talk,” Willow said as she stood up, placing herself between the two of them, and Xander looked up for the first time. He met Angel’s eyes, and at the intense stare, he dropped his own gaze. “He’s in a no talking kind of mood, which is kind of strange for Xander because talking was always his
thing.” Willow continued.

“We’ll be fine, Willow. I just need some time alone with Xander.” Xander shivered again at the voice, and he could almost feel Willow’s doubt like a small animal circling the room.

“Xander, is that what you want?” Willow asked, and Xander looked up into her elfin face, amazed at how little it had changed in the years. He suddenly had no doubt that if he asked her, she would throw herself between them. Okay, she'd get neatly tossed to one side if push came to shove, but she'd try.

“It’s okay, Willow.” Xander whispered instead even though ‘okay’ didn’t begin to cover it. Willow lay her hand on his arm for just a minute before she left, disappearing up the stairs and leaving him alone with Angel.

God, Spike would stripe his back if he ever found out, but then that wasn’t likely to happen, was it? Xander closed his eyes as a new wave of grief tore through him, and he found himself wishing that death were as easy as throwing himself into the sunlight. Of course, tall and broody making with the silence wasn’t exactly
helping. His demon had reached a near constant wail, and the headache threatened to make his head pop. He lowered his head to until he had hunched over and could rest his forehead on his knees. It was like his head had grown too heavy for his neck and might just fall off.

“Xander,” Angel finally said softly as he stepped closer. Xander forced himself to sit still when every instinct in him told himself to either run or throw himself at Angel’s feet. He didn’t think either option would win him any manly awards, so he just sat and shivered.

“I’m sorry,” Angel offered.

“We could try to excise the spirit,” Angel offered, but his tone was doubtful bordering on incredulous, so Xander didn’t bother to answer. They both knew that his demon wouldn’t be cast out by a spell designed for the weak, fraction of a demon inserted into a pet. Silence fell again.

Bent over, Xander could smell Spike lingering the pants, a faint trace of leather that made the jeans smell somehow warm. Normally Xander would love the scent, but now a pressure built in his chest until he couldn't breathe. He sat up and gulped air.
“Xander,” Angel stepped forward, and Xander threw himself off the couch for the second time in five minutes, only this time he allowed the demon to come up, the room sliding into the crystal sharpness of the demon’s vision and his teeth elongating even as he snarled.

Angel’s reaction was instantaneous as the larger vampire showed his own game face and stepped forward. “Enough, boy,” Angel snarled, and Xander backed away, snarling his own wordless reply. Xander made a break for the stairs, but a heavy body slammed him into the wall, and he found himself trapped, face first against the concrete even as he struggled to free himself.

“I said enough, boy,” Angel snapped and Xander felt an arm close around his neck, pulling him back into Angel’s body. “Willow told me you ran outside into the sun and just stared up. She didn’t know what it meant, but I do. Are you so determined to follow your sire, then?” Angel’s voice had become soft, almost lilting, but the arm remained firmly locked around his neck, no matter how he struggled.

“Let go,” Xander demanded.
“Why? So you can kill yourself? That is what you tried to do, isn’t it? Is the demon that much in control now?” Xander stopped struggling as he realized that he had no hope of freeing himself.

“Doesn’t matter,” he honestly replied.

“It does matter,” Angel insisted, and Xander felt himself pushed toward the couch. He caught himself on the sofa's arm and turned to face Angel, but he found the vampire inches from him, staring down at him, and he sat since that was the only way to get some physical distance between them.

“You aren’t the kind to give up, so why are you letting the demon rule you?” Angel asked as he hovered above, his hands away from his body in a clear fighting stance that let Xander know that he wasn’t going to be allowed off the couch.

Xander just shook his head and remained silent, keeping his pain and weakness to himself. Instead of the disgust he expected from Angel, he felt a hand on his head.

“Spike gave ye a taste for something and then left you to
suffer,” Angel said in a lilting Irish voice that had even more accent than Doyle. Suddenly Angel knelt in front of him, his human face showing doubt and worry. “I’ll not have ye suffer.” Angel whispered and then morphed into his game face. Xander realized just a second too late what Angel meant, and he struggled to fling himself over the back of the couch, but a heavy body wrestled him back down. He planted an elbow in some body part soft enough to give, but he felt his arm pulled behind his back by a strength he couldn’t hope to counter.

As he writhed in panic, trying to buck the body off him, he could hear Angel’s soft voice. “Struggle if ye need to, but I won’t let the demon destroy you.” Xander brought up a leg, trying to get leverage, but the foot was kicked out from under him, and he found himself pinned face down on the couch. Angel’s full weight now fell on his back with his one arm still pinned to the small of his back, and he knew the fight was over.

The demon knew too and crowed for joy that it had been found worthy of taking. Xander backed off some and relaxed into the moment, knowing what the demon needed. He was going to be miserable no matter what happened, so the least he could do is give the demon a new sire, a new source of happiness that would make the
beast within him happy even if he never would accept Angel as any sort of substitute.

He felt Angel press at his head, and he nearly panicked again at the thought of Angel destroying Spike’s claim mark. Pushing the nearly purring demon to the side, he forced his way up and wriggled until he could tilt his head in submission in the opposite direction, giving Angel a clear shot at his neck, but not to Spike’s own mark.

That small bit of defiance out of the way, he retired and waited for the strike, and Angel didn’t make him wait long. He felt Angel’s teeth tear into his neck, and his demon rejoiced at the strength of the bite, the depth of the claim. He let the demon sink into the feeling of acceptance as he found his own solace in the emptiness that would be his for the rest of his life. Angel might satisfy the demon, but he was Spike’s and nothing would ever replace that.

Angel drank several mouthfuls, and if Xander knew anything about vampire rituals, forced his own blood into the wound. Xander’s demon purred enthusiastically, both in his head and in the low rumbles of his chest, and prepared for sire to accept him fully, to use him. Xander just tried to shut off the surround sound live theater in
his head so that the demon and Angel could finish up without him feeling like he had betrayed Spike. Angel pulled back.

Xander started mentally chanting as he waited for the clothes to start disappearing, but Angel stood there, his human face back in place and obviously done. Xander could feel his demon’s confusion, but he had to admit to a little relief on his part.

“You won’t kill yourself,” Angel ordered, and then he turned and walked upstairs.

Part Eight

Where exactly would you find a listing for demon psychiatrists? Or maybe demonic psychiatrists. Except demonic psychiatriast sounded way too much like the tag line for some horror film where a psychiatrist ended up being some demon who sucked brains. Baby sent up his own opinions with bitter, sharp condemnation for the
idea that they needed a psychiatrist. Xander was fairly sure that the stabbing stomach pains were Baby too.

"Xander?"

Xander continued to stare at the white wall, refusing to even look at Willow. He followed a fairly interesting crack that wandered up the wall and split into three tributaries that flowed up the drywall to the ceiling.

"Xander? Angel said you might want to talk, and he's not really good with the whole talking part of relationships. He's more with the slightly stalkerish following you through the night and killing things for you, which is certainly a legitimate form of expressing friendship, but not always helpful."

The couch dipped as Willow sat down next to him, but Xander couldn't even come up with any words to answer her. His thoughts had become smoke, and every attempt to pin them down to a feeling or a word just sent little wisps of half-thoughts floating through his brain.

"Angel seems pretty upset," Willow offered after a second.
Xander couldn't even place the emotion that slammed through him, but it was definitely not of the good. 'Enormity.' The word floated up from some English class on a day when Xander hadn't been sleeping. Enormity: abomination, heinousness, horror, monstrosity. Xander just couldn't figure out whether the enormity was Angel being upset or the twisted emotions in his own head over the fact he had upset Angel. He wondered if his English teacher would be proud of him for remembering that word. Then again, it probably didn't make up for the fact that he couldn't remember any of those books they always read.

"Xander, you're kinda freaking me out here. I mean, I know how hard it is to lose someone because... well, you know." Willow's words trailed off miserably, and Xander glanced over. The perky Willow of his memory had been replaced with a wide-eyed young woman who looked on the verge of crying.

"I just need some time to deal. I'll be--" Xander tried to assure her that he'd be okay, but his voice cracked and he couldn't say it.

"Yeah, it kinda hurts like someone's ripping out your guts."
"Yeah," Xander whispered his agreement, his throat tight.

"So, come upstairs?" Willow asked as she stood up and held out her hand. Xander blinked at it for several seconds before reaching out to take it. Baby growled at the smell of the blood thumping just under her pale skin, and Xander closed his eyes in silent struggle for a second.

"Goddess!" Willow screeched just as Xander stood.

Before Xander could even open his mouth, the basement door flew open and Angel charged down the steps so fast that the pounding footsteps became a single rattling roar.

"Willow?" Angel asked, but his hand fell on Xander's arm, jerking Xander to his side. Part of Xander wanted to yank his arm away and stand on his own, but another part wanted to hide behind Angel as Willow stared at them in shock.

"Willow? Willow, what happened?" Jenny asked as she detoured around Xander and Angel to put her hand on Willow's shoulder.
"Angel bit him!" Willow nearly wailed. Xander put up his hand to touch the new claim bite, and the skin felt hot and sticky to the touch. He had an urge to suck at his fingers, but he didn't think that would erase the horrified expression from Willow's face.

"It isn't what you think. I can explain," Angel said as his fingers tightened on Xander's upper arm.

"Yes, do explain. Perhaps your explanation will convince me not to put a stake through your heart."

Xander spun around to see a strange man holding a crossbow aimed directly at Angel. Xander instantly twisted to get in front of Angel, but the iron hand on his arm thrust him back and out of the way. Fear crushed him as the man raised the crossbow an inch.

"Giles," Angel said softly.

"I thought I made it clear that I never wanted to see you again," the man answered. His slightly receding hairline had just enough curl to frame his face, and Xander could see in his eyes a desperate desire to turn Angel to dust. He tried again to move closer, only to have Angel's
fingers dig into his flesh hard enough to make tears of pain blur his vision.

"Rupert, I told you I was calling him," Jenny stepped forward, putting herself between Giles and Angel.

"You told me he was going to pick someone up. You didn't mention that you were going to ask the blood-thirsty monster into our house."

Angel flinched.

"I've told you how sorry I am. I just came here for Xander, and we're going to head back for L.A. as soon as the sun sets tomorrow." Angel took a step forward so that he was standing just behind Jenny, and Xander got dragged along with him.

"Get away from her," Giles practically yelled as he charged down the last few steps in order to get a better shot.

"Rupert," Jenny said in a warning tone, and now Xander could smell a familiar scent drifting off the man. Even without Baby's sense of smell he knew that Giles had been drinking.
"You just can't stay out of my life, can you? If I see you again--"

"Giles!" Willow cried at the same time that Jenny stepped forward with a serious expression on her face.

"Rupert, do not finish that thought. You know as well as we do that Angel is not Angelus. He feels as badly about Kendra's death as the rest of us."

For a long second, Giles stared at Jenny with a blank expression that made Xander worry more than screaming or yelling or even threatening with pointy wooden objects. Growing up in his father's house, he'd learned to deal with the drunken anger with its random accusations and bitter jokes. He'd learned to deal with the manic glee that would make his father laugh and rip apart some part of the house in a half-assed attempt at home renovation. He'd learned to avoid those depressed moments when his father would sob and tell Xander how much better his life would have been if Jessica just hadn't gotten pregnant. He'd slur advice to Xander to pay for an abortion if he got some girl pregnant.

Alcohol set loose ugly emotions that slowly made Xander
hate his father, even if he still loved the man, and again with the need for psychiatric help. However, after they moved to L.A. and things got really ugly, his father would reach these points where he didn't seem to have any emotion, and that's when he did things that Xander really didn't even like to think about. And Giles had the same look. Xander trembled with a need to get between Angel and that cross bow.

"I doubt that very much," Giles finally said. "And I don't really see that much of a difference between Angel and Angelus, especially since he has clearly just put a claim mark on a young man in my basement."

"Claim mark?" Jenny turned around and looked at Xander. Behind him, he could hear Willow gasp.

"It's not what it seems," Angel quickly said. He let go of Xander's arm, but Xander simply stepped closer.

"Pray tell, how is it different?" Giles' sarcasm made Angel's back go a little stiffer.

"He's carried a demon for years, but with William's death, he struggled to get control of it. I simply stepped in to help him."
"Of course. Your motives are always pure." Giles snapped back. Raising the crossbow another half-inch, Giles sidestepped to get a clear line of fire without having Jenny in the way. Immediately, Xander stepped forward, putting his own body between the two men.

Without warning, Angel used vampiric speed to move to the bottom of the stairs. Xander would have followed, but Angel held his hand up, palm forward. "You stay," he ordered. "Willow and Jenny, would you stay with him while Giles and I have a talk?"

Angel turned and climbed the stairs without another word. Inside, Xander could feel Baby curling into a tight ball of pain. Not childe. Not someone to keep close and rely on. Not even a fledge to protect. Irrelevant. Left behind with humans. Minion.

Xander lost his breath as Giles turned to follow Angel up the stairs, and part of him still wanted to throw himself at Giles since the thought of losing Angel ripped at him even if he didn't really like Angel, and even if Angel was clearly not big with the Xander-love. Feeling a tightness around his chest that made breathing hard, Xander turned back to the couch with heavy steps, Baby twisting
in a need to prove himself as worthy of more than minion even as Angel's orders left him trapped in the basement.

"Maybe I should," Jenny let her words drop off, but she gestured toward the stairs.

"Oh yeah, definitely," Willow agreed.

Xander pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. His face felt funny, like the time when he hyperventilated at school and his skin felt all tingly and cold. Minion. The word rattled around in his head, making Baby growl with a desperate, painful need to prove otherwise.

He didn't move when Jenny followed the two men out of the basement.

"Giles won't do anything... well, nothing permanent," Willow assured him. She smelled nervous, and Xander glanced over toward her. She jumped and scuttled backwards a couple of feet.

"Okay, that's just weird. So this is... what... normal? This isn't looking normal, but then I'm the girl that went all
grrrrr and ate a principal, so I don't really have much room to be talking normal."

Xander lay his cheek on his knee and listened to the bits of conversation he could hear from upstairs.

"Buffy?" Xander asked Willow. She glanced up at the ceiling for a second.

"You can hear them? So, it's not just skin-deep, the whole demon upgrade? So, does that make you a demi-demon? Okay, this conversation is getting weird, weirder even than most Sunnydale conversations."

"What's the whole story with Buffy?" Xander repeated his question. Willow watched him suspiciously, twisting her fingers and chewing on her lower lip. She looked like the little girl who, in third grade, nearly cried when she didn't have an answer.

"Buffy. Okay, I can answer that, but let's play that game we played as kids."

Xander stared at her for a second, his brain slow to pull out the memories of his childhood. "You mean the one we made up after me and Jesse refused to play doctor
with you any more?" Xander asked.

Willow blushed. "Someone could have told me I was playing wrong," she said softly, but the tension drained from her body as she sagged down into the chair. Of course, she still stayed between him and the stairs, and that wasn't lost on Xander at all.

"We just got tired of you poking sticks in our mouths and using that flashlight to look into our ears," Xander shrugged.

"But that's what a doctor--. Nevermind. So, your answer is that Buffy was two slayers before Faith. The Master drowned her, and Angel brought her back with CPR, but he must have been too late or pushed too hard or something because she went into a coma and never came out."

"I already knew that part. Why does Giles blame Angel?" Xander asked.

"Oh, maybe because he drinks a little too much and doesn't always go with the rational explanation. Well, he used to drink too much. And obviously has drunk too much today, but normally he's much better now. But
anyway, when he drinks, he thinks Angel and the Master had some sort of deal or something."

Xander glanced up. If Spike was right, Angel did have a deal with the Master, but this might not be the time to bring it up. In fact, from the shouting, never would be a really good time for that discussion. He tried to comfort himself with the fact that Giles and Jenny seemed to be doing most of the actual yelling.

Baby circled and made little mewls of distress at being banished from trying to protect master.

"So, my turn. What's up with the whole demon face? I'm thinking I would have noticed if you were a demon, but then again, I was remarkably unnoticey until I met Buffy."

"I got attacked. A demon's blood mixed with mine and I sort of inherited Baby by mistake," Xander offered. Baby growled and threw himself against Xander's mind as he roared his displeasure. He wasn't a mistake. He wasn't a minion. Xander just closed his eyes and let himself ride out the pain.

"Okay. That's... Can't they get him out?"
"He's part of me, Willow, and that was your second question, so my turn. Who's Kendra?"

Willow paled. "She was Giles' second slayer." She shifted nervously and stared down at her feet.

"Faith is getting into this fight. I guess she's up now." Xander said as a new voice joined the fight. Willow made a funny noise.

"Xander, it's a little before midnight. You sat and did the staring thing for a really long time. We were ready to check to see if you had mold growing on you." Willow tried to make it a joke, but not even she could laugh. "You worried me," she whispered. She still smelled faintly of fear and sweat, but those smells faded under something warmer. Xander struggled to find a way to reach out to her, but he couldn't find the words that would tell her that he still loved her, even if he wasn't the same person she'd known before.

"So, what's up with Kendra?" he asked instead. Baby slowly circled and settled, and Xander felt a popping in his nose that made his eyes tear and his cheekbones ache. He reached up to rub away the soreness, and Willow visibly relaxed.
"Not that I don't like the new look, but I'm a kinda fond of the old look," Willow said. Before Xander could answer, she kept going. "Giles really loved her. Buffy was his slayer, but Kendra was more like a daughter. She worshipped the ground Giles walked on and she was this really neat girl, really neat." Willow stopped, and Xander could smell the salt. "That's my fault too. I wanted to make Angel happy. He would just sit by Buffy's bed with this expression like he was lost, and I wanted to show him that he didn't have to feel guilty all the time, and so I cast this happiness spell. Only he wasn't as much with the happiness as he was with the psychotic killing. Kendra died trying to protect me. Angelus killed her."

"And that's why Giles hates Angel." Xander didn't even say it as a question; he knew the answer from the fighting upstairs.

"Big with the hate. She had this really cool accent, and the first time we met her, I thought Wendell would swallow his tongue, which might have been embarrassing except that she blushed and started stammering and it was really love at first bumble." Willow's voice had a soft sadness to it even if she did smile. "After Kendra died, Wendell really was miserable. I
think Larry asked him to prom just to cheer him up, but who knows, maybe he and Larry might have made it if I hadn't--" Willow stopped. And they were back to the squish story. Xander struggled to imagine Willow having to deal with so much pain and loss.

"You've had a hard time, huh?" Xander asked.

Willow shrugged. "Not so easy when demons pretty well run the town. Angel hung around as long as he could, but he was miserable about hurting Buffy, and Giles just drank more and more when he was around. Besides, Faith is holding her own and when we need extra help, Larry and Oz and even Devon will sometimes show up with a stake."

"You and Larry working together, huh? So not natural," Xander tried for a joke. Upstairs voices came through so loud that even Willow glanced up. He doubted she could hear the words, but he could. Angel hadn't wanted him. Angel had to take him or else the demon Xander carried might overwhelm him. Angel would do what he could to excise the demon.

Baby's presence faded as the demon retreated. Xander only realized he had gone into demon vision when it
disappeared, leaving the basement dim and blurry. In the back of his mind, Xander could feel a cold acceptance, but he wasn't as ready to give up as Baby was.

"Xander?" Willow asked as Xander stood. Stairs were out. He definitely couldn't go up against Angel, not with his demon in full retreat. One wall of the basement had a row of high windows, short, fat windows that Xander could see grass on the other side of. Grabbing the coffee table, he dragged it to the wall.

"Xander, I don't think this is such a good idea. Um, I'm thinking this is really a very bad idea."

Xander ignored her. Standing on the coffee table, he fought with the rusty latch.

"Okay, I really don't want to have to tell on you, but I so will, mister."

Xander dismissed her threats as the window opened with a rusty groan and the sharp crack as the painted wood split.

"Mister, don't you dare."
Xander grabbed the sides of the window and pulled himself up until his belly rested on Giles' lawn. A nearly full moon cast cold light over the trees and bushes, making them look almost bluish. Hands grabbed his ankle, and Xander yanked his leg, squirming to get free of the basement.

When Willow screamed, he scrambled up. Giles' nice little home with its picket fence and white siding burst to life with shouts and a few particularly nasty curses. Xander ran for the trees.

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Hours later, Xander sat in a graveyard watching a few last fledges head for crypts as the first birds of dawn whistled. The sky was just as dark as when he'd fled Giles' house, but Xander could feel the dawn in Baby's rising discomfort. He'd wandered the town as he considered his option. The only one that made sense was staying in town and praying Jenny and Willow weren't as good as everyone seemed to think. After all, Willow had gotten that one wrong answer back in third grade.

Xander flinched at his own patheticness. The odds of
Spike just showing up... not really going to happen. Fact is, his plan sucked turkey eggs, only it sucked less than any other plan he'd come up with.

Baby still voted on going to the court and prostrating himself in front of the Anointed One to try and earn a place there, but Xander wasn't big on the eating of random people and doing act of random mayhem. Neither of them really wanted to go back to Angel, even if Baby did feel some perverse loyalty toward a master who wanted to cut him right out of Xander's mind.

Xander allowed his mind to wander back to Spike. Settling in on a headstone, he imagined his sire striding across the graveyard, his leather coat flapping open on each side making Spike look bigger than life. Spike would issue a random curse like 'bloody hell' or 'soddin' twit' and then pop him upside his head for even thinking Spike would leave him.

Feeling the tears, Xander just sat and let them fall. Spike hadn't abandoned him, but he still felt angry. Spike was supposed to be immortal. Spike wasn't supposed to leave him.

Xander heard a heartbeat and wiped the back of his
hands over his eyes. He'd dodged Willow and Tara and Jenny and Angel and Faith a dozen times tonight, but he was just too damn tired to keep running. If they found him, maybe he wouldn't have to make a decision because they were all for making his decisions for him.

The pins and needles tingling started at the base of his spine—slayer.

Faith walked up to him, stopping nearby and leaning on the next headstone over. Xander waited.

"So, you worried people, buddy."

Xander just stared at Faith, feeling Baby circling darkly at the Slayer's sympathy. He didn't need sympathy from a slayer. Shaking off the sudden anger, Xander shrugged. The cemetery was so quiet that the leaves rustling made a backdrop for the songs of the morning birds.

"So, how ya doing?" Faith finally asked.

"Holding like the last stitch on a fat girls pants," he answered. He jumped when Faith slapped him on the arm hard enough to leave a bruise.
"You're five by five, babe. Or, at least you will be," she added after a second. Faith headed to the next aisle and plopped down on a grave stone, one boot hitting the front of stone with every restless kick of her leg.

"Sure." Xander didn't even bother trying to sound like he believed it. They sat in silence, the crickets chirping in the distance and something heavy dragging through the distant bushes. Xander glanced over to see if Faith would go to the slayer bit, but she just sat and continued swinging her legs. Thump. Thump. Thump.

"So, you're part vampire. That's... completely fucking freaky."

Xander huffed a burst of laughter. Then, the sound turned into a longer laugh, one that Xander couldn't seem to stop. He slid off the headstone and let himself sink into the damp ground, laughing until tears rolled down his face and his side ached in a cramp. Leaning forward, Xander struggled to catch his breath as he started getting light-headed. Finally, the laughter tapered off, even as he continued to feel hot tears rolling down his face. Faith still watched, only now her foot hung motionless.
"At least you say it. I got so tired of being told I wasn't acting like a 'normal' pet, that I told--" Xander stopped. He didn't want to say the name. He couldn't say the name. In the back of his mind, he could feel confusion war with pain, and funny enough, he didn't even know which part was him and which part was Baby.

"Angel's clueless. Big lunk says the most offensive shit, and then he gets all broody when people tell him he's an ass," Faith agreed.

"Angel's..." Xander thought for a moment about how to finish the thought. "He's okay," Xander finally finished. Baby sent a stab of frustration through him. Baby obviously thought Angel deserved better than okay. Angel was master. However, Xander retaliated with thought about Angel being a totally shitty master.

"He's five by five," Faith agreed.

"That doesn't actually make sense, five by five," Xander pointed out.

"Yeah, like you're one to talk about making sense. So, what's it like having a demon rattling around in there?" Faith asked as she stared off into the distance where the
dragging noises had now stopped. The wind shook the leaves, rustling them overhead. Well, either than or a ulat demon had crawled up there. He remembered the story where an ulat made these tree branches shake, and two minions went over to investigate. They got snapped up before Spike could even-- Xander cut that thought off.

"Demon boy? You with me?" Faith asked. Xander shot her a disgusted look.

"It's like having a voice that sounds a whole lot like me, but it's urging me to do things I want to do when I know I shouldn't want them."

"And that's different from the rest of us, how?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure that before the demon I didn't have fantasies about ripping the limbs off people and beating them with the bleeding stumps," Xander pointed out. Faith jerked a little but didn't answer immediately. Instead the silence pushed in on them.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "Had a few of those fantasies. And someone took Spike away from you, so you're entitled."
"Aren't you supposed to be the slayer, the one girl in all the world who stops the demons from ripping off human arms?" Xander asked.

"Are you?" Her voice sounded suddenly serious.

"Am I what?"

"A demon?"

Xander stopped. Okay, he had called himself a demon, and in front of the slayer, which was a whole new level of stupid. Baby started to panic, pushing against the wall in his mind that separated them. Xander's heart started pounding right before his vision slid over into the edges and red tones of the demon. Suddenly, Faith appeared in sharp outline against the stone, a few mosquitos wandering in the air between them.

"That's one way to answer," Faith said. Xander could see her body tense so that her arms cored as lines of muscle appeared under the skin. Xander sat up, his heart so loud in his ears that he couldn't hear much besides his heart beat and hers.

"Was that a quiz? because I'm really bad on quizzes. I
always give the wrong answer. Especially on pop quizzes, they're the worst. My English teacher told me I was a pop-quiz moron once, and I'm thinking he was right," Xander stammered as he pushed himself up from the cold ground. Faith just sat on the headstone, leaning forward a bit, and watching.

"Fuck, you and Willow really are buds. You sure you're not related to her?" Faith asked with tilt of her head.

"Related? Wha?"

"That babbling. I always assumed it was a Willow thing. Tara and Larry and Oz--not so much for babbling. But you have it down."

"It's a talent," Xander answered. He forced Baby back so the graveyard returned to the dusky blue of night.

"So, the eye thing. You could make slammin' money in a sideshow with that trick."

"You calling me a freak?" Xander asked with a weak laugh. He couldn't manage more since his tongue threatened to stick to his mouth it was so dry.
"Fuck, yeah. But seeing as how I'm the one slayer in the world, well, except for coma-girl, I don't have much room to criticize on the freak-front."

"So we're heading toward bonding and not slaying, right?" Xander asked. He could feel his own demon complain, a desire to fight twisting around his stomach in cold, slimy coils even if the demon was terrorized by the idea. Of course, maybe Baby wanted to fight because he was terrified. After all, any demon who learned about the world through him had to have a few loose screws.

"I could take you, but I'm not looking to slay," Faith agreed.

Xander could feel the coils around his stomach turn to resentment. "Please, you could not take me."

"Could, too."

"As if."

"You looking to prove something?" Faith demanded as she pushed off the headstone with a sly smile.

"Oh shit. Um, maybe?" Xander stumbled up, his feet
refusing to cooperate as he considered that the slayer was looking at him like a cat considering a fluffy play toy with lots of pink feathers, and now Baby really complained. The world slid back into demon vision as Xander backed away from the slayer.

"Hey, five by five with me. I just have one ground rule," Faith said as she circled slowly. Xander watched her movements as her long legs covered the ground with a restrained grace. She moved like a predator, and Baby itched to throw himself at her.

"Ground rules are good," Xander nodded. He just hoped the ground rules involved no blood, pain, or death. Then again, death would be fine as long as blood and pain weren't involved. Death would actually solve a lot.

"Everyone walks away with limbs more or less intact," she smiled. Xander didn't even have time to object before her foot slammed into his stomach, sending him flying backwards into headstone. The cold grass under his hands and the even colder stone behind his back made him leap up again, even with the ringing still in his ears.

"Bitch," Xander snapped without his mouth even checking with his brain first.
"And proud of it, babe. You got something to show me, or are you going to lay there all day?" Faith stepped up, and before Xander could even realize he was moving, he had taken a kick at Faith's lower leg, connecting with a jarring thump of flesh against flesh.

"Fuck," she cursed as she stumbled to one side, struggling to catch her balance. Xander leapt up in a moment, pressing his advantage. Still off-balance, Faith backed up to a tree where she caught herself by grabbing at a branch. Xander punched but found only air as Faith used her hold on the branch to twist out of the way.

Realizing his mistake, Xander tried to turn, but a sharp crack and Faith had the broken branch in her hand. Xander had only half turned when the solid wood slammed into his side, sending him flying into the truck of the tree. The tree at his back limited too many of his moves, so he danced sideways just as Faith sent a flying kick into the trunk.

"What's the matter? Don't want to dance with me?" she taunted as she followed him. Now Xander and Faith circled each other warily. Xander breathed deeply as the scent of sweat and dirt and car exhaust and musk and
human sifted through to him. Human. Prey. Xander narrowed his eyes and watched Faith's feet as she moved over the uneven ground.

"You smell... interested in more than dancing," Xander pointed out as he identified the musk now floating through the air.

"Good fight gets the engine revving. Thought I'd take a test drive with you."

"But what--" Xander didn't finish, driving forward in the middle of his own comment, and catching Faith off guard. She turned and deflected his attack so that Xander got in a strike to her side, but he also got hit back. Baby roared happily.

Xander stood panting and Faith now held a hand to her ribs. Inside, Xander could feel Baby pressing him to attack the weakness, but Xander held back. She might be faking. He concentrated so much on preventing Baby from raging out of control that he missed the counter attack.

Faith slammed into him with her full weight, and with his feet badly positioned, Xander couldn't prevent a fall.
Instead, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her down with him. She positioned herself so that she fell with a knee in the groin, but Xander ignored the pain and tossed her off to the side before straddling her.

So he looked down as she lay on the ground, his fists in her shirt and her dark hair spread across the grass. "Who's on top now, Slayer?" he growled.

"Oh, bottom can be fun, too," she practically purred, and Xander froze at the sudden image. Despite her open invitation, something smelled wrong. Baby growled his pleasure at the scent of fear, but Xander froze as he realized that her sultry words masked something darker. No. He didn't want that. He didn't want her. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, she bucked up and sent him toppling backwards. Xander scrambled back, but he didn't get far before Faith landed on top of him, pressing him down into the damp earth.

"Of course, steering around the curves is my usual position," Faith said, squeezing her legs on either side of Xander.

The attraction that Xander had felt before burned out as his fury rose. "Get off," he ordered quietly, not willing to
fight when he felt so much hatred. She wasn't his sire; she wasn't even his master. He wouldn't submit to her any more than he'd submit to some poodle with a pink bow in its hair. He was Aurelian.

"I'm trying to get off, or hadn't you noticed?" Faith asked.

Xander felt the ache in his mouth and the cold tingles in his face as his fangs dropped, and then he bucked up, twisting his body so that Faith fell to the side. Instantly, she sprang up into a fighting crouch, and Xander, one knee still on the damp earth, growled as he adjusted his own weight.

"Damn, babe. If you still want to play, I'm up for it."

"I'm not playing. Back off," Xander snapped even as the sound of Faith's beating heart called him, pounding like the sirens he'd read about in The Odyssey, as if he would die if he couldn't reach it.

"Can't take the heat?" Faith asked sweetly. Xander launched himself.

His first attack ended when Faith tossed him into bushes that clawed his skin, leaving long, red, crisscrossing trails
across his arms and face. Faith stood with an amused expression, one hand on a hip and completely unprepared as Xander leapt at her, keeping his attack low. He struck her knees, sending her crashing to the ground hard enough to elicit a breathy grunt.

Ignoring the increasingly faint objections about killing, Xander bared his teeth and landed on top of Faith, driving both his knees into her stomach. The sudden overwhelming scent of fear spiced the air as Xander pinned her hands to the ground.

"Get off," Faith snapped as she struggled below him. Xander smiled, showing his fangs as he slid his knees off her to either side, both trapping her and giving him the leverage he needed to keep her pinned.

"I'm trying to get off, or hadn't you noticed?" Xander mocked her. Faith's eyes went comically large, and Xander felt a brief flair of pride that he had put fear into a slayer. Then a hand grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back with such force that Xander ended up running backwards for several steps as he tried to catch his balance before falling on his ass.

He bounced back up, still growling, only to find himself
faced with a game-faced Angel. Xander hesitated, and before he could say anything, Angel backhanded him with enough force to send him over one set of headstones and crashing into another. Shaking his head to try and clear his thoughts, Xander scuttled backwards as Angel closed the distance.

Part Nine

Groaning his way into consciousness, Xander reached up to feel the sore, swollen flesh around his neck. The memory of Angel's fury came a little slower, but as his brain slowly woke up with the rest of him, Xander could feel the shame and fear nearly overwhelm him. Xander opened his eyes to see the exposed beams and pipes of a basement. Correction--a dirty basement. Xander watched a spider's web highlighted by the dim sun trickling in through a high window. Even Gunn had a nicer basement.

Closing his eyes against the head ache that threatened to pound out the back of his head, Xander rolled toward the side of the narrow bed. The sound of chains clinking came as a surprise.

"So, you're awake."
Xander jumped at the sound of Angel's voice, and the chain rattled as it pulled tight against his ankle. Turning, he saw the vampire sitting on a stool in the shadowed corner of the room. Immediately, Xander could feel the slippery panic of Baby circling in the back of his mind. Baby would have him throw himself on the ground and cringe and beg. However, Xander knew how well that worked.

He remembered being on the phone with his father, struggling to hold back tears as he begged Tony Harris to come to that first birthday after the divorce. Not only had his father not come, but the next time he talked to his father, the man had accused Xander of turning into a sissy. No matter what Baby wanted, Xander wasn't going to repeat that mistake.

"Angel," he said, fighting to keep his voice even as he got himself straightened up. The chain bolted to the wall didn't give him quite enough chain to put his one foot on the ground, and so he tucked his legs under him Indian style. Even after years of being the weak, vulnerable one, he found himself surprised at the depth of his fear as he faced Angel.

"You have control of yourself again?" Angel asked
without moving out of the dark corner. Xander picked at an edge of the blanket, partially pulling it over his lap.

He hadn't been the one to backhand Angel unconscious, so the whole 'who had self control issues' debate raged in his own mind. Luckily, he managed to avoid saying all the not-so-nice things he was thinking. His jeans had a long tear from the left knee down to the cuff from the fight which was closer to a smack-down, and he tucked an edge of the blanket into the rip, shrugging for an answer. Angel sighed.

"Hey, Gel-boy, I told you it wasn't his fault."

Xander jumped as Faith appeared in the open doorway at the top of the steps. Even though Xander only glared for a second, Angel growled, and Xander dropped his eyes down to the blanket. Right. He wasn't a favored childe. He wasn't even a childe. He was a minion whose existence depended on pleasing the master of the line.

Xander sneak ed a glance toward Angel, but the older vampire watched Faith with a blank expression. He returned to picking at the blanket and tucking it into the rip. Tuck. Pick. Pick. Tuck.
"He would have fed on you," Angel said. Xander would have objected, but he didn't think anyone wanted his opinion. Besides, if he were honest, he just wanted to kill her, which probably wouldn't get him added to anyone's Christmas list.


"He looked like he was winning."

Xander ignored Baby's whine; the demon wanted Angel's approval, only the stupid demon didn't understand that Angel didn't approve. Hell, Angel would stake him if he tried it again. Xander suddenly knew that. Well, that would be one way to end it.

"We were just working out some aggression, playing a little," Faith argued. Xander would have disagreed, but his opinion didn't seem to matter right now.

"He's dangerous."

"Newsflash, vamp-man, most people are if you push them hard enough."
"Faith." Angel's voice was dark with warning.

"Angel," Faith snapped back with narrowed eyes. Oh yeah, this was going well. Pick. Tuck. Pick.

"Where were you going?" Angel barked, and Xander didn't respond until Angel strode toward him, fists clenched. Oh, that one was for him.

"Nowhere!" Xander didn't mean to flinch back, but then he did lots of things he didn't mean to.

"To the court?" Angel asked darkly as he closed the distance, standing just at the edge of Xander's cot and glaring down. Xander struggled against terror that stole control of his limbs for a half second. Smiling sarcastically, he looked up.

"That's your thing, isn't it? Playing both sides?"

Angel flashed into game face, and Xander flinched back so far that he clocked himself on the concrete wall, his head making an appropriate hollow thump.

"Whoa, let's all back off a bit. Boy wasn't doing anything but staring at nothing and doing a mighty fine impression
of you when you have a stick up your ass," Faith broke in. Somehow, hearing her take his side just made Xander feel—even worse. Yep, a slayer had to wade in and save him. By jerking, Xander had pulled the blanket out of the tear in his jeans, and now he focused on tucking it back in.

"You don't know what's going on here," Angel said through tightly clenched teeth.

"Yeah, and you're all knowing everything vamp. Look, Xan hasn't done anything to justify knocking his ass out or chaining him up."

"He tried to eat you."

"Yeah, like you never did that," Faith sneered so sarcastically that Xander felt a need to flinch for her. Angel took a step toward her, nearly vibrating with rage, but Faith just crossed her arms and stared back at him.

"Which is why I understand him. Having a demon always whispering, having these feelings rolling around in your gut just waiting for a chance to slip out, it's not an easy way to live," Angel's voice dropped into a soft plea that made Baby even grumpier. "It took me a hundred years
to sort out ways to keep my demon from slipping out, and not everyone I met survived."

Angel turned his back on Faith and retreated to the far wall where he faced the grey cinderblock, his voice dull. "Who do you want him to lose control around? What happens when Willow cuts herself on a knife and the warm smell of blood overwhelms him? What if Tara does her yoga stretches and the sight of her curved neck makes him slip for just one second?" Angel turned around. "What do I do when he loses control and kills one of you, because I'm telling you right now that I don't have it in me to forgive him, or myself, if you underestimate just how much control the demon has.

Faith uncrossed her arms and shook her head slowly. "Xander and I just got out of hand, and I'm the one who started that boulder rolling downhill," she explained.

"Exactly. Things got out of control, and with the demon inside him, they always will." Angel pointed out. "I'll do my best to pull the demon out, and I know a few demons in L.A. who might have suggestions on freeing Xander from the beast, but this isn't a debate. Xander and I will be heading back to LA tonight."
As the two stared each other down, Xander reviewed the drive back to L.A. Maybe there was a nice tall bridge he could jump off between here and there... He certainly didn't want to live the rest of his life chained in Angel's basement. Hell, he could go his whole life without ever seeing Angel again, and he'd be happy. Baby circled uncomfortably, randomly growling at nothing and everything.

Faith remained silent for a long time, and Xander focused on picking at the thin blanket.

"Whatever, but I'll be down to visit, and the boy better still have all his parts attached," Faith warned.

Faith started heading for the stairs, and Xander watched her slowly leave, her eyes going from him to Angel even as she climbed. Nice to know someone gave a damn, even if he really didn't get the whole reason why she gave a damn.

"Faith?" Xander called. Angel glowered at him, and Baby wailed unhappily at obviously pissing master off, but Xander didn't really have much to lose since he had a feeling he was going to do that a whole lot in the near future.
"Yeah?" Faith stopped and leaned over the railing.

"Things are going kinda wonky with the court," Xander warned her. "Spike," Xander paused, the name still ripping a big vampire sized hole in his gut, "he thought something was up."

"What did he say?" Angel demanded as he stepped forward. Xander fought to keep his eyes up and stare back.

"He was surprised... there were zombies and all sorts of demons, I think one might have been a Mohra. The Anointed One told him to steer clear of vampire hunters and someone named Vahrall."

"Vahrall demons?" For the first time, Angel didn't sound even remotely pissed. In fact, that might have been worry on his face as he exchanged looks with Faith. "And a Mohra."

"I'm suddenly thinking we might be fucked," Faith said seriously.

"Are you sure it was a Mohra?" Angel asked.
Xander felt a familiar frustration. Yeah, he never made honor roll or showed much common sense, but it'd be nice if someone didn't think he was completely stupid. Despite Baby's distress, Xander handled it the way he always handled being the geek, the nebbish, the dork with the wrong clothes—sarcasm.

"They're kinda unique, and Spike... he made me study," Xander yanked the corner of the blanket out of his jeans. "So, I have to pee. Are you going to let me use a bathroom or should I just pick a section of wall and aim?"

Angel now looked shocked. "I have the key," he finally answered and Xander stuck his chained leg out aggressively.

Angel paused. "But know this--you are not my childe, and I will stake you if you even think of attacking anyone again. Understand?" Angel leaned close until their noses almost touched. "And I don't just mean my friends--I mean anyone. You so much as growl at a grandmother on the street, and I will put this through your chest."

Xander froze, the sharp point of a stake Angel had pulled from his waist pressing into the flesh over Xander's heart.
"Understand?" Angel repeated, the stake in one hand and the key in the other. Xander nodded with a dry mouth.

Spike woke slowly, groaning as reality returned with painful clarity. Fucking hell. His head pounded like the whole drum section of one of those wretched concerts Darla had dragged him to so often as a fledge. Neither the memory nor the pain made him feel particularly better as he considered the while walls of his cell.

Humans in white coats wandered past the glass wall of the cell, clipboards in hand, and Spike growled as he considered the best way to make them pay for whatever pain he felt. A chain rattled, and Spike exploded into motion, ripping at the manacle that kept him chained, even in the cell.

His attempts to pull loose failed, and even worse, the soddin' idiots on the other side of the glass weren't even impressed with his efforts, which were damn impressive.
"Hostile 7," a human voice announced from the far side of the glass wall.

"Standard vampire?"

"Captured quadrant 5, east of the campus," that first answered. Spike growled at being called standard anything.

"Well, hopefully we'll get some results from this one, or we're going to join Dr. Walsh for a nice round of ice bowling in Antarctica." A white-coated doctor with eyes too far apart for his face wrote something on a clipboard

"I don't know how they expect us to work like this." An older man with gray, buzz-cut hair snorted his disgust. "Seven specimens, six of them from the same subgroup, and yet we're expected to have results."

Spike shook his head, forcing his demon face back as he stared out the glass wall. Right, so this was balls over tits. Spike watched with narrowed eyes as the two humans finished their notes and walked away, still complaining.

"Dr. Engelman," yelled a voice that sounded vaguely familiar, and a tall man came running by in soldier-boy
clothes. "Graham, he's sick again."

The doctor with funky eyes stopped and shoved his clipboard at the grey-haired one before he started running down the hallway, the gray-haired man hurrying close behind.

As the sound of footsteps echoed away, Spike looked around. Whoever decorated had taken the minimalist concept way too far with white tiles on every surface.

"Hey, I'm Gary," a voice hissed from next door. Spike sniffed the air, annoyed by how the glass dulled his ability to scent his neighbor in the next cell.

"Sod off," Spike finally answered as he caught a whiff of something young... still stinking of grave and dead flesh young.

"Man, I know things. Like, they drug the blood to keep us calm, and some of the men who come through here... they stink of vampire rot."

Spike snarled at the idiot even as he appreciated the other vamp's stupidity. In cases like this, information meant everything.
"Yeah?" he said as he casually leaned against the white wall separating them. "What the hell would you know about vampire rot? You still stink of your grave."

"Another vamp, Antonio, he told me," Gary assured him. Gary's voice came again, slightly louder. "Hey, Antonio, there's a new one, and he knows what vampire rot is too."

"Leave me alone." The voice sounded tired, but at least it had some authority behind it.

"Aw, come on," Gary pleaded, the sound giving Spike an urge to grind the younger vamp's face into the floor. He was weak. Git probably wouldn't survive one day in the court.

"If he knows what it is, bug him for stories for a while."

"Man, come on."

"Gary, if we ever get out of here, I'm going to rip your tongue out, you know this, yes?" Antonio answered, his Spanish accent thicker now.
Right, time to make his presence known. "Just wonderin' how soldier boys would develop vampire rot. Not like they're vampires starving for blood and slowly rotting to make their masters happy."

Gary and Antonio both fell silent, even the sounds of restless feet stopping as Spike used his sire's voice.

"No," Antonio answered slowly. "But they drink vampire blood."

"Enough to get rot?" Spike asked, surprised. Why the hell would someone willingly suffer the agony of rot? He remembered Angelus whipping his back open and then dangling some girl just out of range. Spike would twitch in agony as the unhealed flesh slowly turned from undead to dead as the lack of blood drained him of his power. Angelus would keep up the game for days, sometimes cutting his own wrist and nancy-boy prancing just out of range as Spike desperately lunged at him, sometimes letting prey loose in the same room so that Spike crawled toward the food, unable to catch up with it.

Eventually Darla would complain about the smell, and Angelus would bring him either some tied up beauty or a
shriveled cleaning woman who still stunk of Borax and sweat. The best days would be when Spike ignored his pain long enough to time his attack just right to catch the prey and earn his own healing blood.

"Where the bloody hell are we, and what the bloody hell are these wankers up to?" Spike demanded.

"Welcome to the Initiative," Antonio offered. "And if anyone knows what they're up to, they'd be ahead of us. At this point, I'm not sure that even these pendejos know what they're doing."

"Great," Spike said as he sucked on his fangs in frustration. Get free, find his childe, and eat the pendejos. Worked for him.

Part Ten

The humans wandered back through the white hall, and Spike pushed himself up from the floor, consciously
putting on a mask of obsequiousness just like he wore a human face over his demon. Ducking his head submissively, he hunched his shoulders to make himself even smaller. As much as he hated playing the weak fool, the act had helped him survive Darla, and he wasn't letting any soddin' humans turn him to dust now. His demon growled, but the idea of getting out of the cage and eating the wankers gave Spike the strength to play his game.

"I didn't do anything," Spike whined as the humans went by. They ignored him.

"The treatments clearly aren't working. The tolerance increases each time, and the side effects..." the older doctor pled, his hand hovering over the younger doc's arm as though he wanted to grab it.

"And what other choice do we have? Once addicted, nothing but blood works."

"We should at least--"

"Shhh," the younger doc desperately hushed as a soldier stormed in through a door at the far end of the corridor.
"Dr. Engelman," soldier boy snapped, his body screaming with a need to hit something, and for the first time, Spike truly considered the tall human. Boy had some aggression issues, which might be useful.

"Captain Riley, you are not needed here. Dr. Cruz, collect a quarter pint from number four. That should cure Graham."

"Cure?!' Riley's voice lowered to an outraged growl. "This doesn't feel like a cure. My men are getting sick more--"

"And this gives you the strength to--"

"It's unnatural!" Riley bellowed, and Dr. Engelman snapped his mouth closed, his body flinching back from the anger. Oh yeah, now this was more like it. Spike waited for the fists to start, but soldier boy just stood with his hands closed into tight fists that trembled with rage. The sounds of the other doc collecting blood faded into silence.

"Captain, we are all doing our best. You have your orders, and we have ours," Dr. Engelman said softly, his body still tense as though he would take off running any second. And Spike figured the git might have to make a
run for it considering Riley's barely controlled fury. This one would make a lovely vampire... all rage and violence once he'd lost the conscience that kept his fists at his side.

"Won't work. Drinking the blood... it'll just make ya rot from the inside," Spike tried again, keeping his voice soft and subservient. In the next cell, Gary made a strange noise, and Spike willed the fledge to just keep his gob shut. He hated having the other vamps see him act like a weak, sniveling git, but he figured he could dust them once he got out of this soddin' madhouse.

"Shut up," Dr. Engelman ordered. Spike forced himself to flinch back from the voice just when he wanted to lunge forward and snap the moron's neck.

"It'll just hurt more. Humans can't digest it."

"My orders are clear, but you have to know this isn't working," Riley stepped closer to Dr. Engelman.

"It is working. The body just needs to adjust. The results have shown great promise."

Spike interrupted again, fighting to keep from growling
his annoyance at being ignored. He couldn't very well put his plan in action if they didn't bloody listen to him. "I'm old enough ta know things. Know how the blood works. Know how to help your friend."

Spike watched as Riley's eyes jerked to him immediately.

"What?" Riley demanded as he stepped up to the glass. The way he moved reminded Spike of Angel... the way he used his large body to command attention. Even more than before, Spike felt a burning need to throw himself at the boy and prove his strength by draining the body and leaving it lying in an awkward pile of skewed arms and legs. Instead, he reminded himself that strength came in more than one form as he forced himself backwards away from the glass as he indulged in a bit of fantasy with all the humans mangled at his feet.

"The more ya give 'em, the more the pain's just going to come back. I'll trade information for my freedom, or maybe some nice fresh blood," Spike tried again, whining like the worst of the court fledges. Oh yeah, he would bloody kill every last wanker who saw him acting like some half-arsed minion.

"Don't listen--" Dr. Engelman started saying, but Riley cut
him off.

"Your experiments are just making my men more and more sick."

"If ya keep drinking blood, the pain'll just get worse. I'm older. I know things." Spike did his best to imitate the irritating fledgling Dru had turned in the twenties. Git had made it two whole weeks before Spike had torn off his head.

"The protocols have resulted in higher performance levels across the board, Captain Finn. Our experiments represent the best chance to develop a defense against the hostiles," the doctor insisted as he ignored Spike all together. Spike added the man to the torture before killing list.

"You are not Dr. Walsh. Your experiments have resulted in more men being in the infirmary than available for patrol." The boy was so angry that his body had gone stiff and still so that he looked like a cardboard cutout of a soldier.

"These are temporary setbacks."
"Been around a long time. I've never heard of a human surviving after drinking too much of that. Now lots of humans pay for a little extra," Spike whispered to the soldier, making up the plan as he went. Angelus never had liked his lack of planning, but then Angelus had never tried to deal with humans as nutter as these lack-brains. Fact was that a few mages used vampire blood in some spells and potions, but only idiots would drink the shite straight, at least not without trying to turn someone.

Captain Cardboard glanced at him again.

"I tell you, and you'll do right by me, yes?" Spike whispered as he glanced toward the doctor as though afraid. "You'll remember if I help ya?"

Spike could see the doubt in Riley's eyes. Before knowing Xander, Spike would have tried to bribe the boy with promises of power, but now he slid forward and made another offer. "Can cure your friend. It's an old trick. Works every time. It's a good way ta give human helpers a little extra protection, extra healing."

"What is it?" Riley asked, ignoring both Dr.--'s frown and the second doctor who now stood next to him, a bag of blood in hand.
"You'll do right by me?" Spike forced his shoulders to slump. "Yeah?"

Riley just crossed his arms and stared through the glass. Spike barely caught a growl from erupting.

"It's blood, but the body can't digest it. A little vampire blood over a cut... just enough to let blood and blood mingle." Spike stilled. It all depended on them falling for that little piece of half-truth. Well, than and them using his blood for the little experiment.

"That's unacceptable. It could result in turning or some sort of half-vampire," Dr. Engelman immediately dismissed it.

Spike shook his head. "Have to drain someone to turn 'em. But blood touching blood will give ya a bit of a boost. If I'm lying, I'm still here, chained to the wall. Wouldn't do that."

"And if you're lying, I'll make it a personal goal to make you beg for death," Riley snarled as he slapped a bare palm against the glass wall. Spike flinched back, cowering in the corner even as he promised to bathe in their
bloody entrails as soon as he got out.

"There's no way--"

"Do it." Riley said quietly.

"What?" Dr. Engelman was still shaking his head as he looked at Riley in shock.

"I'm not going to stand by while Graham and Forest and the others on your 'program' slowly die from this."

"Graham is far too weak for us to experiment. As soon as he has another dose of blood, he'll recover and we might consider some laboratory tests on his blood's reaction to direct contact with hostile blood."

"He doesn't have time." Riley turned his back and strode down the hall with sharp footsteps that echoed off the walls. For a moment, Spike thought he'd lost, but then the glass slid open. He watched as Riley returned, stepping into his cell and standing at the edge. Part of Spike wanted to throw everything into ripping the chain loose, but for once in his life, he needed to just follow through on a plan.
Riley held a thick knife out. "Give me your arm," he ordered.

Spike inched forward, shaking his head. "I'll heal too fast. You need to cut yourself first to make sure the blood's still flowing," he said. For a second, Riley looked at him with cold eyes, and then he pulled the sharp edge against his forearm, opening a shallow cut across his arm.

"Just remember, if you're lying, I will make you suffer like no creature on earth ever has," he warned as he pointed the tip of the knife in Spike's direction. Silently, Spike held out his arm. Riley grabbed his wrist and made a quick deep cut into the flesh. As Riley held his own wound under Spike's bleeding cut, Spike could feel his demon swell. For a second, he felt like a rubber band being slowly stretched, and then something snapped.

The world turned reddish as Spike flashed into game face. Riley stared back, seemingly unaffected, but Spike could hear his heart race. Spike could also smell the clear scent of demon now drifting under the soap and gunpowder odor of Riley. Now Spike just needed to figure out a way to use his newly made pet.
Spike paced uncomfortably as he waited for something to happen. A third doctor had come and taken blood from Gary, but nothing else had happened since Riley left with the two doctors nattering on about isolation and tests. The only thing he hated more than playing the moron was being bloody bored.

Spike reached the glass wall and the end of the chain again, and gave it one more yank just for good measure.

"Won't break," Gary offered.

"Shut the fuck up," Spike snapped back. Gary made another of his strange little noises and then fell silent as Spike paced the four steps to the back wall. Fuck the "make a pet" plan, he just should have tried to snap the soddin' chain when the wall was open. Besides, making a pet obey required a serious beating or sex. He doubted he'd have a chance to try either.

The image of Xander flashed across Spike's memory. Boy had followed without either. Of course, boy hadn't really been a pet. Spike shoved a rising nest of fear aside. He couldn't afford to think of his childe right now because if he did, he'd be lost. He remembered seeing Dru across
the river, her clothes ripped by the sticks and pitchforks of the mob. A hundred voices had fused into one scream for her blood. Dru had snapped at one with her fangs, and then she had tilted her head in confusion, probably hearing some voice in her head.

Spike had finally waded into the dark, polluted water of the Vltava. His clothes sucked up the water and dragged at him, but he couldn't even think straight enough to shed them. Instead he plowed through the murky water as he struggled to reach her side, even if it had been just to turn to dust by her side. Instead, he hadn't even made it half way before he'd seen her shimmer into dust and then vanish in the light of the full moon. Spike had just stopped swimming, the current pulling him miles down river before he'd finally crawled out onto the rocky shore.

He'd been careless, leaving victims who could identify them. Of course, now he knew that Cassidy had turned the crowd on them, but he remembered the ash taste of guilt in his mouth. He tasted that again as he thought of his own arrogance at ignoring the shuffling sound of human footsteps in the dark. He'd dismissed these wankers, and now his childe was out there, on the Hellmouth, alone.
Spike's mind shifted to nightmare images of Xander broken or chained to the Anointed One's throne. Forcing those thoughts aside, Spike paced harder. No time for turning into a nancy-boy brooder like Peaches.

Spike yanked at the chain again. Stupid, nancy-boy plan. Angelus loved the complex plans with the thousand things that could, and usually did, go wrong. Spike was more the hands on sort, and he cursed himself for not just going for the ripping the chain free and smashing heads into walls plan. 'Course, the chain didn't seem to rip free all that easily.

The door whispered open at the far end of the corridor, and Spike froze. Even before the figure appeared, he could feel the slight twitches and pulls at his demon. Riley-pet then. Spike watched as the soldier came in and silently walked toward Spike's enclosure.

Spike leaned against the wall and considered soldier-boy. Without turning the human's emotions back on himself through fear or lust, he couldn't really control him properly, but obviously he could influence him. This time, when Riley came to the glass, he looked more confused than confrontational.
"Your friend okay, then?" Spike asked. Riley started nodding immediately, and then he stopped and shook his head like a dog coming out of the water.

"He's better. They used a small transfusion of five's blood." Spike glanced toward the wall where Gary and Antonio had their cells. Antonio might not be able to fully use the bond, he sounded a bit young yet, but if he understood what Spike had done, he might be able to influence the git thought their connection.

"Why?" Riley sounded confused. Spike cocked his head as he wondered what the demon whispered into Riley's mind. Bloody stupid volunteering himself like that, but then, lately Spike had some experience with that kind of stupidity. If the boy was anything like his own childe, maybe soldier-boy felt something even stronger than lust or fear.

"Not all demons are out ta end the world, mate," Spike offered. With the demon in Riley, he wouldn't play weak any more, but he couldn't make the human feel threatened. For this to work, soldier-boy needed to take the demon's thoughts for his own. Otherwise, the wanker would just fight tooth and nail ta get free. Spike
shrugged. "Take me, I like the world right where it is."

"You're evil," Riley shook his head.

"Maybe. Had a friend once told me that I'm no more evil than a leopard. Just want to go about my business."

Riley shivered, either in response to Spike's voice or his own demon's whispers. Xander had said he felt the demon as if it were some dark part of himself, so Spike just needed to make sure Captain Cardboard kept thinkin' that.

"Seems like experimenting on you lot is more evil that eating a few hairy-arsed idiots. Aren't they supposed to be on your side?"

Spike watched Riley's eyes narrow as he fought some internal battle.

"Hostiles threaten the country," he finally said.

"Bloody boring threatening a country, I'm more hands on," Spike joked. Riley's body tense, and Spike could feel the connection between them go taut as Riley obviously struggled. "Sides, I don't really fight on the side of chaos"
anymore," Spike shifted his argument slightly. "Have a mate, a human friend, wouldn't want to make him all cranky."

"You...?" Riley was back to looking confused. If not for the cage and chain, Spike might have found the whole thing amusing. "You have a human friend?" Riley finished.

"Yeah. You lot tossed him in the van with me, but then ya tossed him out somewhere."

"The boy with dark hair."

"Yeah," Spike agreed.

"He's your friend?"

"Yeah, mate, he is. And he's a right white hat, savin' damsels in distress and all."

Now Riley shook his head as he obviously struggled with that idea. "No. You eat people. This town, it's being overrun with demons. They kill."

Again, Spike could feel his control slipping away as the
soldier reasserted himself.

"Bloody right," he agreed, and Riley actually leaned forward, his hand slapping the glass, as though Spike's agreement had thrown him off balance both physically and mentally. "Powerful little git called The Anointed One is brewin' up some serious shite with a pack of demons that shouldn't even be in the same dimension together, much less a room. He's got Vahrall comin' in, and they're ending the world sorts, them. Now I don't really want the world endin', and I know my mate would be right put out seeing as how he's human. Problem is, these gits in green interrupted me before I could get any details."

Spike willed Riley to believe him. 'Course it was only half true, but if the boy's streak of protectiveness ran as deep as it seemed to, Spike might just be able to keep this plan from going tits up.

For the second time, Riley shook his head like a dog, as if he could physically rattle his thoughts back in order.

"No. It's not possible." Riley argued, but his words came out strained and soft.
"Oi, not lying. Tell ya what, I'll give you a bit of proof." Spike waited until Riley looked up at him. "But you have to make a promise."

"I'm not promising a hostile anything," Riley immediately answered, his voice stronger than before.

"Promise that if my Xander's at this place I tell you, that you won't bring these wankers down on him. You already saw he's human, and if I'm turning ta dust in this place, I at least want to know he's safe. Promise me you won't let Dr. Frankenstein touch him." Spike leaned forward, putting his palm on the glass. If he gave Riley the warehouse, he wouldn't have a bolt hole, and he might be putting Xander in danger, but he couldn't leave his childe alone, and it was the best proof Spike had.

"Xander? If he's human..." Riley's voice trailed off, and Spike could practically read the soldier's thoughts. Graham and his crew were human, yet the scientists had made guinea pigs of them.

"Promise me, and I'll take your word for it," Spike pressed. Riley paused and then nodded sharply, his mind clearly made up.
"He's safe. I won't give his name to anyone."

"Right, two-story warehouse at the northwest corner of Mill and 3rd. If I were evil, or if I were even cranky, I'd drain Xander for making me listen to his soddin' country music collection, but you'll see. The bloody music, and if the universe likes me just one little bit, Xander are both safe as houses. Not all vampires treat humans like walking happy meals. And I'm not out ta end the world, or even willing to sit back and let someone else end it, now am I?"

"Mill and 3rd." Riley repeated slowly. Spike could feel him balanced on the edge of believing and giving in to the demon voice.

"You go and see. Xander and me, we live together without me seein' him as a meal. And then we need ta figure out what to do about a runt of a Hellmouth Master who seems ta be trying to open a portal to hell right in the middle of California, yeah?"

Spike thought he might have pushed too far from the way Riley went still, his whole body pausing unnaturally with one hand half raised. It was as though the boy had been caught in time, and then, after three heartbeats, he
Part Eleven

The minute he climbed through the concrete tunnel into the night air, Spike took a deep breath and immediately started digging through duster pockets looking for his cigarettes. Stupid bloody buggers must have stolen them.

The other escapees, Gary with his long stringy hair cut in an 80's mullet and Antonio with his dark eyes and cropped hair, followed him out into the night. There weren't many people or vampires Spike could look down at--his new pet had a good six inches on him--but Antonio stood several inches shorter than Spike. Both vampires looked near starved. Finally Riley climbed out, his eyes scanning the dark trees on one side of the storm wash and the park-like clearing on the other. Only on the Hellmouth would a normal storm drain lead to a multi-
million dollar secret government facility.

"You need to clear out of here before regular patrol," Riley muttered. Gary hissed, his long stringy hair sticking to his lips as he thrust his face aggressively toward the soldier. Without comment, Spike ripped off a low hanging branch and jabbed the jagged end into Gary's heart. Then he pulled it out so quickly that Gary didn't have time to do more than look confused before his body exploded into a shower of dust.

Riley leapt back, blinking either to clear them of dust or in surprise, Spike didn't know and frankly didn't care.

"But..."

"Warned him, didn't I?" Spike answered before Riley could even gather his thoughts enough to ask. The demon obviously whispered in his mind because Riley tilted his head in confusion before shaking it like an oversize dog. If Dru had been around, Spike would have tied the boy up with a bow and given him to his dark plum. Problem was, Spike wasn't sure what to do now that soldier boy had broken them out, convinced he was helping save the world from both demons and mad scientist types.
Spike hadn't made a pet before, and now that he had, he was caught between frustration that he'd been forced to claim a soldier boy and a familiar feeling of possessiveness. He didn't want to leave Riley behind any more than he'd leave his duster. Spike considered that comparison for a moment, remembering the feeling of utter elation when he'd killed the slayer and earned his duster. Okay, he didn't want to leave Riley behind any more than he'd leave his lighter. On the other hand, boy wasn't fully broken, and the bit about saving the world probably wouldn't last long once Riley saw Spike snack on some human Happy Meal.

So, eat him, leave him, or fuck him into full submission. Spike postponed the decision for the moment, focusing instead on Riley's unspoken question about the now dusty Gary.

"If the git couldn't control his darker side, he had no business bein' in on this," Spike spun the truth like a silken spider web. "Vahrall demons are a dangerous lot, and we can't afford soddin' mistakes."

After not more than one of Riley's heartbeats, Antonio nodded, his dark crew-cut bobbing in the light from the
nearly full moon. Maybe this one had enough sense to keep around. "If we wish to stop the Hellmouth from opening, we can afford no distractions," he agreed.

Riley shook his head again, and his hand rested on the butt of his tazer. "But he was one of you."

"Oi, not even. Can't say all people are on the same side, and I reckon it's the same with our lot," Spike objected, "and I don't bloody leave enemies alive... not even to torture 'em and bleed 'em." Spike added the last part as he glared back toward the dark exit they'd just crawled out of. While he watched, a small light flickered unsteadily and then stabilized to a dull, yellow glow.

"They've got the generator up, you have to go." Riley sounded desperate now.

"Right then, we're off," Spike agreed. Before he could even turn, something crashed through the bushes on the far side of the clearing, and Initiative soldiers in black charged across the lawn, flowing around the park bench with practiced ease.

"Fuck," Riley swore. Antonio froze for a scant second, but when Spike took off in the opposite direction, he
followed with a growl of "Pendejos!"

Random curses colored the air as Spike dodged around tree trunks. A thwap sent him dodging left when the silver tangs from a tazer sank into the white trunk of a birch tree. Vines snatched at him, but Spike just powered through the growth, ripping green creepers from trees as he dashed over the uneven ground.

Behind him, human footsteps crashed though the bushes. He darted to the right, and faintly heard a curse behind him before he nearly collided with Antonio. The younger vampire fell back a half step, running just behind Spike. Worked for him seeing as how the soldier-boys would get Antonio first.

A brick wall appeared almost without warning, and Spike crouched and leapt, clearing the structure and landing on the manicured lawn of the college. Crowds. Wankers wouldn't dare chase them into a crowd... too much chance of random Happy Meals getting killed.

Behind him, Spike could hear the ungraceful charge of soldiers through the bushes as he dashed east... toward the faint vibrations of a thumping bass pounding out loud music. Part of Spike wanted to turn and face the soldiers
head on. He wanted to growl his fury and rip through flesh like tissue paper. He wanted to drink them and feel them squirm and struggle in his grip until they slowed and finally submitted to him and to death. However, he couldn't bloody do it with a dozen of the wankers all carrying tazers. As Spike finally turned the corner and spotted the frat house on across the street, Spike simply promised himself that he would track them down later. Now, he just needed to lose them.

Spike slowed down as he strode across the street, one more punk party goer looking for some free beer and maybe a few drugs to send him flying. On the lawn stood a college student with pink hair; she smiled at him, and Spike winked back as he hopped up on the curb, heading for the brick house.

"Goin' in, luv?" Spike practically purred. Pink-hair girl looked at him out of the side of her eyes, arching her neck and shrugging her shoulders non-committally. Oh yeah, this one was already flying and putting out the invitations. Spike edged closer, checking behind him in a single glance. He spotted a dark crew-cut on a short, thin man on the other side of the street. Antonio turned and looked at him for a second before dropping his eyes back down, but he started across the street.
Spike smirked. Looked like he had one follower. He hadn't been sure whether Antonio could control the demon's urge to turn and fight or if he were old enough to take off on his own.

"You going in?" Pink-haired girl asked as she gestured toward the house and drifted closer.

"Figured I'd get a bit of something. Invite me in with ya, and I'll play escort," Spike offered, and he reached out, running a finger up her warm arm. The girl shivered.

"Nice accent."

"Not the nicest thing about me. If you ask right, maybe I can show ya what I'm really known for." Spike winked and slipped a hand around the girl's waist. She swayed a little and smiled at him. "So, how 'bout that invite?" Spike asked as he gave her a small push to get her moving toward the crowded house.

"Oh, you're definitely invited in," the girl nodded as Spike headed up the wide steps. A boy no older than his own Xander lay on his back, staring at the underside of the porch ceiling with a beer bottle in hand while a couple
sitting on the railing caught a few awkward gropes.

"Right then, maybe we can find a nice corner to play," Spike suggested as they walked through the entrance. Seeing as how the soldiers and doctors treated Spike as if he were some rabid dog, they wouldn't believe him capable of hiding in the middle of all this flesh without tasting a bit. So, if Spike had played this right, they'd go running off looking for him and their little gadgets wouldn't do them any good in the middle of the mass of writhing, stoned human bodies moving in time to the music blasting from the stereo.

Pink girl shimmied up against him, and Spike slipped his hand into her waistband, letting his fingers trail south as she smiled widely, a tongue ring glinting in the dark of her mouth. Twisting and coiling his body invitingly, Spike pulled at the girl, drawing her into the middle of the crowd even as he slipped his fingers farther south. He let them trace the valley down until she shivered helplessly and pressed herself to him, her breasts crushed against his chest.

Spike leaned in and kissed her neck, smelling the scent of lust and drugs. Antonio wandered in the door, walking right in front of Riley who scanned the crowd with an
earnest desperation that would surely catch someone's attention, even in this lot. Lifting his head, Spike nodded briefly at Antonio who then turned and whispered something to Riley. The minute Riley saw Spike, his body relaxed, the eyes that had darted wildly settled on watching Spike.

Spike went back to scenting the girl in his arms as he watched Riley move to a position next to the window, snagging an abandoned beer before leaning against the wall. To anyone else, he looked like one more partier tired out from the dancing, but Spike could see the way he scanned the grounds, watching for danger. At least, he watched the grounds when his eyes didn't dart back to Spike, watching his every move. Spike remembered some of Dru's pets doing the same thing, especially when they were new or when she'd bring home a second toy before eating the first.

The slavish need to see master fed Spike's ego, but it did make for another problem. He needed to feed, but his story wouldn't hold up if Riley saw him pull some girl into a closet. The girl shimmied, pressing even closer as her hands explored under his duster, wrapping around him and teasing him with the scent of warm willing blood.
"So cold. I'll have to warm you up," she muttered into Spike's shirt. Spike placed another kiss on her neck before sucking gently at the skin. She mmmmm'ed into his shirt, her fingers slipping under his silk to run nails lightly over his back. He hated partial feedings. He hated the fear that would crawl into his belly at the thought that he'd left a victim alive and able to point at him, point the mob toward them. His stomach crawled at the thought, but soldier boy still watched him with wary eyes, and he could turn Spike in even faster if Spike killed, and Spike couldn't keep fighting all the soldier-boys if he didn't have blood.

Bracing himself against the buzzing fears that stung him, Spike opened his mouth and ran dull teeth over the girl's neck. Pink girl clutched at his back, digging nails in as she made appreciative moans. Spike's body rippled with the music and he used the movement to get his knee between her legs.

"Should find some place more private," she suggested, digging her nails in deeper. Spike smiled without lifting his lips from her neck. Slowly, he pressed in, yanking her body closer.

She jerked once, and then, as he started sucking, her
back arched as she gasped her desire. Fighting his own need to drink her down in huge swallows until her heart staggered to a stop, Spike timed his feeding to her heart, sucking out a mouthful with each beat. Pink girl started thrashing, her head thrown back and her pink hair flying as she gasped out a mantra of 'oh gods.'

Her body trembled, and Spike brought his knee up, forcing her legs apart as he pressed into her clit with his leg. Now she went wild, rubbing herself against him madly as her moans reached a crescendo. Spike started truly feeding now, drawing the blood out in satisfying gulps, and the girl cried out.

For a moment, Spike struggled against the instinct to finish her and the fear of leaving her alive. Every cell screamed at him to take her, to drink until she sagged in his arms and he possessed every bit of her. Instead he pulled out, licking the two tiny wounds until no more ruby drops appeared.

Now the girl leaned into him, her heart slowing as she smelled of a woman's completion.

"Fuck yeah," she finally muttered as she held on to him like a life preserver.
"Told ya I had parts nicer than my accent," Spike said smugly. He hadn't partially fed since Prague, but he obviously still had the talent. He started toward Riley, his arm around the girl to steady her. Soldier-boy looked vaguely panicked, and Spike needed to deal with him before he went and alerted the troops. No good denying himself the joy of feeding just to have Riley squeal anyway.

Weaving through the crowd, Spike finally reached Riley who immediately reached out for the girl's neck, either to check for a pulse or a bite. Spike didn't know which Riley expected, but he'd find both.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked as he bent down a bit to look the girl in the eye.

"You're just fine, aren't you, pet?" Spike prompted her.

"Oh fuck yeah," she breathed happily, a stupid smile over her whole face. "He should charge for that."

Spike sucked in his cheeks in amusement when Riley just looked slightly bewildered as his eyes went from the girl to Spike and back.
"You shouldn't just let some guy--" Riley started, the girl cut him off, shoving at him ineffectually with hands that flopped.

"Buddy, I don't need a lecture. You're ruining the whole post-orgasm bliss here."

When Riley didn't step back, she snorted her disgusted and pulled out of Spike's arms, stumbling over to the stairs, where she collapsed on the second step, slipping her hand inside her own pants as she laid back. Spike watched the show for a few seconds: the girl's head rested on a higher step, leaving the front of her neck curved out deliciously, and either the drugs or an exhibitionist streak left her squirming on her own fingers while those dancers who weren't too stoned to care watched.

"She's okay?" Riley said uncertainly.

"Bloody hell, it's not like a vampire has to kill a human to feed," Spike rolled his eyes. "So, you were with those sadistic soldier boys up until a few minutes ago, what're they going to do now?" Spike asked as he leaned back against he wall.
Riley's body went stiff for a moment, his fists clenched as he fought some internal battle. "They're good men," he offered, which didn't even come close to answering Spike's question. Spike raised an eyebrow. "It's Engelman and his kind, not us soldiers. It hasn't been the same since Dr. Walsh left."

"You're not one of them anymore, mate," Spike pointed out, and Riley tightened his fists so tight that cords of muscle appeared in his arms.

"I should turn myself in. You're out, so you go do what you need to in order to keep the Hellmouth closed."

"No," Spike said simply. Antonio wandered closer, and his dark skin looked even darker. The vamp had fed without creating any screaming mob, which was one more point in his favor.

"I need to." Riley took a step toward the door, and Spike grabbed his arm in a vice-grip.

"No," he repeated. "Those wankers have bollocked up the whole mess. You'll stay with me until I tell ya different." Spike watched Riley's eyes dilate, the black
swallowing the blue until only a ring of blue remained.

"I should..." Riley said weakly, his voice trailing off to nothing. Hadn't even taken fear or lust to bring the boy under control, and having a soldier, especially one with knowledge of tactics, might come in mighty handy. If Spike had time to wait a full day, he'd turn the soldier, but right now, finding Xander wouldn't wait a day.

"You should help me find my mate and then stop the Hellmouth from opening," Spike finished for him. "We're going under cover. You play the obedient servant, and I'll get us into places where you'll never get alone. We'll infiltrate demon central, we will," Spike tempted Riley. "You'll help save the world."

Riley remained transfixed for a second, and then he blinked and the blue had returned to his eyes, his pupils once again normal. For several minutes, he blinked owlishly, his face a mask of confusion. Then something settled into his skin and he nodded slowly.

"Right, so what does it mean to play your servant, and where are we going?"

"I figure the court'll know where Xander is and seeing as
how it sits right on top of the Hellmouth with dozens of
demons, that's the place to start," Spike answered. "So,
tell me how the soldiers work and how we get from here
over to the north end cemetery without getting shot."

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"Still don't know why we don't just beat up a few guys
over at Willie's and get the truth out of them. There are
always a few vamps creeping around that place," Faith
complained.

Xander kept his eyes on Angel's boots, but he had
obviously missed something. They didn't need to go
anywhere to find vamps, they'd passed at least two of
them just walking to this cemetery. Xander could feel his
demon growl at each who passed. Of course, growling at
people was definitely not on the menu of things to do,
well, unless that menu was titled ways to get killed. But
then vamps weren't really people, so maybe growling at
a vamp would just lead to more getting bitch slapped,
which might actually be better than the whole ignore-
the-minion thing Angel had going on.

Angel stopped, and Xander moved to the side and
waited, looking off in the opposite direction from Angel and Faith.

"Those vamps aren't in the clan, they don't know anything," Angel answered after a minute.

"It'll still make me feel better," Faith answered. Something snapped, the sound echoing slightly off the huge stone mausoleum they stood in front of, and Xander could feel his demon's desperate need to look to see if Angel had a tree branch at his backside. He struggled to keep the demon facing away from the danger.

"Do you have the candle?"

"I don't mind saying that wandering around a cemetery waving a candle is not big with the making me feel better," she complained but a zipper opened.

Angel sighed heavily. Since Xander couldn't really annoy the big, broody one too much before getting pinned to the ground and growled at, he could at least enjoy Faith annoying the vamp. A shadow passed from one tree to another as a stray vampire ran along the inside wall of the cemetery.
A snick of a lighter, and the bones of the dark trees appeared faintly yellow.

"Noley me January, Umbrella listens sap ender man 'um sumper me 'effin dater," Angel chanted solemnly. Xander took a wild leap and guess that the vamp was chanting in something other than English... either that or Xander had finally lost the last of his marbles. The wind picked up, and clouds suddenly blocked the moon.

For a dark moment, Xander felt like something cold and huge brushed against his soul, and Baby cringed back, its first instinct to throw itself on the ground seeking Angel's protection. This time, Xander had to turn around. When he did, he fell back several steps away from the huge ghostly face that projected out from the door to the mausoleum.

The mouth opened, and Xander shivered in dread at its answer. "Illae res occultae sun tempature et locis obscure. Enuntiare illas chaos super orbem vivum terrarum ferat." Yep, definitely another language.

Angel babbled back at it, and the huge head drew up, anger etched into the smoke.
"Noli petere! Perturba nos non diutius!" the head yelled, and then the smoke sucked back into the stone like I Dream of Genie smoke, only that definitely wasn't Genie. Xander had plenty of late night rerun fantasies with Genie, but this thing was more of the nightmare producing variety.

"Well that went well," Faith said sarcastically. She had a stake gripped in her hand so tightly that her knuckles had turned a lighter color, but other than that, she was a picture of disinterest as she leaned back against a headstone.

"It was worth a try," Angel said tightly as he blew the candle out.

"Well, you and Giles are sometimes a little too much with the thinking. I have a simple approach to life. See. Slay. Go find someone to bump humps with after."

Angel made a strangled noise as he turned and headed back toward the exit.

"Like him. I'm thinking he knows something," Faith dashed between the headstones before Xander had even
spotted yet another random vamp lurking along the inside wall toward the entrance to the Aurelius lair.

Angel hesitated, and Xander could feel a need to follow Faith even as he fidgeted and waited for Angel. When Faith had covered about half the ground, Angel took off after her, and Xander followed. Slaying vamps he knew how to do. For the first time, Baby felt a flare of hope at being able to impress master. Since master hunted other vamps, Baby could prove that he was a worthy fighter to battle beside master.

This wasn't a fledge; he dropped into a fighting stance and growled as Faith flew into him with her first attack. The kick drove the fledge back into the wall, but he tossed the slayer to the side, sending her rolling on the grass. She leapt right back up and dropped into a more cautious crouch.

"That the best you got? Come on, I wanna play," she taunted as she threw a punch. The vampire fell back away from that punch, and Xander crept forward a half inch. Angel's hand falling on his shoulder pulled him back.

"Slayer," the vampire hissed.
"Name's Faith," she corrected him, and a sharp in and out with her left, and then a half second later, the vamp exploded into dust.

"Too easy," she complained as she turned away.

"Faith," Angel said softly, stepping forward. Xander could feel his own heart race as he watched shadows detach from the trees, fangs flashing as a dozen vampires closed on them.

Faith turned to look. "Well, fuck." She cracked her neck first one way and then the other. "It's all five by five. Let's kick a little vampire ass."

Xander couldn't control the bounce in his legs as he watched the enemy close, and Angel finally let go of him to pull a stake out from under his coat. However, all Xander's excitement and blood lust vanished under confusion and shock when he spotted the white hair.
Well, bugger plan number.... Spike couldn't remember which plan he was on right now, but Xander standing beside the great poofy one buggered it. A couple of the Anointed One's minions hesitated when he stopped, but then they surged forward, throwing themselves against the slayer as ordered. Only Antonio held back, watching Spike as he picked up on some signal that told him things had changed. And Riley just stood behind Spike, still shocked and silent, like he had pretty much been since he'd seen the court. Boy's world view obviously hadn't included demonic communities.

"It's all five by five. Let's kick a little vampire ass," the slayer said with a wiggle of her hips. Immediately, Spike was caught between wanting to applaud her attitude and wanting to drink her down. He did neither.

"Master?" Riley asked, the crash course on human behavior in court obviously still sticking.

"She's the slayer... one human given powers to stop evil and save the world and all that rot," Spike said absent-
mindedly as he watched Angel take up a defensive position in front of Xander. The git obviously didn't plan on jumping to the slayer's rescue. Xander, on the other hand, looked nearly ready to vibrate out of his own skin as his eyes snapped from one attacker to another. He was clearly ready to throw himself at the nearest vamp.

"What is it?" Antonio asked as he took a step forward toward the fight, probably feeling the same burning need for violence that Spike felt. Riley just stared as the slayer took a hit and then popped back up with a wide smile. Her opponent turned to dust and she charged right through the cloud to attack two more. Once everyone had their eyes on the slayer's dance, Spike took his own stake and slammed it into Antonio's back, watching as the vamp turned to dust without ever turning around.

"New plan. Step one, get rid of the extra baggage," Spike muttered as he stepped through the Antonio cloud. He had one chance to impress the slayer with bein' on her side, and he couldn't bloody afford to squander it. So he grabbed one of the Anointed One's minions by the back of his neck. He slipped the stake in the fat vampire's back and then flinched away from the storm of dust created when he exploded.
"Are we..." Riley let his voice trail off, but his hand moved to his waist band where he had hidden the rough stake Spike had given him.

"Have at 'em, mate," Spike gave his permission just as the slayer sent two scrawny fledges flying through the air. Both landed on their backs just in front of Spike and Riley, and the gits obviously hadn't kept up with the change in plans because they just lay there like overturned bugs, not even trying to defend themselves against Riley and Spike. Buggers were so stupid, staking them was doin' the Anointed one a favor, not that Spike thought the pipsqueak would see it that way. Riley dropped down to his knees next to the first vamp, driving the stake in before rolling through the ash to stake the second one without missing a beat.

Almost immediately, Riley was on his feet and moving into the fight, stake forward. Oh yeah, this one would make a lovely minion—all grace and predatory instincts. Riley staked a third in the back as it snarled at the slayer, and the dark-haired girl gave Riley a salacious smile and wink before ducking an attack from the rear. The attacking vamp overshot and rammed into Riley, sending them both crashing to the ground.
Seeing another vampire baring teeth at his pet, Spike's demon rose to the front and he charged forward, pulling the wanker off Riley and ripping his head from his body. On the ground, Riley looked up with wide, panicked eyes, and Spike held out a hand to help the human up. When time came, he'd decide to eat or turn his pet--no minion would get a fang in him.

Angel had stepped closer, and Xander stood behind him, yellow bleeding into those brown eyes, but the slayer still fought with the three strongest minions... the three who had enough control and common sense to wait until the others had worn her down. One darted in, backhanding the slayer, and she wasn't bouncing back nearly as quickly now. She staggered backwards, and Spike teetered between two courses.

A minion kicked at her leg, and she went down; however, when he fell on her to feed, he turned to dust. Once his dust cleared, Spike could see the stake the slayer had tucked in close to her body. Decision made, Spike sailed into the last two, dusting one with a short jab while shoving the other to the ground with his shoulder. The slayer wasted no time in dusting the one on the ground, and Spike backed away, his hands held up in surrender.
"Got no problem with you, slayer," he said even though his fangs itched to have at her. Now Angel stepped forward, flashing into game face. Before he had a chance to say anything, Xander spoke up, his voice a strained whisper.

"Spike?"

"Pet," Spike answered, the last of the fear snake that had coiled in his guts evaporated.

"William, what are you doing here?" Angel asked, his voice low and dangerous. Spike froze. Bloody hell, he thought they'd made their peace in L.A. They might still call each other a few choice names, but he hadn't done anything to deserve the dark warning Angel now issued. He had even fought on the side of the slayer.

"William?!? Xander's William??" Faith stood, her mouth hanging open as she stared. "Xander was doing it with the undead?" She turned to Xander. "You're doing it with the undead? And the cute undead... good job Z-dog." Okay, that wasn't the reaction Spike had expected from a slayer. Somehow he'd expected more of a welcome from his childe and sire and a little less enthusiasm from the girl who'd dedicated her life to killing vampires. Mind
you, she seemed fine with Angel, even after seeing him go soulless, so obviously this slayer didn't take the job all that seriously

Spike kept a part of his attention on the slayer as he turned toward Xander who continued to stand by Angel, his body tense and his eyes on the ground. Bloody hell no. Spike sucked air in frustration as Angel inched sideways, getting between Spike and Xander.

"Xander, pet?" Spike called softly. Xander flinched back, and Spike's demon surged forward at the evidence. His pansy-arsed sire wasn't takin' his childe. He launched himself at Angel before his rational mind could even point out that his sire was older, larger, and more powerful.

Unlike a certain night at Angel Investigations when Angel had just defended his face, allowing Spike to pummel his body into a patchwork of bruises, this time Angel fought back, driving Spike into retreat with a blow to the side of his face that left Spike staggering back. Spike retaliated with a flurry of punches up and down Angel's body, dancing in and out as Angel impotently batted at him. Unfortunately, Angel caught him with a backhand that sent him reeling back.
"Whoa, whoa, hold on there. All of you, shove the testosterone back in the bottle and stop thinking with your dicks," Faith yelled as she jumped in between. Spike snarled, ready to take her on as well, but then Xander was there, standing between him and Angel, at Faith's side. Spike could smell the misery and fear rolling off his boy, and he backed up a step. Normally, he reveled in the smell of human terror, but now it made him want to find the fear and rip it out. He wanted his boy back, and his boy never smelled of fear, even when the git probably should.

"Spike?" a deeper voice asked, and Spike tilted his head toward Riley.

"What have you done?" Angel growled, stepping forward as he glared at Riley, but Faith held her ground, putting her hand on Angel's chest to stop him. Spike almost laughed at the irony. Here stood the great Angelus who'd made a career out of torturing human pets, leaving them cringing and kneeling at his feet, but he was going to get pissy over Spike taking one soldier-boy. Bloody hypocrite.

"Not even, big boy," she snapped at Angel as she held him back. "You just chill your ass out. And you," Faith
turned and pointed a finger toward Spike, "start talking."

Spike growled as Xander slid back, silently taking a position behind Angel where he concentrated on staring down some random blade of grass. Angel pressed forward again, and now Faith turned toward him, pushing at him with both hands. The sight of Faith's back made Spike growl softly, but then Xander curled in on himself like a fallen pastry, his shoulders hunching up toward his ears.

Blinking back the demon, Spike struggled to get control before he did the stupid something he desperately wanted to do. He needed to get his childe back from Angel, and while Spike might not be able to win a fair fight, he didn't feel much need to fight fairly, especially considering how Xander was disappearing under the demon's cringing loyalty to Angel.

"Ya workin' on making a new Dru, there?" Spike taunted. Xander flinched back, and Spike soddin' hated hurting his childe, but he hated the weakness his childe showed even more. However, Angel's suddenly stiff posture made the jab worth the pain. At Angelus' knee, Spike had learned how psychological torture could break someone down, rip away their defenses until they begged for
death. Angelus had tried to teach him to stalk his prey and find their hidden fears, their secret hopes. Spike hadn't been a particularly good student, but to earn back his childe, he'd play a game that would leave Angel broken and twitching.

"Spike?" Riley asked again, taking a defensive position next to his master.

"Thanks for the assist there, buff-boy," Faith offered with a nod. "Now, someone want to explain what the hell's going on for those of us who seemed to have slept through class?"

"The demons are trying to open a portal to hell," Riley injected after a long silence in which Spike and Angel glared at each other and Xander tried to sink into the earth.

Faith snorted, "Old news. Demons are always pulling that shit."

"Yeah, don't always have Vahrall workin' for 'em, now do they?" Spike added. "Course, maybe Peaches doesn't mind seeing as how he's gone back to playing dominate the human. Maybe your soul isn't stuck on quite as tight
as you'd like us all to think," Spike verbally poked at Angel, and the Angel narrowed his eyes in warning.

"And you are...." Faith let her words trail off as she waited for an answer.

"Spike."

The wind rattled the trees in the silence that followed.

"And?" Faith prompted

"And he's a cold-blooded vampire," Angel added.

"Your blood's just as cold, mate," Spike pointed out.

"I have a soul."

"Not much of one from what I can see. Ya still enjoy havin' a minion around ta make you feel like ya aren't a piss-arsed pansy."

"William," Angel warned. Xander glanced up, his eyes yellow under his curls, and for one moment, Spike could see the trembling struggle in the boy. But just as soon as he let himself hope that Xander would fight his way back
to Spike's side, the boy dropped his gaze and inched closer to Angel.

"Wot? Not like you'll fight someone strong enough ta fight back, is it?" he pushed. If the slayer hadn't been in the middle, holding Angel back, the older vamp would have tackled Spike right there, or at least tried to. Spike smirked as Faith pushed Angel back with a small shove.

"Okay, patience is gone, and someone better start talking. Xander, since you're the only one not acting like a pissy two-year-old, you're up."

Xander looked up, panic dancing over his face as his eyes darted from Faith to Angel and back again. Angel simply stood with his arms over his chest, and Spike could smell the fear from Xander. Bloody hell, boy had stood up to Spike and yet Angel's silence left him trembling as he shifted from foot to foot. Spike curled his hands into fists, fighting back a desire to punch Angel right in the mouth. Wanker.

"The whole stuff with Cassidy and the pet demon thing is right, and Spike did rescue me from Cassidy but we might have not mentioned the whole him being a vampire." Xander shrugged and slid back behind Angel.
"Is anyone going to do something about the demons trying to open hell? The kid vampire is expecting his minions to come back with the slayer's head, so this might be a good time to attack, when he's expecting victory," Riley interjected.

"Bloody hell, wanker expected us ta get dusted by the slayer," Spike dismissed the concerns. "Not that a slayer could take me. By the way, does this one know you're the reason she got called ta duty?" Spike asked Angel, enjoying the stiffness in Angel's body. "I mean, you are the one who ate the last slayer, aren't ya? You're only a hundred years and one slayer behind me, mate."

Spike braced himself for an attack from either the slayer or Angel, but Faith continued to hold Angel back.

"Yeah, yeah, mortal enemies," she rolled her eyes, "only Willow had her werewolf and Buffy and Angel had the whole Romeo and Juliet bit going and my Watcher is married to a Gypsy witch, so I'm not really big with the whole council party line. I decide who I'm enemies with, and so far, I'm not seeing much reason to have at you with a stake."
"Faith, he's a killer. When he wants something, he's ruthless about getting it," Angel hissed, his eyes flashing between brown and yellow.

"Hate to break it to you, but that pretty much describes the two of us, too," she pointed out as she turned her back to Angel, so she didn't see the flinch from Angel. Stepping forward, she held out her hand to Spike. "Besides, if the Z-dog picked you, I'm willing to give a little credit."

Spike hesitated. He could take her as a hostage... she was tired. One strong yank, and he could have his hand around her neck, ready to snap the delicate bones. But his souled up grandsire hadn't fought at all, and Spike didn't think he could take him right here right now. On the other hand, if he had time to mentally torture Angel a bit, he ran a good chance of getting his childe back. Xander hadn't given up on him even when he'd lost, when he'd hung helpless in Cassidy's lair waiting for the strike that turned him to dust. He wasn't giving up on his boy now.

Spike took the outreached hand.

"Ta, luv. Fucking fine fighter, you are."
"A vamp who knows a way to a girl's heart," Faith laughed. "Just know that if you threaten my friends, I'll torture you before I kill you," she added in a more serious tone.

"If I want ta threaten ya, I'll do it to your face without goin' after your friends like some hyena pickin' the weak ones off in the dark," Spike promised Faith, but he kept his eyes focused on Angel. The older vamp didn't react, but Spike could see the tight muscles where Angel fought to keep himself under control. Let the wanker wear himself out fighting himself; Spike would be there when he finally broke.

"Captain Riley Finn." Riley stepped forward, his own hand held out.

"Faith Lehane," she offered. "Captain? Haven't seen any captains around here except the pep squad snacks that keep wandering the parks at night, tempting all the little vampires. You don't look like a cheerleader."

"Marine, ma'am."

"Marine?" Faith raised her eyebrows.
"Trust me, luv, you don't want to know. Wankers are playing Dr. Frankenstein without knowing what they're messing with," Spike explained when Riley froze, clearly unwilling to tell about his comrades in green.

"In Sunnydale? Fuck, we have enough trouble with demons, we do not need this grief."

"If the doctors can't make some progress soon, it may not be an issue. The government is threatening to discontinue funding if they can't find a practical solution for combating or controlling hostiles. If that happens, this whole part of the state would be left unprotected."

Faith stared at the boy for a half second. "Unprotected my finely shaped ass. Slaying's my gig."

"But the demons, they're talking about opening a Hellmouth."

"They can talk all they want, but makin' it happen is something else. Watch and learn, Captain Cutie. You're about to find out how a slayer kicks demon ass."

Part Thirteen
"Can we please get this over with before having to deal with *that* leaves me in need of a drink? Jenny poured the Scotch down the sink, and the local liquor store only carries cheap American swill." Giles pushed in the door to the Magic Box and went immediately to the counter where he dropped several huge rolls of heavy paper and a few thick books.

"Five by five here," Faith agreed. She followed him into the store and disappeared behind a counter. When she came up again, she held a vicious knife and a sharpening stone. She hopped up on the counter, sitting on the top and sharpening her knife with a whip-whorr of metal scraping over stone. Xander noticed all that, but he focused more on Angel, who had followed them into the store and then stood near a display of dried... okay, Xander wasn't going to look to closely at what those were. Beside, the way Angel pressed close to the wall, it he seemed as though he wanted to press into it and disappear. Baby hissed unhappily.

Xander understood what Angel was feeling. Xander had spent most of his high school career trying to find clothing that would blend into the graffiti stained walls of his L.A. high school, and unfortunately, he generally failed. A quick shove from bullies regularly sent him
crashing into lockers had taught him to use that body language that screamed, 'not worth your time to hurt me.' It was a cross between looking so hurt already that any further bullying was a little pointless and looking pathetic enough that bullying him didn't earn cool points for the bullies. Angel had that same expression, and Baby growled at master's discomfort. The human made master unhappy. Baby had a very simple solution for what he considered the Giles problem. Xander focused on stopping the growl from actually growling since he didn't really doubt Angel's promise to kill him.

"I suppose it's hard workin' with the vampire who put one of your slayers in a coma and killed another," Spike mused as he passed them all and settled in leaning against a shelf on the other side of the room.

Outside, waiting for Giles to come and unlock the door, Xander had ignored the man beside Spike, but now he couldn't escape the smell of the unfamiliar male. He smelled like gunpowder and musk, and Xander had a sudden hatred for all things gunpowdery and musky. Looking down at the dull tile floor, Xander ignored Spike with his new pet and Angel's discomfort and his own growing hatred for more than one person in the room. Yeah, way too much stuff to keep track of at once, and
Xander had that pop-quiz-coming feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"And you are?" At Giles' words, Xander furtively glanced up as the Watcher pulled off his glasses and polished them as he looked toward Spike.

"Name's Spike."

"Good lord." Xander didn't have time to blink before Giles had pulled a large cross from under his jacket. "William the Bloody. Faith, stake him," he ordered. No one moved.

"Chill out. We have a truce."

"A truce? With a blood-thirsty demon who would like nothing more than to drain us all? If you won't do something, I will." Giles started forward, and Faith jumped down, putting herself in Giles' path.

"He's Xander's William. He doesn't want the world to end any more than we do."

Giles stood, his fury clear even though he stood perfectly still. When he spoke again, he had the perfectly calm
tone of absolute certainty. "Your naïveté is both astounding and stupid."

Faith stepped back, blinking in surprise, but she didn't move aside. Giles simply stared at her as she refused to yield.

"Slayer's right, I got no problem with you lot," Spike added, "and you're a little long in the tooth for me, mate. Might go for the little witch, but then Xander'd be put out, so I figure your whole lot is off the menu."

Xander felt a slight twinge of fear for Willow, silently thanking his not-so-lucky stars that she hadn't shown up yet. He could just imagine her hyperventilating at the idea of yet another vampire taking an interest in her. He'd heard the stories of Angelus after Willow used a spell to "cheer him up" and accidentally ripped his soul out. She really didn't need any more vampire admirers.

Spike hadn't even finished before Angel stepped forward. "Threaten her again and I'll dust you, Spike."

"Oi, I'm pointin' out why I wouldn't threaten her. Seems like you're the one who went and murdered her fish." The sarcastic tone made it perfectly clear how he felt
about Angelus going after fish, and from his place behind Angel, Xander could see vamp's back twitch.

"Enough," Angel growled.

"Was that before or after ya killed her wolf?" Spike taunted. Angel took a single step forward, his jaw clenched in fury.

"I bet ya didn't even wait for full moon when he had a chance in hell. No, it'd be more your style ta trap him in some corner and—"

"Fuck, not this again," Faith practically yelled. "When I'm the most level-headed person in the room, there's a problem, people," Faith said as she backed up a little more to get between the two vampires while still watching Giles.

"Hey, perfectly responsible adult-type person here," Willow objected as she came in, Tara close behind. The bell over the door jingled merrily, and the suddenly cheerful sound gave Xander an urge to laugh hysterically... not so much with the cheer in this room.

"Jenny said it was full on F-team meeting," Willow said as
she stepped up to the counter where Giles had dropped the papers before getting in a staring contest with Spike. She stopped, her eyes darting around the room as she picked up on the hate-vibes.

"Good, you're here. At least now the humans outnumber the vampires," Giles said with terse politeness

"Vampires?" Willow nearly squeaked, "other than Angel vampires?"

"And the G-man is exaggerating again. Only two vamps. The other two are..." Faith paused.

"Human," Angel said tightly. "They may carry a part of a demon, but they are human."

"Whoa, what do you mean part of a demon?" Spike's pet pushed forward, and Xander really looked at him for the first time. Spike had called him Riley, and even thinking the name made Xander want to bite someone. Riley. Big, handsome, stupid muscly-type type. Xander knew he deserved to get replaced, but he couldn't help feeling the cold hatred for the man deep in his stomach. He would have gone fangy and growled, but Baby chose that moment to show an utter lack of interest in growling.
"It's in the blood, mate," Spike answered his pet. "Blood touches blood, but that's not what has the Watcher's knickers in a twist. He's mostly browned off because Angel, the great poof who killed his slayer isn't dust."

"I have a demon?" Riley demanded weakly at the same time that Willow gasped, her fingers searching her purse for a stake, "Vampire?!?!"

"Spike, also known as William, and you'd be Xander's little friend. He says lots of nice things about ya, luv, and he isn't exactly overflowing with love for all things Hellmouth."

"William?" Willow sounded slightly hyperventilaty.

"And that's about it," Faith added. "Only he left out that Giles wanted to attack Spike and Spike has been verbally torturing Angel and Angel continues to growl at Spike and then there's the whole fact that no one is really focusing on the demons who are about to open a portal to hell."

Giles coughed. "If the Anointed One is orchestrating this plan, I doubt the Vahrall have the same agenda as the
vampire master. Vahrall demons believe self-sacrifice can open a portal to a hell world and return the world to its true master, the pure demons. I find it unbelievable that a vampire would support their activities since pure demons are no more fond of vampires than of humans," Giles backed away, glaring first at Spike and then at Angel for an awkward moment before turning his attention to the stack he'd dropped on the counter. He sorted various scrolls, unrolling them to reveal cramped, tiny writing interrupted by detailed images of various demons.

"Only the Annoyin' One has something up his tiny sleeve," Spike added. "He's got zombies and a Mohra down there. I'm guessing he's either playin' big with the mojo or makin' some pretty big promises." Spike took a step back and leaned against the wall. Xander wanted to just keep looking at him. He wanted to take these minutes to pretend that he hadn't ruined the only good thing in his life by turning to Angel. His mother always told him that he needed to suffer the consequences of his own action. She meant his science grade, but Xander hadn't truly understood suffering consequences until this moment.

He remembered the day he'd sparred with Spike in their basement. Spike had tossed him to the ground again, and
then backed off and looked at him with that same intense expression. Part of Xander wanted to pretend Spike didn't have a new pet, pretend that he was still at Spike's side, but instead his eyes slid back to the floor.

He'd thought he felt pain when he thought Spike had died, but being in the same room was a special torture. He should be happy that Spike was still alive... or unalive... whatever, but instead all he could feel was the pain of both loss and rejection. Spike had a new pet, and Xander had Angel.

Xander snorted and Angel shot him a displeased look that made Baby go whimpering back. Oh yeah, once again everyone else sucked the sugary goodness of candy while life had handed him the fuzzy end of the lollipop. Only this time, it was fuzzy, dirty, and covered in cat hair.

Xander glanced sideways at the silently furious vampire beside him and wondered how much it would take to get the vamp homicidally angry. As often as Xander had made his father angry enough to resort to a fist, he should be able to provoke Angel twice as fast. After all, vamps didn't feel much loyalty toward minions. Spike had called them cannon fodder, sent out to die for their masters.
Baby whined and Xander felt himself pushed farther back. He was just so damn tired that he didn't even fight the pressure that forced him into the dim corners of his own mind. Baby came forward and dismissed his plans, his displeasure clear from the throbbing little pain settling in at the back of Xander's head. Baby had a master, and he would live or die to please his master. From a quiet corner of his own brain, Xander pointed out that while they might be able to die to please Angel, neither one of them had much luck pleasing him any other way.

"Whatever the Anointed One has planned, it is imperative that we intercept any attempt to open the Hellmouth," Giles said as he turned to the scrolls. "The scroll says that the demons will need the Word of Valios in order to open the Hellmouth. I simply cannot fathom why the vampires would support opening a portal between here and the Va'alli hell."

"Shortcut to avoid morning traffic?" Willow joked softly, but no one laughed.

"Who cares? We know what they want, so we get it first and then kick demon ass. Simple," Faith said with a
shrug. She obviously decided that no one was in any immediate danger of attacking because she went back to the counter, hopping up and returning to sharpening her knife—a wickedly curved silver blade that reflected light from the florescent lights.

"If we knew where to find the Word of Valios, that might work. Since I have no idea where to find it, we start with research. Willow, you have the Tredecim and Attonbitus scrolls. Tara, take Libra Audacter. Faith, maybe you could help me go through the volumes of the Cassus Almus. Those not researching might wish to do something constructive like naffing off so the rest of us can complete our work," Giles finished without looking up from the scrolls.

"I'm not really one for the dusty duty. Why don't I just go along with the boys for some patrol?"

Faith had no sooner suggested it before Giles wheeled around, his eyes so cold and hard that even Baby started reevaluating just how "helpless" this human might truly be.

"I will not have you patrol with Angel or Spike. If we must work under some truce, then we will do so safely, which
means you will not patrol with them or patrol alone."

"Whoa, chill—" Faith tried to interrupt,

"You have impressive skills, but no more so than Kendra, and Angelus has already shown his ruthlessness in taking advantage of any weakness. Hunting with him would be—" Giles stopped, obviously unable to come up with any words to explain his opinion on Faith hunting with Angel.

"I'm sorry," Angel nearly whispered.

Giles stalked past Faith and straight to Angel, his heavy cross in one hand, and a stake in the other. Baby wanted to both throw himself between master and danger in an attempt to impress master and cringe back in fear. Really, that was pretty lucky since it allowed Xander to keep himself still at Angel's side as the watcher got up in Angel's face.

"If you touch one hair on her head—" Giles didn't raise the stake, but he held the cross so close that Angel had to press back into the wall to avoid being burned.

"I'm here to help," Angel said quietly, and from his side
of the room Spike gave a doubtful snort. Shooting a hateful glare in Spike's general direction, Angel started again. "Jenny called me."

That stopped Giles, but he still held the cross close enough that it pinned Angel to the wall. Xander started looking for escape paths, figuring if all else failed, he could just go right over the low shelving with the shrunken heads in bizarre rows.

"Jenny may have forgotten what you are capable of, but I certainly haven't. Kendra was—" Giles stopped, the words choked off into silence. For a long time, he continued to stand, his tweed jacket and glasses and grey hair doing nothing to hide the raw hatred and fury as he held the cross an inch from Angel's hand. Xander could only stand and watch, not even sure what he should do, even if he could get all his various Xander-and-Baby parts organized well enough to actually do anything.

"Giles," Faith called softly from the counter.

"You will take volume one of the Cassus Almus," Giles ordered her without turning around. And then he backed up, his hand still clutching the weapons as he moved back to the counter where he dropped the stake and
used a shaking hand to steady himself on the countertop. Suddenly, the fury drained leaving just a sad, sagging man clutching the counter.

"No problem," Faith agreed quietly. Willow had found some interesting spot on the wall while Tara stared at the floor, but Spike watched his sire with an obvious glee that made Xander squirm. He remembered that expression of unmitigated joy from times they had sparred, especially when the sparring had led to pinning and sex. Now he glanced toward Riley who had silently stepped closer to Spike.

Xander gulped air, aware that he had forgotten to breathe until the sharp edges of unconsciousness poked at him, making him dizzy. Angel's hand fell on his shoulder, and Xander dropped his eyes to the floor, aware that he had been staring.

"Spike and I will do patrol," Angel said as he moved toward the door slowly. Xander followed his master back out into the night.
Part Fourteen

Xander followed close behind as Angel stalked toward the nearest cemetery. He could hear the regular pounding of Spike's footsteps behind him. Normally, Spike could move through any territory without making a sound, but right now, his 150 pounds sounded more like 300.

"I don't know what is going on here, but I am not a hostile," Spike's pet announced into the awkward silence.

Angel snorted.

"I am a captain in the United States Marine Corps, and if you don't plan to take down the hostiles currently conspiring to open the Hellmouth, I need to find someone who will help me get the job done."

"They won't open the Hellmouth," Angel said, his voice tight with frustration. Xander could feel Baby echo his master's distress. And once again, Baby had just one suggestion for humans that bothered master.
"Yeah, 'cuz you've been so good 'bout stoppin' the wankers in the past," Spike growled, his voice dripping with sarcasm and heavy with accent.

Angel didn't answer as he kept walking down the dark street. Tension rolled off the older vampire, and Xander could feel himself slowly unwinding, like a ball of fraying yarn a cat kept batting around until it turned into a big tangled mess of... well... tangles. He felt like begging Spike to just stop before Angel snapped and went after Spike with whatever weapon he could grab while another part of him danced with anticipation at seeing master put Spike in his place. Xander was guessing that Baby was the one voting for an Angel-Spike showdown, either that or Xander had really lost his marbles. Again.

"Seems like you've been playin' both sides of the fence. The Annoyin' One certainly didn't chase ya out of town, and a slayer layin' in that hospital... she'd be on easy snack, only no one seems ta be snacking on her. Not unless you've been sneaking a fang into the coma-girl," Spike smirked. Angel didn't even pause before spinning around in game face. Shrinking back away from that fury, Xander pushed into the bushes lining the sidewalk just to get out of Angel's path.
"If you touch Buffy, I'll stake you myself," Angel snarled, closing the distance between them with a few long, furious strides.

"You're the one who goes for leftovers, these days," Spike said coldly. "Besides, I'm one slayer up on you old man. If I wanted ta take my third, I wouldn't go for the one you already put in a coma," Spike's smirked even wider as his barb sunk home. Angel stood, half in an island of light, his hands at his sides even as his fists trembled and flexed.

"I don't know what game you're playing..." he articulated each word carefully and slowly and dangerously, but Spike's new pet interrupted him.

"He said he was trying to stop the hostiles. What game are you two playing?" Riley, inserted himself between the two vampires, Angel in game face and Spike now leaning insolently against the lamp post, his hair shining in the florescent light. "And I want to know what the hell is going on with the blood reference. If I'm at risk, then so are my men. So someone is going to tell me what is going on."

"Your men?" Angel dropped back out of game face,
looking at Riley in confusion. "How many men?"

"Why?" Riley asked suspiciously.

"William, what have you done?" Angel demanded. He stepped around Riley and backhanded Spike viciously. Spike twisted through the air, crashing into the bushes a couple of feet from Xander before he bounded back up onto his feet.

"That your best shot?" he asked as he touched a corner of his mouth where blood trickled.

Angel didn't have time to answer before Riley attacked from behind. The sight of the short wood stake aimed at Angel's back sent Xander flying forward, the world slipping into the demon reds as a burning fury rose like bile in his throat. Xander would have ripped Riley to shreds, only within seconds, the soldier was stomach-down on the grass strip between the sidewalk and the street. Xander barely pulled back before plowing into Angel's back, which wouldn't have won him any warm and fuzzy looks from the great cranky one.

"Enough," Angel roared as Riley continued to squirm and buck. Riley froze, his face still pressed to the damp grass.
"How many of your men?" Angel snarled. For a second, Riley stayed silent, and Xander half expected Angel to take Riley's arm, which he currently had wrenched up behind Riley's back, and rip the sucker off.

"Four, plus me."

"Spike made blood to blood contact with all of them." Angel sounded shocked.

"No, only I did. The others used the two vampires Dr. Engelman held for testing. My men volunteered for Engelman's experiment in boosting strength and endurance, but if this has done something that might compromise them..."

Xander could almost feel sympathy for the man on the ground, or at least he would have except for the whole burning jealousy for stealing Spike and acidic hatred for threatening Angel.

"Bloody idiots were sufferin' from vampire rot. They'd taken to drinking our blood as a substitute for their morning protein shakes. They shoulda stuck to the seaweed and soy," Spike offered as he once again leaned
against the street lamp. "But don't get your knickers in a twist, Peaches. I dusted the other vamps, and the soldier-boys won't even notice unless some other vamp slips a fang in their necks." He paused to search his pockets for a cigarette.

"What did you do to my men?" Riley sounded furious now, but Angel just put a knee in his back, pinning him helplessly.

"What game are you playing?" Angel demanded as he twisted around to face Spike.

"Not playin'. That was your business, mate. You liked your head games and your petty torments. I've always been a little more straightforward." Spike sucked on the cigarette and then blew a ring that slowly rose in the air.

"Then explain to me why you would suddenly start taking human pets."

"Wot? I should wait down there while those wankers cut me apart and experiment on my bits? I bloody like my bits where they are." Spike emphasized his words by reaching down and grabbing his own crotch. Xander felt a wistfulness that sent Baby roaring up to the forefront
so that he could slide closer to Angel. Yep, Baby knew which vamp he preferred.

"So you risk them? I won't let you turn people into puppets," Angel flashed into game face again.

"You want that one? Fine. You take soldier boy, fuck him, turn him, eat him, use your fucking spell and set the git free, I don't soddin' care. But ya took what's mine, Angelus, and I won't bloody leave 'til I get him back." Spike dropped his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with the heel of his boot. Taking a step forward, he slipped into the sharp ridges of his vampiric face and bared his fangs.

"Leave Xander out of this," Angel warned, and Xander slipped backwards away from the street light. His head began to throb, and he sucked air in as he realized he'd forgotten to breath, the thought of Angel and Spike doing the whole final showdown sending him pretty much into mental meltdown land.

"Thought that's what we were soddin' fightin' about." Spike stepped forward, planting one foot ahead of the other and holding his arms out, ready for an attack.
"You'll lose, William."

"Xander's the one who's already bloody lost. Havin' you as a sire-- not exactly enjoyable."

"He's human."

"No, he's bloody not. Wot's more, he's bloody less human every time I look at him," Spike snapped, and yellow eyes fixed on Xander who suddenly found some very interesting dirt on the sidewalk to stare at. He hated how those eyes saw more than they should. He hated it nearly as much as he hated not being seen at all.


"Still thick as bog-mud, aren't ya? You'd rip him up as bad as ya ever ripped up Drusilla, only this time it's because you're a fucking thick-skulled mick, innit?"

"Don't push your luck." Angel abandoned Riley and moved so fast that he stood chest to chest with Spike before Xander could look back up. Riley lay on the grass holding his wrenched arm and looking a bit dazed. Xander knew the feeling. He also felt his soul shrivel at
the thought of Spike fighting and dying for him.

"Spike, Angel? Um, demon hunting? Sound familiar?"
Xander interrupted the vampire-stare-o'thon. "You know, we told Faith and Giles we'd go out hunting some demons, and I'm fairly sure that he meant for us to hunt other demons," Spike flashed a smile in his direction, and Xander gave a small half-smile in return before Baby rose up and the world slid into demon-red again.

"Think I'm goin' to do just that Peaches. I think it's time I pushed my luck." Spike cocked his head and looked up at Angel.

"Last time in LA, I let you get your hits in. You start something now, and I will kill you rather than let you keep playing these games with human lives."

Xander could hear the certainty in Angel's voice, and he shivered in both horror and anticipation, and Baby really was a little too bloodthirsty for Xander's stomach.

Spike smirked again, his tongue tracing the inside of his lower lip as he slowly inched backwards. "Not going to bloody happen," Spike answered. Without warning, he followed up with a spinning kick that made Angel
stumble to the side. Riley barely had time to scramble out of the way as Angel careened backwards, but the retreat didn't last long.

Angel lunged forward, leading with a right punch that Spike only partially ducked, catching the blow on his shoulder. Spike retaliated with a number of jabs while dancing out of the way of Angel's more powerful blows. Angel landed fewer hits, but each of his sent Spike staggering while Spike struck over and over again without driving Angel back at all.

One hard hit sent Spike crashing into a blue mail drop box which rang like a rusted bell before Spike hit the ground. Angel dived after him, but in a move that Xander couldn't quite see, Spike deflected Angel, shoving him headfirst into the metal box which crumpled under the force. Grabbing his chance, Spike twisted out from under Angel and pinned the larger vampire, sinking his fangs deep into Angel's forearm, ripping though coat and shirt until the blood soaked the fabric and dripped onto the grey concrete.

Roaring, Angel bucked and the finally threw himself to the side, pinning Spike between the battered mailbox and his own body. Spike let go with a muffled, "Bloody
fuck." They lay tangled with each other, half on the curb and half in the empty street.

Now that they had their hands on each other, Xander could see Spike struggle. He twisted so that he could get leverage with his foot, forcing them to roll into the street where Spike got on top, his hands on Angel's neck in a grip that reminded Xander of the way Spike had ripped one fledge's head right off his neck. But before Spike had time to do anything, Angel used his brute strength to grab Spike's hair and slam his head down into the concrete.

Before Spike could recover, Angel had pinned him. Huge hands squeezed Spike's throat while Angel used his body to trap Spike against the cold concrete of the road.

"It's over, Spike. I don't know what you're hoping to do, but I'll give you one chance to get out of my territory and out of my sight before I hunt you down." With that, Angel physically lifted Spike by his neck and then slammed him back to the ground with a sickening crunch. Xander watched in horror while an amoeba shaped red stain grew under Spike's skull.

Angel stood up, but Spike still lay on the ground
motionless. Even while Baby growled his pleasure, Xander could feel the cold horror sinking into his bones. Yeah, Spike obviously wasn't dead-dead what with the lack of dustiness, but he didn't look ready for any fights. The Anointed One's most pathetic minion could probably dust Spike as he lay on the ground, pale and motionless and staring up at the sliver moon.

Baby hissed contemptuously toward Spike, the loser, but Xander stood, unmoving, as he fought through a tangle of his own feelings.

“Xander, let’s go,” Angel said, and Xander looked at his demon’s master and then at his defeated sire. He could feel himself torn apart, but when the demon pushed for him to follow Angel, he rose up with all his strength, and pushed back. Hell, he shoved and rammed and drove forward until he could force the demon back.

“No,” he all but whispered.

“Xander.” Angel turned to face him. “Things have changed; Spike isn't your sire, and you don't need him,” Angel said as he took a step forward.

“Oi, that’s right, force him ta do what ya want, just like
with every other pet ya ever had,” Spike said as he slowly picked himself up off the ground, blood smeared down one side of his face. “Go ahead and break him since he’s mine—that’s what ya do, innit? Break whatever’s mine?”

“Spike,” Angel growled, and Xander struggled to just stay standing, his need to hide in the corner nearly overwhelming him.

“So, you’ll threaten Spike and kidnap me?” Xander asked even though he knew that a pretty good sized part of him begged to go with Angel. He clenched his teeth to prevent the demon from following its master.

“I’m protecting you, Xander,” Angel offered in the tone of voice a person might use with a particularly stupid child. The vampire put a hand on his shoulder, and Xander could feel the tremors at Angel’s touch. Just please master; make him want us. He could hear Baby pleading, but he knew that no matter what he did, Angel would never want them, and he sent that thought back into his mind.

He flooded the demon with memories: Angel biting him and then leaving him on the couch, unclaimed as childe; Angel pressing a stake to his chest; Angel ripping him
from Faith and choking him unconscious. He pummeled
and pounded those memories, mixing in older memories.
The time his father called him a child for begging his
father to come to Christmas with them and the time his
mother forgot him at school until after dark, leaving him
wandering home alone when he wasn't tall enough to
get into the rides at the summer carnival. He took all that
rejection and failure and shoved it down the demon's
throat until Baby choked on it, retreating under the pain.
He stepped back away from Angel's touch.

“No, you’re taking away my choices; you’re doing what
you wanted to do the first time you met me,” Xander
said through gritted teeth. “You’re living out your little
save the world fantasies with me.”

"You aren't thinking clearly right now. The demon—"
Angel started. Xander could feel Baby squirming up,
struggling to answer master's voice, but then Spike
interrupted.

"You bloody arrogant bog-trotting wanker. Soul-no soul,
you don't soddin' change." Spike wiped the blood from
his face with the back of his hand. "Everyone has to do
things the way you do them, or they're just bloody
wrong. I've got fucking news for you, mate. You don't
know everything."

"I never said..." Angel started, but Spike shook his head in disbelief and interrupted again.

"You don't have to say it, clear enough from the way you treat everyone else, innit? When you were soulless, you'd beat me bloody if I didn't do things the way you did 'em. You killed your folks, so I was supposed ta be overcome with hatred for mine. You like fuckin' with people's minds, so ya had to tell me what a failure I was for preferrin' an open fight. And now that you have the soul, it's the same damn out-of-tune song, innit? You're a soddin' souled demon, and you fight your own instincts every soddin' day, so you just treat Xander like he's the bloody same."

"You have no idea what..."

"No, but I know what Xander said. I know he and his demon had a truce until you came and mucked it up. Look at him!" Spike pointed, and Xander shrunk back as both vampires and Riley looked at him. Riley had retreated to the far side of a Volvo, but he still stood close.
"The mouthy git stole my CD's and gave them to you, mate. At the club, he went sailing into a fight against a gang of fledges to save his friends, and he bloody called you for help doing it. I soddin' near pulled my hair out with how much he never bloody listened to me, but that's what made him worthy of bein' a childe. He had his own soddin' brain and he used it. With you, he just cringes in your shadow." Spike stepped forward, but this time instead of glaring at Angel in open defiance, he looked to the side, his body tight but not in fighting stance. "And now that he makes a decision of his own, you're punishing him for it. You're bloody well destroyin' him." Spike looked up with fury carved into his face.

"I didn't—" This time Angel stopped on his own. Xander flinched back as Angel closed the distance between them, his hand landing on Xander's shoulder. "I'm trying to help you control the demon."

Xander closed his eyes as Baby struggled forward at the hint of master caring for them. He pulled up the memory of his father telling him how proud he was of Xander for graduating, and then, on the day of graduation, Xander had searched the crowd. He had made his mother stand by the south entrance for an hour, waiting for his father. His father hadn't come. They'd gotten home to an
answering machine message with a slurred message about traffic, the sound of a bar in the background. He couldn't do this again.

"I did control the demon until you tried to control him for me," Xander answered. Angel pulled his hand back.

"He bloody well did too. Bugger gave him fits when he had dirty little dreams of topping sire, but Xander controlled himself. He wasn't like you, and Baby's not Angelus, raging under that soul ready to rip the world apart if he can just get out." Spike stepped closer, and Xander clutched at control as Baby quailed in fear.

"Xander, I didn't—" Angel's words trailed off again.

"Spike, I'm sorry," Xander whispered. Spike stopped, his hand hovering above the arm Xander had crossed over his stomach, hugging himself.

"What ya sorry for, pet?" Spike asked softly. Xander trembled as Baby sent up a whole litany of sins. Some didn't make much sense, unless it was sense of the vampire kind, so Xander picked the one that he could understand best.
"I'm sorry I gave up on you."

"Bloody hell, I'm the one who bollocked that up. Sire's supposed to be the one who doesn't fuck up and get caught. I bet you tried to find me, yeah?"

Xander nodded. "But Baby..." he stopped. He couldn't put the vampire's feelings into words. He'd betrayed Spike; he'd liked Angel more; he'd thought Angel was stronger. Xander flinched at the realization that part of him still saw Angel as stronger. But he wasn't. Angel wasn't stronger, Xander thought back into his own mind.

"Baby's too young and too soddin' stupid to really know anything, pet. He can't tell who ta follow, so you have to guide him." Spike put his hand on Xander's arm, and Xander could feel the fear and longing and hope ripple through his mind. "Xander Harris is my childe, and he never bloody stopped bein' my childe. Baby's just goin' to have to earn his way back into my favor," Spike offered.

"Spike," Angel said softly.

"Don't bloody start with me, mate. I had enough years of your arrogant shite already. If you say one thing, I swear, if it takes the rest of my unlife, I'll skin ya alive."
Angel didn't answer, but Riley did. "I have a job to do... to protect this town from hostiles, particularly the group that's trying to open the Hellmouth."

Xander felt Spike's arm slip around his waist as Spike took a position at his side, and now Xander could look at Riley without the jealousy and hatred swirling through his mind. The soldier looked exhausted, dark circles under his eyes and dirt staining his knees and one shoulder. He pushed his blond hair back with an absent-minded gesture that made him look like a tired child struggling to stay awake.

"I'm not going to let the Anointed One open the Hellmouth," Angel said. "I had a truce to protect Buffy's life, but Buffy won't last long if that portal is open."

Angel turned and looked pointedly at Spike. Eventually Spike sighed heavily.

"Bloody hell, I don't want the Hellmouth open any more than you. I meant what I said about helping to keep the annoying little shit from doing something annoyingly stupid. Look, you save the world because it's what you do, having a soul and a mission and all. But just because I
don't have some mission from the Powers that Be don't mean that I can't help out. I'm not bloody giving up my Passions or my fags or my music without a fight."

"Mission?" Riley stepped around the car, coming closer to the group, and Xander could practically see the strings pulling at the body. Riley had a bit of demon, and that bit of demon wanted a master. Xander just hoped that Angel's smack down meant that Riley's demon wanted Angel because Xander really wasn't a good enough person to share Spike.

"Angel went and got himself a soul and a mission to save all the innocents in the world. Wanker runs around with his nancy-boy hair savin' all the damsels in distress," Spike answered, and Riley edged closer to Angel.

"Spike," Angel said in a warning tone.

"Stop bein' such a twat, Peaches. After all, the boy's got a mission of his own to protect home and country and all that rot. Besides, you bein' all soul-having, I bet you have a plan to make sure his buddies are all safe as houses, don't you?" Spike asked, his arm tightening around Xander's waist.
"My men. If something is putting them at risk..."

"We'll make sure it doesn't," Angel answered, and Xander felt himself pulled away from the two men.

"Where are you going?" Angel asked. "We still have patrol and we need to find out what the others learned about the ceremony to open the Hellmouth."

"You two can handle that rot. Xander and me need to have a little conversation. We'll meet you at the Magic Shop tomorrow night," Spike answered. Xander let himself get pulled down the street away from Angel and Riley whose voices had faded to a distant mumbling he couldn't quite make out.

Part Fifteen

When Xander pushed open the warehouse door, he could still feel Baby churning uncomfortably. He only realized how uncomfortable they were when Spike's
hand landed on his shoulder, sending Xander leaping forwards. Xander ended up in the middle of the garage before he turned to see Spike watching him with one eyebrow raised.

"Problem, pet?"

Xander considered the answer to that, struggling to figure out the flood of emotions coming from Baby. He got so distracted he didn't notice Spike until a finger curled around his arm.

"Xander?"

"Yep, that's my name, don't wear it out," he joked awkwardly, but Spike's face remained serious. "And I'm not really sure on the whole problem front because the brain doesn't seem to be quite keeping up with the feelings, and as a man, I’m not supposed to be discussing feelings. It's in the man handbook."

"Oi, that's my Xander," Spike said with a shake of his head, and then he guided Xander to through the door and into the main room. Everything looked the same, down to the dust on the table, but Xander could feel himself tense at every scritch of mouse feet across the
concrete. He followed as Spike guided him to an old sofa that smelled like his Aunt Betty who wasn't really an aunt but the slightly strange neighbor who lived across from them at the first apartment in LA, the one with a dozen cats.

"Xander, I didn't ask about Baby, I asked if you have a problem."

"Do you think cats peed on this couch?" Xander asked as he stared down at the worn leather, following his own mental train to Aunt Bettysville.

"Maybe," Spike admitted slowly. Spike crouched down, his knees on the outside of Xander's knees, and Xander took a deep shuddering breath.

"Pet." When Xander didn't look up, long fingers flicked him in the nose.

"Ow, that hurt!" Xander complained, holding his face with his hands defensively as he finally looked up into Spike's blue eyes. Relief and shame and fear tugged at him.

"Pet, tell me what's bothering you," Spike said, strong
hands resting on Xander's thighs. Xander shrugged.

"Oi," Spike exploded up, throwing himself across the room and toward the huge wooden table, and Xander shrank back. When Spike slapped his hands on the table top, leaning heavily with his head hanging between his arms, Xander felt the guilt and shame bits of him overshadow the rest. Pushing himself up, he slowly inched toward Spike.

He knew Spike could hear him, and yet the vampire remained leaning against the table with his back to Xander. With every step, Baby circled uncomfortably, but Xander ignored the feeling as he closed the distance and then sank to his knees on the cold concrete.

"Sire." Xander whispered the word that always brought Spike to his side, bending his head so that he could hide behind a curtain of curls. Fingers ran through his hair, and Xander reached up with trembling fingers to open his shirt. He tried to shrug the fabric off, but then Spike was there, kneeling in front of him, strong hands over his, holding him still.

"Xander, what are you doin'?"
Xander bit his lip and shrugged. Baby had still in a sort of silent panic.

"Right, up you go," Spike said, and hands under Xander's elbows lifted him. Xander followed without complaint as Spike led him into the bedroom. The stack of CD's had fallen over leaving a scattering of plastic across the floor and the someone had flipped up one side of the carpeting so that Xander almost tripped, Spike's hands keeping him steady.

"We're going to play twenty questions, and you're going to bloody answer every question, you understand?" Spike said and then Xander sat as strong hands pushed him toward the bed. He nodded silently.

"What did you do that you think you need punishin'?" Spike tugged the open shirt, and Xander slipped out of it, surrendering the clothes as he worked out the answer to that.

"I turned to Angel. You told me to stay away from him," Xander settled on. Spike sat on the bed.

"Ya like the broody one?"
"Not likely," Xander snorted.

"He does make it hard to like him what with the acting like a soddin' git," Spike agreed. "So, you didn't turn ta Angel, Baby did. Bloody awful judgment there seein' as how Angel only knows how to get bossed around by humans and ride roughshod over minions."

Xander nodded his agreement as he twisted his fingers aimlessly.

"Pet." Spike's hand landed on Xander's twisting fingers. "Baby's going to have to pay for that, but right now, I don't give a rat's arse about Baby. You're my first and favorite."

Xander could feel the Baby part of him draw back even farther. He took a deep breath and tried to sort the crush of emotion.

"Pet, tell me what you're thinking." Spike took his hand and turned Xander's head so that Xander had to make eye contact, gazing into blue eyes that he had convinced himself he would never see again. The shame washed through him again: he hadn't even tried to find Spike... he had just believed Willow and Jenny. Rage boiled up
through the shame.

"They told me you were gone."

"S'not that easy to kill me."

"They told me." Xander could feel his anger press up against his throat and he pushed Spike's hands away as he dashed for the bathroom just seconds ahead of throwing up.

"Bloody inconvenient bodily functions." Spike's voice echoed over the tile walls, and Xander heaved again, the acid burning his mouth. Pressing the lever to flush away the mess, Xander leaned against the edge of the counter until a water glass appeared before him. He grabbed it.

"I would have looked for you," Xander said as he stared at the clear water. "They told me you were dead."

"I am, luv. Have been for a while now," Spike said softly as he came close and slipped an arm around Xander's stomach, stepping up so that he pressed to Xander's back, and as the words settled into Xander's brain, the heat rose to his face.
"Oh god. Oh god. I'm an idiot. Shit. How can you love a total idiot?" Xander gasped out. "I didn't tell them you were a vampire. You were dead. They told me you were dead, and I was too stupid to even put that one together. Oh shit." Xander let the glass down on the counter with a hard crack, and a trickle of water slipped out the bottom, making a small stream that meandered across the marble counter and into the side. "Oh fuck. Spike."

"Shhh, pet. Bloody hell, you'd been knocked on your ass, left to wander the Hell mouth alone, and in the middle of slayer central. Not surprising that you weren't thinking straight." Spike reached around and pried Xander's fingers off the slightly cracked glass and tipped it the water into the sink. "Don't need ta take it out on the glassware."

"Dunder Harris at it again," Xander snorted as Spike took another glass and emptied out the liquor before rinsing the glass and filling it with water. Before Spike handed over the glass, he slapped Xander upside the back of the head hard enough to make Xander rock forward.

"Ow. Stop hitting me."

"Though ya wanted me ta hit ya?" Spike handed over the
glass and then he turned to lean back against the counter as Xander rinsed his mouth and drank the water.

Even after he'd finished, Xander had to stop and think about the answer to that one. "I just want it to be easy, like before," he finally answered.

"Easy?" Spike's face took on an amused expression, like when some gang member called him a fag right before becoming the evening dinner. "Easy like when I stripped the skin from your back, left ya in chains, and then went to find the wanker who let you go sailing into a fight with a gang of fledges?" Spike asked.

Xander thought back to that night when he'd been so sure Spike would kill Carlos because of a mistake Xander had made. He'd crouched on the flood cold and sore and feeling like the world's biggest loser. He shook his head.

"I want it simple like when you came back and everything was forgiven."

"Pet." Spike reached up and brushed curls back from Xander's face and Baby stirred to life again. "I'm not ready to forgive Baby yet." And there went Baby cringing back to a corner of Xander's mind.
"He thought you were dead," Xander said, desperate to have his inner demon okay with the world again, and until Spike said the big 'f' word—forgiven—he didn't think there was going to be much peace.

"Xander." Spike sounded almost tired as he led them back out to the bedroom. Oh yeah, when Spike called him by his name, he knew he was in serious trouble. "Why did ya step back and let Baby make the decisions?"

"And I'm going back to 'I'm an idiot.'" This time Xander was ready for the hand that tried to bop him, and he ducked, covering the back of his head with one hand while he aimed an elbow at Spike.

"Brat," Spike complained as shoved Xander onto the bed. Xander bounced and sprawled, and before he had a chance to recover, Spike had landed on him. "So, why did you take back over?"

"Hello. In case you missed it, Baby was all ready to go with the great broody one." Xander rolled his eyes. For a second, he wondered what he would be doing if he'd stayed with Angel. He'd probably be chained in the basement again. Maybe Angel had chained Riley down
there this time. Spike's finger pulling at a nipple brought him back to reality.

"So when you really wanted something, like me, you took control," Spike smirked and pulled harder at Xander's nipple. The heat made a line straight for Xander's recently neglected cock which began to swell with anticipation. Baby started stirring as well.

"Well, yeah."

"So, when Baby took over, it was because you were lettin' him." Spike turned his attention to the second nipple as he lowered himself and ran a tongue over his claim mark. Xander threw his head to the side and groaned in need.

"Yeah," he agreed. Of course, to keep Spike doing that, he would have agreed to almost anything.

"So, why give Baby the control?" Spike whispered in Xander's ear, tickling the little hairs all the way down. Xander shivered. When Spike stopped, Xander opened his eyes to find Spike staring straight down at him. "Why let Baby have control?" Spike repeated more slowly.
Xander squirmed with discomfort as Spike stared at him the way Mrs. Wilson in third grade had stared at him when she expected him to be able to do long division. "He seems to know what he's doing, and he never babbles, and he doesn't play with his shirt tails and look like a dork dressed up in his brother's clothes because the clothes you bought for me really aren't much like me."

"Bloody hell, you think the demon's... what? Cooler?" Spike pulled back, and oh yeah, Xander totally felt like he'd just announced to the class that 3 goes into 9 five times. He shrugged.

"I guess I hoped that the demon cool would rub off like osmosis or something only with a lack of dorkiness instead of water," he agreed. "Instead I'm just as dorky as ever only when Baby's up front, people aren't so much with the noticing me being a dork."

"Pet, why does the great broody one annoy the unlife out of me?" Spike asked.

"Okay, I'm obviously missing something because one-that's making sense of the not even variety and two-I thought we were talking about how fucked up I am."
"You are fucked up, pet, and so am I for that matter, but look at tonight. I would have staked the git if I could have."

"And that would be the whole stealing of me part, right?"

"Partly. Pet, why did you keep droppin' the stake when you tried to hunt with Gunn?" Spike tried, and Xander could feel the invisible dunce cap growing out of the top of his head.

"Because I'm a loser?" Since Spike had pinned him to the bed, Xander couldn't dodge the slap to the side of the head that time. "Ow!"

"Stop bein' so thick skulled," Spike snapped.

"Hey, I get hit when I call myself thick skulled," Xander pointed out the unfairness, but Spike ignored him.

"Baby wanted a master... why?"

"Demons are all about who's in charge and structure and clan," Xander answered, watching Spike suspiciously for any more sneak attacks.
"Exactly. And why does the great broody one leave me wanting to just rip him right off the family tree and drop him in a vat of holy water."

"Because he broods?"

"Bloody hell, the Master did that all the time. According to Darla, he'd spend months whining about how in the old days, a master could walk the alleys and pick off the best humans without having mobs on his tail. Angel can brood til his hair falls out for all I care, but he should act like a proper vampire. He's part of the Aurelius line, even if he is a git, but he won't act like it."

"Okay, and I should..." Xander waited for Spike to finish his sentence, but he just lay there, pinning Xander to the bed and silent. The pinning part was good, but the silent expectation was more than a little annoying. "You need to put the dots closer together for me, Spike."

"No, I bloody well don't. Figure it out, pet," Spike answered and then he leaned down and sucked on the claim mark so that Xander's entire brain switched off as all the blood headed south. Helplessly writhing, he clutched at fistfuls of Spike's coat and gasped. By the
time Spike finally let go of his neck, he could feel his cock struggling against the fabric of his pants.

"Miss me?" Spike muttered against Xander's chest as he worked his way down with a series of small kisses.

"Fuck, yeah," Xander gathered enough brain cells to answer.

"Picked ya up a prezzie, pet. Somethin' ta make up for leavin' ya alone all that time." A mouth descended on Xander's nipple, sucking so hard that Xander arched his back up off the bed and threw his arms out for leverage. Sucking good. Sucking very good.

"Ya want to see?" Spike asked when he finally released the hardened, red flesh. Xander couldn't answer what with everything above the neck being so numb. Spike half sat up, pressing his ass into Xander's crotch, and the sharp edge of pleasurable pain drove Xander to thrust up into that pressure. When something silver floated into his vision, Xander had to struggle to focus on the silver ring, thick with grooves carved into a rough design on one side and a ball suspended between two points at the front.
"You like?" Spike asked.

"Um... yeah," Xander looked at the size and wondered if he could even fit it onto his pinky finger. He didn't have time to say anything else because Spike had gone back to working the same nipple, pulling and nibbling at it until Xander couldn't have formed the word fire even if the heat in his groin had spontaneously set the bed on fire.

The dull aching needy pain in his chest ended with a sharp pain that sidetracked Xander's penis, which was really surprising considering how into things his penis had gotten. And that would be the not-good side of pain.

"And again with the ow," Xander complained, but Spike just waggled his eyebrows.

"Not gonna say that in a minute," he promised. Xander gasped as Spike grabbed the abused nipple and stretched it. The red pain grew for a second, and then cold steel soothed the burn as Spike slipped the ring into the hole he'd made with his fang.

Lowering his head, Spike licked the abused skin, and Xander shivered as the ring sent exquisite shivers through his body. "Like that, pet?" Spike whispered as he
moved down, trailing a fang over Xander's stomach, and the faint scent of blood brought Baby to the surface.

"Pet, your demon's showin'," Spike said as he sat up, his knees straddling Xander as he slipped off his coat and flung it to the floor.

"I... uh, what?" Xander finally managed. Spike unbuttoned his shirt before putting his hands on either side of Xander's head and bending over.

"Your demon's showin', and since your demon's been acting like a right git, you have two choices. If your demon's coming to the surface, we can get the punishment out of the way now, or you can put Baby back in his place until sire and sire's favorite finish playin'," Spike offered before licking the claim mark.

It took Xander a couple of seconds to realize Spike was threatening to stop with the sex, and another couple to catch his breath and force Baby back so far that the world blurred into the blues and greens of his normal human vision.

"Oh no, no stopping, stopping bad," Xander objected as Spike shimmied out of his red shirt. He reached up and
touched one of Spike's nipples, rubbing his thumb over it until Spike hissed in pleasure.

"Fuck, yeah, Xan. Flip over," Spike ordered as he unbuttoned his jeans and pulled out his cock. Precum formed at the tip, and Xander could see the end already nudging the foreskin aside.

Xander ripped open his own jeans, arching his back as he struggled to get them down, but then Spike grabbed the belt loops and yanked them down with one pull that left Xander's hard cock to bob in the air.

"Miss me?" Spike asked salaciously, and Xander squirmed around, his face to the pillow, and suddenly Spike's use of 'pillow biter' actually did make sense.

"I thought I'd lost you." Xander pulled his knees up under his chest, spreading them to open himself up for Spike.

"Never goin' to happen, pet. You're mine, and I always come back for what's mine. I love seein' ya all spread out for me."

Xander shivered as a possessive hand ran over his ass and down a thigh. He pressed back and wiggled in
"Stay put," Spike ordered with a warm slap on the ass that just made Xander wiggle harder. His cock dangled in the air, and Xander reached down to stroke the neglected flesh. It'd been too long.

"Oi, someone's being naughty," Spike said as he slapped Xander's hand away and closed his own hand around the base of Xander's cock.

"Spike, please," Xander begged as he tried to thrust into the hand only to have Spike move with him, teasing and tormenting him to the point of near exploding.

"Seems like someone's forgotten who's in charge pet," Spike commented with an entirely too amused tone and then he disappeared from the bed. Xander could only kneel with his face to the pillow and his empty ass in the air as he waited for Spike to come back. Baby uncurled a bit of longing for sire, and Xander ruthlessly shoved it away, so not willing to have Spike stop now.

Just then something wrapped around his right ankle, and Xander partially raised himself to watch Spike tie a soft white rope around it with a double knot that would have
made any sailor proud. When he finished, Spike put a hand on Xander's shoulder, pushing his face back down to the bed, and Xander obediently sank down, his ass still in the air. He'd tucked his arms around his head, but Spike took his right arm and pulled it to Xander's side. When Spike used the long end of the rope from Xander's right ankle to start tying Xander's right wrist, Xander could feel his breath catch as his cock thickened even more. Far beyond words, he could only moan.

Then Spike repeated the restraints on the other side, tying Xander's left ankle to his left wrist with about eight inches of rope between them. Xander was left with his cheek pressed to the pillow, his arms helpless at his side, and his knees bent at the perfect angle to leave his ass open and stuck up in the air.

"Such a pretty childe," Spike said, and now hands stroked his ass and traveled up over to his back.

"Spike, please," Xander found the words to beg.

"Goin' to enjoy my childe, aren't I. I'm sire, after all, and it's my bloody right," Spike answered without mercy, and Xander groaned as he pulled against the rope. He just succeeded in sliding his legs up the bed an inch, arching
his back even more as Spike chuckled.

"Knowin' Angelus, the wanker probably bit the inside of his cheek off trying to keep himself from tying you to a bed and torturing you until you passed out from pleasure and pain," Spike said as he walked around the bed to the far side. Xander squirmed to raise his head and turn so that he could watch, but with his head sunk into a pillow, he couldn't even manage that. He had to just lay there as Spike rattled around the room with his jeans hanging open and his cock jutting out.

"Don't care. Sire, please let me..." Xander pleaded as he stared at the open bathroom door helplessly.

"Not goin' to let you do anything but lay there, so get used to it," Spike answered, and then something wet and warm touched his ass. Xander groaned as the feeling of warmth traveled up his spine and radiated into his body, damn near setting his cock on fire.

"Someone's tight," Spike commented and then a finger wiggled into Xander's ass. The feeling of sire again inside him... even if it wasn't quite the way he wanted sire inside him... made Xander grunt in pleasure and pain and need, but he couldn't do anything else. Spike pressed at
his entrance and a second finger worked inside, now stretching him. His muscles loosened with a soft burn, and something bigger pressed inside. Xander awkwardly thrust backwards, impaling himself on something too small to be Spike, and a sharp slap on his ass send him forward again, his movement limited to the six inches of rocking back and forth.

"Impatient little bugger," Spike said, and then he slapped Xander's ass again, this time, the hand drove the object farther into Xander, triggering the prostate so that Xander could only grunt in pleasure and need so sharp it made his hanging cock ache. "Someone got told to just lay there." Spike slapped again, spreading the heat over Xander's ass.

Xander lost himself in the pattern of slaps, some feather soft, some hard enough to press his face into the pillow. Whatever toy Spike had put into him nudged into his prostate, and the growing heat in his ass radiated out to his whole body until he could only feel the fire and the pattern of blows and his hard cock hanging useless. Xander had almost lost himself when Spike pulled the toy out, leaving him cold and uncomfortable; however, the feeling didn't last long.
The bed tilted as Spike climbed up, and then Xander felt the pressure of Spike's thick cock pressing against his ass. Without even opening his eyes, he pressed back, groaning as the muscles stretched even more. Inch by inch, Spike slid in the first bit, and then strong hands grabbed Xander's hips. Xander exhaled and thought relaxing thoughts as Spike then drove in the rest of the way.

Gasping in both pleasure and pain, Xander fist ed his hands and arched his back as Spike pulled out and then slammed in again. On the third thrust, Xander felt himself start, orgasms ripping through him as he fought the ropes, his muscles stiff and his whole body struggling to arch up. Spike paused for a second, and then as Xander's second and third wave hit, started thrusting again. Xander only half felt Spike finish as he sank down into a post-coital silence, like being wrapped in sheets too thick to fight out of.

Spike pulled out and dropped onto the bed next to Xander. Xander half opened one eye, still tied in position and his back starting to ache.

"Missed you, pet," Spike said.
"Missed you too, Spike," Xander answered before closing his eyes again. Fingers worked at his wrists and ankles until he could finally lay flat, so tired he couldn't even bother to open his eyes and watch Spike. Even when something warm and wide tightened around his wrist, Xander lay there one big limp sexed-out noodle. When both hands had been wrapped, the clink of chains finally inspired Xander to open his eyes and watch as Spike chained his wrists to a ring set into the wall. He had enough chain to get comfortable, but not enough to get off the bed, and Xander remembered when Spike had first captured him and kept him locked up while Xander fought a growing fondness for waking up chained.

"You aren't going to start on Baby tonight, are you?" Xander asked sleepily.

"No." Spike walked over and dropped the lock key on the dresser before padding back to bed and sliding in under the covers. "Just thought I'd remind you who you belong to, pet," Spike finished as he pressed to Xander's side, clever fingers playing with Xander's new nipple ring. Xander just smiled as he let himself drift to sleep.
Part Sixteen

Xander stretched, the click of chains reminding him that things had changed a bit. Well, that and the comfortable bed and the fact that Baby curled in the back of his head instead of doing the whole large and in charge bit like when he'd tried to bite Faith. And oh god, he'd tried to bite Faith. Xander groaned.

"Mornin', pet." Spike said a second before the stereo speakers screamed with the wails of one of Spike's favorite CD's.

"Gahhh," Xander yelped as he clapped his hands over his ears and clocked himself with a length of chain at the same time.

"Problem there, pet?" Spike asked as he landed on the bed with a bounce, looking at Xander with a smirk.

"Not funny. I think I gave myself a concussion," Xander complained as he felt the bump on his head. Unfortunately, that left his ears undefended as a punk
singer screamed through the speakers.

"Have Baby do somethin' about it then," Spike shrugged without much sympathy. Then he reached out and tweaked the nipple ring Xander had forgotten getting. A shiver traveled his whole body and Spike waggled an eyebrow. "Knew you'd like that. Thought of you the minute I saw it."

"Please tell me that's saw it as in 'spotting it in the window of some kinky shop' and not saw it as in 'taking it off someone's body after having them for dinner,"
Xander said as the thought struck him. "Please?"

"Oi, like I'd get you some used bauble," Spike snorted. Xander noticed that Spike skipped the whole eating of people part as he rolled his eyes and then headed out into the main room, leaving Xander chained to the wall and listening to music that made his ears throb. Rubbing the sore spot on his forehead, Xander tried doing what Spike had said, calling Baby up the way he would call up his vision. His head started throbbing worse, and then it evened out, the swelling shrinking under Xander's fingers.

Xander could feel Baby's eagerness to do more, almost
like an anxious puppy, and really that might not be such a bad comparison considering how the demon responded to encouragement, pressing forward.

"Yeah, yeah, like you've done a great job lately," Xander said sarcastically as he shoved at Baby. Rather than yielding, Baby growled and slid forward until Xander could feel the pressure like when he and Jesse used to dare each other to dive to the bottom of the deep end of the pool where the water pressed against them.

Pulling against the chain that kept him on the bed, Xander locked his jaw and fought until he could hear the blood thumping through his skull. Baby sent up thoughts of being strong and hunting with sire, feeding. The image of Baby sinking teeth into prey sent Xander off the bed, but with his wrists still chained to the wall, he ended up twisting around and falling so that he sat on the floor with his arms up in the air, the chain tight between his wrists and the wall.

"Not even," Xander said through gritted teeth as he pulled up memories of his own in their silent battle. He remembered the first time Gunn had taken him out hunting without Xander having to follow the guys into the night.
"You keep your head down and stay away from any fangs," Gunn had ordered as he passed over a stake. Xander remembered the feel of the warm wood as he followed the guys, Luther shooting him dirty looks the whole way. Gunn wasn't prey. Humans weren't prey.

Baby retaliated with thoughts of Riley, fantasies of flesh pulping under his hands and the feeling of bones snapping. Riley tried to take their place. Riley was rival.

Xander took a deep breath as he tried to find a way to fight that one since he did feel more than a little Riley-hatred. But he couldn't just kill humans who annoyed them. If he started down that path, his mother would be near the top of the list. He still flinched at the memory of his last birthday dinner. His mom had peppered Spike with questions that bordered on rude until she'd gone over into all-out rudeland with the whole question of protection.

"You seem old enough to know which side of a condom goes on the inside. I do hope you two are taking precautions," she had said, her fork gesturing in the air with a piece of chocolate cake impaled on the end. Xander had fairly well felt like he was the one impaled on
the fork as his face blushed dark red.

"I'm always careful, missus," Spike had answered around the cake in his mouth, and Mrs. Harris had frowned unhappily.

"You don't strike me as the careful sort," his mom had started in again, but Spike interrupted her.

"I'm careful when it's important. I even make sure that when I tie him spread-eagle over the bed that I check the circulation in his hands and feet." His mother had dropped her fork, cake and all, and Xander choked so badly that he ran for the bathroom, leaving Spike looking slightly concerned and his mother in clear shock. Yep, if he was going to start killing people who annoyed him, his mother and Spike would both be high on that list, but he still loved them. He loved Spike charging into Cassidy's lair looking for him without any backup. He loved the way, back in his glorious days of unemployment, his mother used to slip a couple of dollars into his wallet at night when she thought he was asleep. They were annoying, but he loved them anyway.

"So, you ready for some breakfast?" Spike's voice interrupted, and Xander opened his eyes to find Baby
had retreated. Now Spike stood in front of him with a key in hand.

"Food would be of the good, just as soon as I pee. You know humans with human needs," Xander answered as Spike came over and unlocked the chain from the leather cuffs buckled around his wrists.

By the time Xander wandered out to the main room, buttoning his jeans as he went, Baby circled in the back of his mind, nervous around Spike but no longer radiating fear. Spike sat on the table, his bare feet braced on the arms of a tall chair as he cleaned a handgun, various shining metal parts laying on the table next to him.

Xander glanced down at this own shining metal, touching the nipple ring and feeling the tingling down through the center of his body. "Thank you, Spike," he said as he dropped into a chair near his sire and grabbed the sack of food sitting in the middle of the table. He pulled the fries out first, shoving them in his mouth before they had a chance to get cold.

"Looks good on you, pet. So, are you and Baby sorted out then?" Spike slipped two parts back together with a click and then slid the new piece into the back of the gun.
"Uh, strangely yes. I think he's oddly okay with the whole dumping Angel plan," Xander said as the thought of Angel didn't cause more than a grumble.

"Not so strange, pet. I asked you last night if you'd figured out why I'd like to kick the great broody one off the Aurelius family tree, and last night, Baby was probably about as frustrated with you." Spike put the gun down and picked up a long knife, checking the blade as Xander unwrapped a cheeseburger. He wondered if Spike had some hidden minion who did the food run or if he'd just bribed some McDonald's worker. Xander looked at his sire suspiciously, but Spike just waited for his answer with that one eyebrow up expectant expression.

"The dots still are kind of dot-like instead of picture like," Xander shrugged as he bit into the burger. God he was hungry.

"In the morning, I can hear you pulling at those chains, making sure they're tight," Spike commented, and Xander swallowed quickly, a blush making his face hot as Spike turned to look at him. Yeah, Xander liked the chains plenty, but it wasn't something he exactly wanted to talk about.
"Hey, how about that Hellmouth," Xander tried distracting, but Spike just cocked his eyebrow up even higher. The vampire jumped down from the table and walked around to behind Xander, and Xander could feel his heart speed up when strong hands landed on his shoulders. Spike ran his hands down Xander's arms and then stopped at the leather cuffs still buckled around Xander's wrists.

"When I put things on you, I like that you don't take them off. If I want the cuffs or the ring off, I'll take them off." Spike reached up with one hand unbuttoned Xander's shirt, tracing a fingernail over the exposed skin before reaching in and flicking the nipple ring. "But I'm sire, and I make that decision for you," Spike said with a tug to the nipple ring, and Xander groaned. But just when he expected to get thrown stomach down on the table and taken, Spike stopped. The hands disappeared and Spike went back to his original spot, a malicious grin on his face.

"So not nice," Xander complained. And then the dots seemed suddenly closer. "And that would be the point. I—" Xander paused, blushing as he forced himself to ignore the embarrassment, "I like when you're in charge,
and Baby wants me to be in charge, only I went and made him take over, so now he thinks he should be in charge, only he isn't because then I took over again."

Xander knew he was right from the smile, but one part still didn't make sense. "But what does that have to do with you being annoyed with the big broody one?"

Spike had been sharpening his knife and now he paused. "He was my sire," Spike started. "He had a right ta to what he wanted with me and Dru, just like I have a right ta do what I want with you." Spike stopped, but suddenly the dots were very pictury.

"But he left you alone," Xander finished. Spike started sharpening his knife again.

"Wouldn't even mind that as much except he comes in and plays sire. He turned up in China and again during one of the big wars. And then in L.A., he promises to help me get you back, and asks for my help takin' out Cassidy, and then he turns around and tries to shove me off. Can't rightly just call him a bastard and ignore him or submit to him, and I sure can't dominate him even though I did give it my best. Just feels wrong to have things so unsettled."
Xander watched Spike check the edge of the knife. A long red line appeared in his thumb and Spike licked it.

"And that's what I did to Baby," Xander said softly.

"Yeah, ya did, pet. However, that doesn't change the fact that Baby had a duty to me, and he wasn't strong enough to stand on his own and wait for me. You're both my childer even if you're my favorite. So, Baby and I will still need to come to some understanding," Spike added. Xander could feel Baby stir, but there wasn't the blind panic of earlier. "Right now, though, we have to go play nice with the slayer. Vahrall demons aren't the kind to play by the Annoyin' One's rules, and if that Hellmouth comes open, we're going to have to find ourselves some other dimension to set up shop."

"Another dimension?" Xander asked, panic sending his voice into frightenedly girly tones. "But what about my mom, and Willow, and Gunn, and Angel, and Aunt Betty who's not really my aunt but who does have a whole lot of cats?" Spike shot him another look bordering between confusion and concern.

"If we have time, we'll gather up your mum, but my first choice would be keeping that Hellmouth shut." Spike
paused. "Considering the alternative is having your mum live with us, I'm willing to do what it takes to stop the Annoyin' One and his half-arsed plan for the Hellmouth." Spike shoved the sharpened knife into a sheath strapped to his leg before pulling the jeans over it.

"Living with us?" Xander considered the true horror of having his mother in the next room. As a teenager, he had to play sock puppet of love in the middle of the night to keep his mother from pounding on the door and asking if he needed more bran, and having her in the same house with his current sex life... Xander shuddered in horror.

"So, let's talk about the others," Spike said as he pulled on his boots. Xander shoved the last of his cheese burger into his mouth and looked at the table. The others. Okay, Angel thought he was out of control, Faith had to think he was a nut job, which was actually okay with him as long as she didn't try jumping him again. And Willow.... Oh yeah, she must think he'd slipped round the bend.

"Ya can't ask Baby to take charge, not when that means dealing with a slayer and a slightly off-bubble watcher and more stress than a new fledge can handle," Spike said as he pulled on his second boot. Xander swallowed
and nodded unhappily.

"Out with it," Spike said as he jumped to the floor and picked up the gun, shoving it into the back of his waistband.

"Um, no, I can do this. Just... I don't know... stick me with an elbow or something if I start babbling."

"Just what?" Spike stopped, cocking his head at Xander in that adorable 'I don't know what the hell you're talking about' expression. Xander sighed.

"I babble."

"Yeah, I noticed, pet."

"But when I babble people tend to look at me, and normally this is good because I perfected the whole class clown act where I can be the center of attention and still not have anyone actually pay attention. I'm good at that. Normally." Xander stumbled to a stop, not sure how to explain.

"And you don't want people to look at ya?" Spike asked. "You're a treat to look at, and now that we got you out of
those bloody awful clothes, you're going to catch some looks, pet."

"Yeah, but those looks are from people who don't know some of the things I've done, and Angel and Willow know that I'm a different. Angel saw me try to bite Faith."

"Bloody hell, you tried to take a slayer?" Spike practically bounced forward, his eyebrows up in an expression of glee that made Baby growl his pride. "Get in a few good hits then?"

"I sat on her and almost bit her before Angel pulled me off and choked me into oblivion," Xander said, leaving out the part where Faith had offered to throw him down and ride him around the curves. He really didn't want to see her end up Spike's next meal.

"Good on you!" Spike offered with a slap on the arm that left Baby ecstatic and Xander feeling a little pride, and then a little guilty at feeling proud of nearly biting someone.

"Okay, this is what I mean. You think this is great, but Faith and Willow and Angel, not so much with the cheering. And now they're going to give me the look for
picking you over Angel and Willow is going to give me the disappointed face, which is nearly as bad as the resolve face, and I'm going to get all flustered and say something incredibly stupid," Xander blurted as he stared at the table. "I didn't let Baby up because he's smarter because really, not so much. Baby just babbles less than I do, and I really don't know how to even start some of the explanations they're all going to demand."


"Yeah, Patheticsville. I know this Spike, but Willow's going to say something like, 'How could you,' and I'm going to say something incredibly stupid, and then Angel's going to give me that disappointed look, and... okay, I have no idea what to say to Angel, but that's the point. I don't know how to talk to these people, at least not without making myself sound like either a loon or someone in need of serious therapy. Of course, they may be right on the whole me needing therapy part."

"No one's suggested therapy yet, so I don't think you're ready ta be committed." Spike pointed out.

"See, inappropriate sharing of inner fears. Baby doesn't do that. He knows how to keep his mouth shut."
"And you will too, and without confusing the shite out of Baby by shoving him up front to try and deal with the slayer and Peaches."

Xander laughed as Spike headed for the other room. "Spike, I had teachers who would have paid good money to see you teach me how to not talk. I had two modes in high school. Either I sat in the back half asleep, or, when the back row was too scary for even me, I would sit up front and make inappropriate comments about Russian queens and rumors of horses. My history teacher almost had an aneurism, and sadly, I didn't even mean to blurt that piece of totally inappropriate material, although, I would like to say in my defense that the back row paid a lot more attention to history after—."

Xander froze mid-sentence when Spike reappeared. Okay, Spike didn't make him fall silent as much as the leather in Spike's hand. "And that can't be what I think it is," Xander whispered.

"Like I said before, you're my childe, and you'll submit to me, not to Baby or to any other demon on the soddin' planet. So, if you can't control yourself, I'll provide the control."
"I can't go out with that on. Willow would think I was..." Xander couldn't even find the word that would explain this. However, Spike kept coming even as Xander backed away.

"This is the Hellmouth pet, people around here have learned to ignore whatever doesn't fit into their narrow little worlds. Now either come here or I'll add in some punishment for you on top of what Baby's earned," Spike promised seriously. That was enough to stop Xander from backing away even if he couldn't get his legs to move him forward.

Spike quickly closed the distance and wrapped his hand around the back of Xander's neck, pulling him forward and he settled the straps in over Xander's head. Part of Xander said that he should make some form of protest, but at least this way he wouldn't be the one explaining anything, at least not without pantomime, and Xander suddenly had an image of himself babbling in pantomime. So not pretty.

Spike pressed something against his lips, and Xander opened his mouth. A cold metal piece slipped into his mouth, trapping his tongue in the bottom of his mouth
as Spike tightened straps. Leather ran from the sides of the bit in his mouth over his cheeks and over the top of his head and down the back. Matching pieces ran from the side around the back of his head and then down and under his chin so that Xander found his mouth held firmly shut.

"There, babbling problem solved," Spike commented as he kissed Xander's closed lips, nibbling on the lower lip. With the bit, Xander couldn't really do much in return. "So, let's go see your little friends and get this world-savin' bit over before I lose all self-respect. Can't believe I'm helping the white hats save the world," Spike commented with a slap on Xander's hip.

Xander headed straight for the bathroom, ignoring sire and his own need to start pulling at buckles. In the mirror, he could see the upside down triangle of leather from the corners of his mouth out to a head strap around his forehead. Straps went over his head, and the bottom of the muzzle tucked under his chin before connecting to a piece that looked suspiciously collar like, the soft brown leather dark against his skin and the blue of his shirt.

Xander turned and found Spike leaning against the door,
smiling. "Ya look like a right treat, pet," Spike said softly as he came forward. His fingers played with Xander's curls, tugging them out from under the straps so that the leather slowly disappeared under the hair. But unless Xander planned on growing a pretty impressive beard in the next ten minutes, nothing would hide the muzzle around his mouth. Xander reached up and touched the rings at the corners of his mouth where the various straps all connected.

Spike pulled his hand back down and rested his chin on Xander's shoulder, invisible as Xander stared at himself in the mirror.

"Pet, ya let Baby muzzle you, and you nearly lost yourself. If you're that afraid of yourself, ya have to trust me to speak for you." Spike said, reaching up to Xander's still-open shirt and playing with the nipple ring. Xander looked up at the ceiling for a second, struggling with various fears.

"If it bothers ya that much, we can just go dimension shopping. Mind you, Angel is a tough bastard, and I think he'll probably save the world without us."

Xander took a deep breath before looking around the
room for something to write with. He found a big nothing. Slipping out of Spike's embrace, Xander headed for the bedroom and snagged a pen from the nightstand. On the palm of his hand, he wrote, "We'll help."

Spike smiled.

**Part Seventeen**

"Oh goddess," Willow breathed as Xander followed Spike through the door to the Magic Box. Xander ducked his head as his face nearly caught fire from his blush.

"Red, Peaches, Slayer," Spike greeteded the assembled group.

"Oh goddess. Oh goddess."

"William, what do you think you're doing?" Angel demanded. Xander could feel Baby stir, but he shoved back viciously. He'd never be anything other than a minion to Angel, a reminder of all the vampire bits Angel didn't want to feel. He was childe to Spike, and he'd stick with Spike. Baby backed off with a grumble, but Xander nearly walked into Spike's back. Instinctively, he tried to apologize, but he just managed to make himself blush even deeper when his attempt to talk tightened the
straps around his head. Oh yeah, his brain wasn't running on all cylinders.

"Oh goddess, Xander, are you okay? Of course you're not okay with that... that..." Willow stopped, and Xander looked up in time to see Willow's hands fluttering like butterflies.

"Chill, 'Lo, boy doesn't seem like he's hurting any, although he does seem to be walking a little funny," Faith said as she came out of a back room, a tall man walking just a bit behind her. Xander glared at her because he was not walking funny. Okay, if he'd been all human, he totally would have been, but he wasn't and he could walk just fine.

"Tone down the glare. What, did the Z-dog wake up on the wrong side of his vampire this morning?" Faith stepped aside to let the man step forward. "Larry, this is Xander and his vamp, Spike. Xander and Spike, Larry."

"Hey," Larry said with a nod of his head. "Wait. Xander? Xander Harris? Oh god, I remember you from grade school. Man, I am really sorry about the whole lunch money thing. I just really didn't have my head screwed on straight, you know?" Larry offered with a smile, and
Xander's eyes widened as he finally placed the face. Larry held up his hands in surrender, but he held an ax in one hand, which made him look a little not-so-harmless.

"Hey, no need to look so worried because I process my anger now. I just thought I'd show up and help swing an ax against the menace of the day," he said as he lifted the heavy black ax.

"Um, guys, Xander..." Willow stepped forward toward them, but then Angel sidestepped putting himself between Willow and Spike.

"William, take that thing off, now."

"Or wot?" Spike asked as he leaned against a shelf. "Seems like the boy made his choice, and it wasn't you, Peaches." And that would be Spike's smug voice.

"William," Angel growled. "Take it off or I will."

"Bloody hell, we came here to help with the Annoyin' One, but if you're going to act all high and mighty, we have places ta go, dimensions ta check out," Spike said in a voice dripping with accent before he turned back toward the door.
Xander froze, looking from Spike to the group gathered in the Magic Box. Riley stood near the counter with a number of weapons laid in front of him. Larry looked slightly dazed, Willow still had fluttery hands, and Tara just stood with wide eyes and a book clutched to her chest. Xander reached out and grabbed at Spike's arm. Spike stopped, his back to the group.

"He's mine, Peaches. If we stay, you don't get ta tell me what to do with my boy." Spike didn't even turn around, and Xander could feel the tension in the room as he clung to Spike's duster.

"If you think—" Angel started, but a voice from the far side of the store interrupted him.

"For heaven's sake. It's not like putting those contraptions on him is any more cruel than when you simply intimidated him into silence," Giles said. Xander turned to see the watcher stand up from behind a shelf with a large book in hand, and Angel flinched back, his fury gone under the more familiar guilt.

"Besides, the boy is not exactly human, so I suggest we continue with our plan so that I can get all four of you
out of my shop and my life as quickly as possible. While I understand the necessity for cooperating with certain demons, I certainly don't like it."

"I am not a hostile," Riley said in a fair imitation of a growl, and from the tone, Xander guessed this wasn't the first time he'd made that particular announcement.

"Of course you aren't," Giles agreed in a tone that made it clear that he thought Riley was both demonic and slightly stupid.

"But Xander," Willow inched to the side, gazing around Angel's body, and Xander felt himself blush even redder. Okay, he could do this. Xander could feel his own fear and humiliation rising, and Baby pressed in on the tide. This time, Xander forced Baby back as he clenched his teeth over the bit in his mouth, determined to keep control. Baby slid back into the shadows of his mind.

"The boy's mine, witch. I take care of him, and that means if you don't stop staring and making him feel uncomfortable, I'll walk right out of here with him, and you'll never bloody see him again." Spike turned around and caught Willow in one of his patented, narrow-eyed glares of doom.
"But..."

"Hey, how about you do your blessing thing on my ax? My ax could use some serious blessing, and as the official adjunct member of the F-team, I am due some extra Willow time. I never get to see you any more," Larry interrupted as he walked between Angel and Spike to pull Willow away.

"But..."

"You want me to come explain the kinky birds and leather-bees?" Faith called from the counter, and Willow gave a strangled chirp sound while Larry practically shouted a "NO!" Hurrying, Larry pulled Willow into the back room, and Tara slowly put down her book.

"I should—" she ducked her head and waved toward the back room. Then she made a hasty exit, walking fast enough to make her skirts swirl and tangle around her ankles.

"Back off, Big-A. Seems like Xander could flash some signal if he needed saving, and I'm not in the business of getting involved in anyone's sex life. Least, not without a
proper invite," she added as she gave Spike a wink.

"You don't know—" Angel started.

"We don't bloody know? I know you just about turned him as loony as Dru ever was. You soddin' well know he wanted to be with me, and you still tried ripping him away. You tried back in L.A., and you tried here, but the boy picked me," Spike interrupted, now in game face.

"So that's what has you acting like this? You finally found a way to make yourself feel like you aren't second to me, boy?" Angel demanded as he stepped forward. Spike pressed forward himself so that now the two vampires stood chest to chest with matching yellow eyes glaring at each other. Xander could feel Baby's desire to press back into a dark corner, but to hell with that. Xander stepped forward and backhanded Spike across the arm, giving him a dirty look before pressing between the two vampires.

"Stay out of this, pet," Spike said, but Xander ignored him as he pressed his back into Spike's chest, struggling to push him away from the brewing fight. Luckily, Angel retreated several steps to avoid touching, so Xander could cross his arms and glare at the great broody one.
"Good lord, it's like watching demonic five year olds. Might I remind people that we need to figure out how the Vahrall plan to use the Word of Valios to open the Hellmouth?"

"It's usually a sacrifice. Kill a few virgins, toss something down a hole, chant a bit and then watch the world end. I vote for finding the Vahrall and guttin' them before the chanting and sacrificing start." Spike announced as he slipped an arm around Xander's stomach, and Xander relaxed back into the embrace.

"I'm voting for bleach-boy's plan," Faith added.

"Yes, hardly surprising," Giles answered as he retreated behind the counter and started flipping through the pages of a dusty, yellowed volume. "But the Vahrall are immune to magic, including the locating spell Jenny has been trying for the last 24 hours straight, and we have no idea where to find them or their ceremony."

"I'm guessing the Hellmouth," Spike offered. Giles looked up, sighed, and then returned to flipping pages.

"Yes, thank you, I hadn't thought to look for a spell to
open the Hellmouth to occur on the Hellmouth. If you would like to be of assistance, perhaps you can go sit in the ruins of the old high school until the Vahrall show up or until the sun rises and turns you to a pile of dust. While you're at it, take Angel with you."

Xander held his breath, waiting for some sort of explosion from Spike after that bit of disrespect, but Spike simply stood with his arms around Xander's waist. Surprisingly, Riley jumped in.

"I don't think this hostility is helping to—" Riley started, but Giles interrupted him before he could finish.

"Advice from the vampire's pet, how charming."

"I am not—"

"How silly of me to forget, you are not a hostile, a demon, a thrall, a demon's pet, or anything other than a United States Marine. Yes, yes, quite so."

Xander flinched at Giles' tone of voice, and he actually found himself feeling a little sympathy for the soldier who now clutched a rifle in his tight fists. Angel backed up a few more steps, taking a position next to Riley.
"He has a point," Angel said carefully. "We need to work together. If it would be easier, I could leave."

"Easier. Yes, it would be." Giles ripped his glasses from his face and polished them furiously as he stared at a spot just left of Angel. "Go harass Willie or some low-level demon. Go back to L.A. Go sunbathing or go take a bath in holy water or go throw yourself on a bed of stakes. All of those options would make working considerably easier." Giles slapped the shop counter with his open hand and then stood there, glasses dangling from his other hand as he stared down at the open book.

Angel nodded mutely as he started toward the door.

"Wait. I'll go with you. A couple of my men can be trusted to help us, and maybe the Initiative has a line on any new demons in town," Riley said as he put the rifle down and grabbed a hand gun, shoving it deep into a jacket pocket. Angel paused as Riley trotted to catch up and then they left, the door bell tinkling merrily after them.

"Of course the boy is not a pet. A pet would go running after his master eager to help him, and that's certainly
not what Riley appears to be doing," Giles said to himself dryly as he put his glasses back on.

"Cut him some slack," Faith said. "So, Word of Valios. Anyone I can beat an answer out of for you?"

Giles sighed. "Unfortunately not. Willow, Tara and I searched these books and Jenny has had no luck with the spells. I hate to admit it, but at this point our best bet would be to watch the old high school from midnight to three when the stars are properly aligned for a sacrifice. According to the Yarg texts, the Vahrall will want to make the sacrifice on the surface so that the spirits of Ha'ur and La can witness. Unfortunately, without a clearer timeline, I just don't know when they might show."

"Stakeout, check."

"Except the presence of a Moira does significantly change the odds." Giles added when Faith jumped down from the counter. "If the Anointed One has orchestrated this plan, he will certainly send his best warriors to either stop the Vahrall or defend them, depending on his ultimate plan, and that force will surely include the Moira demon."
"Moira, Schmora. It's a demon; I'll kill it," Faith answered with a shrug.

"Nice thought, luv, but those buggers are hard to kill. A hit to the jewel in their head will do it, but they know that too, so they tend to defend that spot. Hit 'em anywhere else and you just piss 'em off."

"And while I would normally take Spike's advice with more than a little suspicion, I can confirm that," Giles said, and even Xander could smell the distress in the air. He looked over his shoulder at Spike, but Spike could only shrug an answer. Xander looked back toward the man who smelled of fear and despair beyond anything Xander had smelled before, and that was surprising considering some of the dirty back alleys Spike picked for hunting.

"Look, I'm not some white hat, but I'll be damned if I let some Vahrall or Moira or the sniveling Annoying One end the world. I like the world right where it is, so I'll go along and watch the slayer's back," Spike finally added. Giles looked up with a sharp glare.

"The last time a vampire gave me that speech, he turned around and killed one of my slayers."
"Peaches does have a way of going back on his word," Spike agreed.

"Oh, and I suppose you always tell the truth?"

"Bloody hell no. I lie with the best of them," Spike insisted in an insulted tone. "I told his mum I was joking about tying him to the bed," Spike said with a nod toward Xander. "Lied to soldier boy 'bout so many things I can't even keep track of what I told him, but I don't want that Hellmouth open, and as long as your needs and mine are the same, I figure I'm as good of an ally as any."

"Hardly inspiring confidence. I'm sure Tara and Willow will be willing to go along. Their magic is impressive, certainly strong enough to slow you down while Larry beheads you if you start anything," Giles commented as he gestured toward the door to the back room. Faith headed that way, Xander assumed to get the rest of the F-team.

"Fair enough," Spike answered with a nod. "Your clan isn't mine, and I'd kill them all if it meant keeping me and mine safe, so I figure you have a right to doubt my
motives."

"At least you admit it." Giles leaned over and grabbed something out from under the counter. As soon as he twisted the top, Xander's nose twitched from the bitter scent of alcohol. Giles took a deep swig, stashing the bottle back under the counter when the others came in from the back room.

"Spike," Willow said softly, clutching something to her stomach, but her eyes remained on Xander, making him blush. "Do you think... well... oh goddess." Whatever she had intended to say disappeared under a shaky breath as tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Xander flinched, and Spike's arm tightened around his stomach.

"Spike, would you mind if we asked Xander to write us answers so that we can talk to him?" Larry stepped up and took a pad of paper from Willow's hands, holding it out to Spike.

Xander looked at the paper, but just waited as he considered Larry. Xander remembered Larry through the filter of childhood terror, but now, as Spike reached out to take the pad, he could see someone else as Larry shot him a quick wink before backing up to Willow's side. And
shouldn't Larry be more freaked? Xander knew he'd be freaked if someone showed up wearing a muzzle, and Larry seemed strangely not-freaked. Now Willow... she was freaked. Xander glanced toward her, and she reached up and wiped her eye as she stared into space.

"Right, so let's get to the Hellmouth." Spike said as he handed the pad to Xander. Xander took the paper and followed as Spike headed for the door in a swirl of leather.

"You heard him, let's go kick some demon ass... if we can find any," Faith said behind them.

Part Eighteen
Xander sat on a chunk of fallen ceiling folding and unfolding the same corner of paper. The conversation seemed to have petered out after pages of "yes, I'm fine" and "where did you meet Tara?" and the whole "what happened here?" that had sent Willow on a crying jag.
Tara still knelt beside her in the ruins with her arms wrapped around Willow who had gone from crying to just staring into space.

Xander reached up and itched a bit of cheek under a strap, silently blessing Spike for giving him an excuse to not talk because the awkward silence was babble-worthy. Heck, Willow totally would have been babbling if not for the whole crying, staring, lost in the depths of despair thing she had going on.

Larry reached over in the silence, plucking the pen and from Xander's hand.

'Willow blew up the school,' Larry wrote in a scrawled hand. Okay, that surprised Xander, both Larry writing, obviously not wanting to say it in front of Willow and the whole Willow blowing up the school. Hell, if someone was going to blow up a school, Xander would have put himself much higher on the list of potential arsonists. He hated school, but the Willow he'd known would have hyperventilated if she ripped a page in a library book much less burned a library and the rest of the school along with it.

'???' Xander reached over to write. Something must have
let Spike know that he was upset because the vampire stalked back toward them, still chain smoking so that a gray plume followed his head. Larry immediately tilted the pad of paper toward Spike while writing. Spike leaned against a beam near the other side of the room, his eyes flicking to the paper for a second before turning and watching Faith balance on a tilting beam that straddled an old desk. Xander rolled his eyes at Mr. Overprotectiveness.

Larry tilted the pad of paper back toward Xander so he could read. 'Jenny had magical pow powder for blowing up box. Big fight. Spiders came out of box. Willow blew up spider. Spider fire blew up pow powder. Powder blew up school and mayor.'

Xander nodded absent-mindedly, and then spiders plus explosions rang the memory bell. He took the pen back.

'Wendell?' he wrote, the sound of the pen scritchting over the paper the only noise other than the faint creaking of the wood beam that Faith balanced on. Larry blinked several times, ignoring the pen Xander held out. After a second, Larry got up and walked away from the group, abandoning both the paper and his ax as he headed out a hole in the crumbled wall.
And fuck. Just a few seconds too late, Xander remember the part of his conversation with Willow where she talked about Wendell and Larry going to prom together, and yeah, even with his mouth gagged, Xander had a real ability to say the wrong thing. Xander could only watch and silently kick himself as he added one more person to the 'horribly offended' list.

Xander jumped when Spike's hand rested on his shoulder before the vamp dropped onto the wall next to Xander.

"Ya alright, pet?" he asked. Xander nodded and waved a hand absent-mindedly toward the gap where Larry had disappeared.

"Boy needs some space," Spike commented.

Xander grabbed the abandoned pad and scribbled, 'no duh.'

"Brat," Spike complained without actually sounding very complainy.

"I blew up Wendell when I blew up the school," Willow whispered from her place in the ruins. "I tried to blow up
a spider, but I blew up Wendell and then the supplies we brought caught fire."

"It wasn't your fault," a deep voice said, and Xander turned to find Angel stepping in through the gap where Larry had just fled. Riley followed, dressed in army green, and two other men followed. One looked a lot like Riley with the whole military clean look, and the second one, an African American, had a real Gunn thing going on.

"I'm thinking it was my fault what with me doing the magical blowing," Willow said softly.

"The spider had already bitten him, he would have died in agony even if we had gotten him out," Angel insisted.

"Still, blowing up my best friend..." Willow stopped, her breath coming in ragged sobs.

"Still know how ta cheer up a room, don't ya?" Spike asked Angel as he stood up. Xander would have stood up next to his sire, but Spike's hand resting on his shoulder held him in place.

"Shut up, Spike."
"Oh yeah, clever come back, Peaches."

"Isn't that...?" the soldier behind Riley stopped as he brought his gun up.

"Hostile Seven, one of the escaped hostiles," the other soldier added.

"Stand down. Hostile Seven is helping with trying to shut down this demon conspiracy," Riley ordered. "Graham, Forest... this is Spike. The girls are Willow and Tara. These are Graham Miller and Forest Gates." Riley made quick introduction, but Xander noticed that he had been left conspicuously out despite the fact that both soldiers looked at him strangely, which was not so surprising considering the whole muzzle.

"Yeah, stand down," Spike suggested with a tone that promised a whole lot of bloodshed if guns didn't go down. Forrest raised his gun a little higher, but Riley reached out and pushed the end of the weapon down toward the ground.

"Stand down," Riley snapped. "We have readings for multiple hostiles in the area." Riley offered.
"Buddy, there are always multiple hostiles in this area. Welcome to the Hellmouth," Larry said as he climbed back in the gap, coming over to Xander to retrieve his ax. "Sorry I bailed on you there. Some things, just, you know," Larry offered with a half shrug. "So, do we have any bad guys in need of dismembering?" he asked the new arrivals.

"God, I hope so. I'm going to die of boredom if something slimy or horny doesn't walk through that door soon," Faith offered while still balancing on her board and gesturing toward the charred outline of cafeteria doors.

"Careful what you ask for on the Hellmouth, luv."

"Let's focus," Angel interrupted, causing Spike to roll his eyes. "We have rumors of a ceremony this week, and the Vahrall have been spotted near here. Whatever is going to happen will happen soon."

"Not soon enough, A. I'm dying here," Faith objected.

"You won't say that when you face the hostiles," Graham commented. Faith froze mid-balance and then started to laugh hard enough that she had to jump down.
"Babe, I've been facing 'hostiles' for the better part of a year, which puts me on the list of one of the more successful slayers. But I'm not big on hanging around waiting for someone to show up, so I'm hoping your plan includes some action. Otherwise, I'm going to go hit a graveyard or two to find a quick fight."

"I say we flush 'em out. Call the soldier boys' friends in and point them at the court," Spike suggested. "We could see what rats come crawling off the sinking ship."

"And how many humans would die?" Angel demanded.

"Don't soddin' care," Spike answered. Angel stood with his jaw flexing as he fought some internal battle, but Spike just pulled out another cigarette. "If you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it."

"Can I just say that getting in the middle with the court and the Initiative and the Vahrall is sounding kinda not good?" Willow said as she sat up. "Middle tends to be bad."

"We can't just stand around and hope the hostiles show up," Graham pointed out.
"We don't need to wait." Tara pointed toward the large opening where doors once hung. Striding toward them, three green demons growled.

"Bloody hell," Spike said. The blast of three automatic weapons opening fire made Xander fall backwards off his seat, but when he came up, he had pulled his largest knife. The soldiers had already abandoned their automatic weapons in favor of tazers, but Larry with his ax was actually faring better. The Vahrall simply ignored the tazers, and Forrest went down under a vicious punch.

One of the demons, his horns curving backwards like really bad helmet-hair, shook his head and chanted as the ground started to shake, but his words ended in a bubbly growl as a knife sunk into his throat. Xander lost track of what everyone else was doing as he threw himself at the nearest demon, which happened to be the one who had just knocked Larry to the floor.

Xander darted in, slicing the demon's arm and then ducking back as the demon took a swipe at him with a nasty looking claw. The world tilted red and Xander tasted blood as a fang caught his lip. On the floor, Larry scrambled out of the way while Xander dodged in again, this time scoring a hit on the demon's thigh. His knife
stuck in the thick skin, and Xander moved a little too slow.

The demon caught him with a punch to his back that sent him to his knees, but Xander retaliated with a knife strike to the back of the creature's knee. First target, a head or anything that looks like a head; second target, joints. Xander mutely thanked Spike for that lesson as the Vahrall staggered to the side, giving Xander time to get to his feet.

The creature opened its mouth in a furious roar that made Xander want to growl his answer, but Larry appeared behind the demon. Larry sunk the ax into the creature, burying the steel so far into the demon's skull that Xander knew it was dead before it hit the ground. Xander twisted around, ready to take on the next demon, but the other two were already on the ground, reddish-purple blood oozing from multiple wounds and a few dismembered limbs scattered on the floor.

"Okay, as apocalypse go, that was a major disappointment," Faith said as she lifted her sword and let the blade rest on her shoulder. "Is anyone else disappointed?"
"I know I am," a child's voice offered from the open gap that had once been a set of doors. Xander felt Baby withdraw in fear as the Anointed one walked through the opening.

"Anointed One," Angel said respectfully as he took a step forward. Xander took about four steps back so that he stood next to Spike as other vampires filed into the room behind the child-sized Master Vampire. Colin stood at the Anointed One's back, sword ready while the minions scattered across the room. One tried to slide around their group to the back, and Spike snarled a warning that sent the fledge cringing back.

"Angelus. I am disappointed in your interference. I thought we had an arrangement." The child vampire stood looking around at the group, his disdain obvious.

"I won't let the Hellmouth open. Defending it is not a breech of our agreement."

Xander watched as Willow's mouth fell open as she stared at Angel. Oh yeah, the great broody one had definitely failed to mention having a deal with the current Master of the Hellmouth.
"But acting against me is a breech of our agreement," the Anointed One said softly. He took a step forward, and Colin moved to his side, fangs showing.

"I acted against the Vahrall. Certainly you have no wish to see our dimension pulled into theirs." Angel remained respectful, but he didn't back down. Instead, he stared at the Anointed One with yellowed eyes.

"But I told your childe that the Vahrall were part of my plan. Or perhaps Spike is no longer under your protection." The Anointed One looked toward Spike, and Xander could feel his sire's body stiffen at the challenge.

"I don't bloody need—"

"He's mine," Angel snarled as he interrupted Spike.

"He doesn't act like he's yours."

Xander looked from one vampire to the other, feeling the currents pulling at them as Angel vamped out and glared at Spike only to have Spike glare back.

"Can fight my own fights," Spike growled. Angel didn't bother to answer; he closed the distance in two strides
and grabbed Spike by the back of the neck.

"You're mine, boy," Angel said loudly before dropping his voice, "and I won't let you throw yourself against him because I don't know how to feel about the fact that you'll always be mine," Angel whispered into Spike's ear as he yanked Spike close to him. "Just keep your head down and back me up, and for once in your unlife, follow orders."

Spike shoved back at Angel, making Angel take a small step backwards. "Got recognized as a Master without you, ya overgelled poof."

"William," Angel warned.

"Wot? Ya don't have the knackers to make me submit."

Xander was on the edge of hyperventilating-type panic when he saw Spike tilt his head slightly. And that was not a challenging look Spike gave Angel as the larger vampire blocked the Anointed One's view of their little exchange.

"Spike, don't," Angel said as he stepped into Spike's space. Spike tilted his head a fraction more.
"Or what? Soddin' souled up excuse—"

Spike didn't get a chance to say any more before Angel drove fangs deep into Spike, drinking his blood while jerking Spike's body into his own. The sounds of sucking stopped, but neither moved.

"Ya need more," Spike whispered, his words little more than a breath, but Angel pulled back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Angel glanced over to Xander, bringing up a hand to rest on Xander's cheek for a second before giving the muzzle a sharp tug. As Angel turned to face the Anointed One again, Xander realized Angel had opened a buckle. Xander looked toward Spike for guidance, and Spike reached over and pulled another buckle free.

Getting the point, Xander unhooked the rest of the muzzle, and pulled Baby's strength up to the surface, feeling his mouth ache as fangs pushed out. He understood the silent message in Angel's act. If things went bad, Xander would need every advantage in fighting, and a vampire's fangs could be a deadly asset, one they couldn't afford to muzzle.

"Spike's mine, and he falls under my protection," Angel
said as he stepped forward again. The girls and Larry had pushed closer to Spike and Xander, but all three soldiers stood their ground, spread out in a triangle shape and ready for a fight. Faith remained to the side, her sword held out in front while a couple of minions sneered at her.

"You have failed to open a portal," a deeper voice said as the Mohra stepped into the room, its skull-like face turning to consider each creature in the ruins before turning to the Anointed One.

"I haven't failed. It will simply take a little longer," the small vampire answered, and much of the arrogance slipped away.

"You promised tonight."

"I will still succeed. I have the spells to control and direct the portal, and in time, I will find a way to open it. I will control the pathway between the worlds. I have the power; you have seen this," the Anointed One insisted. The Mohra considered him with snake eyes.

"Your power is insignificant." With that, the Mohra turned and left. Xander could feel the shockwave in the
room as vampires shifted. As creatures sensitive to power and status, other vampires nervously glanced toward the Anointed One as some of his status melted under him, but the tiny Master continued to stand there, looking as unperturbed as ever.

"You have cost me considerably, Angelus. Our arrangement was that you would stay out of clan business."

"Our arrangement was that I wouldn't go after you," Angel corrected him as he took another step forward. Colin growled and stepped in front of his master.

"And now the head of the Aurelius line must be defended? Is that what the line has come to?" Angel asked with a sweet smile, but Xander could feel the shifting fears run through the minions. Their demons demanded that they follow the strongest, only they weren't as sure about who was strongest any more.

"And I would hate to think that you have violated that arrangement. Your slayer is so helpless lying in that bed. It would take the weakest minion only a moment to drain her."
"Yeah, well they'd have to go through me first," Faith threw out there as she squared off against the Anointed One.

"And our arrangement does not shield the current slayer, even if it does put your pets and childe under your protection."

"Faith." Angel barely breathed the word.

"No problem, Big-A. I don't need a shield because I can take this one out by myself. So, if you have some sort of deal with him for Buffy's life, I'm five-by-five with that. Just keep the minions off my back while I turn this one into dust."

Xander had no idea whether confidence or bravado inspired the words, but the minions shifted again, and Xander could feel Baby's growing contempt rattling around just below the surface. The little vampire failed. His plan failed. His allies called him weak and abandoned him. The slayer challenged him.

"Step back, Faith." Angel's voice carried no emotion.

"Not a chance."
Angel stepped forward and grabbed Faith by the back of her neck, pulling her off balance with that hand while he grabbed her sword arm with the other. "You will not challenge him because I will taste his blood, so step back or challenge me," Angel snarled, his game face now forward. Faith jerked in his grip, the scent of fear drifting through the room, and Xander growled in response. Spike's hand rested on his arm and anchored him.

"Slayer, ya don't want to go up against Angel, he's a right bastard when given a chance, and ya know that. So just come wait with the witches, alright?"

Faith's eyes flicked toward them, and then Angel gave her a shake and let her go. Xander held his breath as the slayer stood, sword in hand, and looked from Angel to Spike. And right about now, Xander really wished he had some cool power like telepathy because she was totally not getting it. She glanced toward Willow and then to him, and Xander mouthed the word 'please.'

Finally, she started backing away from Angel, her sword held up defensively as she put herself between Angel and the rest of her F-team. Angel didn't even glance at her as he stared down the Anointed One. Oh yeah, Angel with
his back to a slayer, so confident of her submission, and that had an effect on the minions. And it didn't hurt that the girl who hadn't batted an eye at challenging the Anointed One now smelled of fear and uncertainty.

"You aren't worthy of challenge, souled one," Colin hissed as he moved forward. Before Xander could blink, Spike had darted past Angel, grabbing Colin while the vampire was still focused on Angel, and ripping his head from his neck in one vicious twist. Xander growled at the nearest minion, expecting the free for all to start as the Anointed One yelled for an attack.

Instead, only a few random minions darted toward them. Faith neatly decapitated one while Spike took out two in a furious attack and Riley staked another without moving out of position. Xander grabbed the one who flung himself in their general direction and tangled his fingers in the long, stringy hair, yanking the head to the side. The vampire hissed and clawed at Xander's legs, but Xander just drove his fangs deep into the soft flesh of the minion's neck and started drinking.

For a second, Xander found himself sliding under Baby's surge of triumph, the primal act of feeding on the enemy making Baby roar his power. Then Spike turned and
looked at him, one eyebrow raised in question, and Xander forced Baby back, resorting to his own feelings of nausea as he considered that he was eating a sentient creature. Yeah, an evil, deserving to die vampire type creature, but eating of the walking, talking, thinking sort of enemy really didn't work well with his stomach. He let go.

"Ew," he said softly as the vampire slumped to the ground at Xander's feet.

"Seconding that," Larry said right before he drove a stake down into the vampire's heart. The minion exploded dust all over Xander and Larry, ash sliding down Xander's leather as he smiled sheepishly and shrugged at Larry's strange look.

Xander turned back to where the Anointed One now stepped forward toward Angel. Spike backed off some, growling at a couple of other minions who had edged forward until the Anointed One's followers pressed themselves to the sides of the room.

"Slayer, get yourself and the other humans out of here," Spike said softly as he took a position in front of Xander.
"But..."

Spike snarled as he whipped around to face her. "Bloody hell, that gap only lets one through at a time, and there are seven of ya. If this comes down to a fight, we're not goin' to be able to all get out that gap, so get your bloody humans and get them the hell out of here."

"I won't leave," Riley said as he watched Angel and the Anointed One stare at each other in the cleared center of the room.

"Then you're a bloody fool because he wants ya out," Spike hissed. "He's made peace with the clan for three years, and he's challenging now just to save your sorry hides, so go on then, get yourself killed anyway so he has somethin' to brood about later."

Riley hesitated, his knife hand trembling slightly so that the metal twinkled in the dim light filtering down from the shattered roof.

"Come on, soldier boy. He who fights and runs away lives to kick serious demon ass another day," Faith said as she tugged at his arm. Riley finally yielded and let her pull him toward the gap in the wall where Willow was just
now sliding out into the night.

Xander looked at Spike as the others fled. This was clan business, so it felt right for the others to leave, but Xander didn't know what he felt. Baby stirred uncomfortably, a cold wind circling the room even though most of the walls still stood.

"Sire?" he whispered, watching Spike's fists curl as Angel and the Anointed One started circling.

"We submit to whoever wins and hope like hell it's Peaches. We've done all we can," Spike answered the unspoken question just as Angel lunged forward into battle.

Part Nineteen

From their sizes, Xander expected the fight between Angel and the Anointed One to last a whole five seconds, but every punch, every throw, every move the Anointed
One made was too powerful for his size. It was as if the Anointed One had one of those cheat codes that gave him unlimited hit points, and that might have been cool except that Angel bled from a long gash on his skull and favored his left side.

Spike clenched his fists and jerked slightly as Angel landed another punch. The weight of the hit sent the Anointed One crashing against the wall, but he just stood up and launched himself at Angel again. Angel met the attack with a toss that sent the Anointed One off to the other side, but the tiny vampire rebounded and hit Angel's knee before Angel could react.

"Fuck," Spike swore as Angel stumbled to one knee. "Fucking stubborn bastard. Just submit," Spike hissed, but Angel didn't seem to hear as he lunged forward, grabbing the Anointed One and slamming his small forehead into the floor. The image looked just so wrong what with big, scary looking Angel attacking little tiny Anointed One, but the Anointed One wrenched himself free and didn't even have a mark where his skull had hit concrete. The kid moved a little slower, but whatever superpower juiced him up was some seriously scary shit.

The Anointed One laughed as Angel fought his way back
up to his feet.

"Your soul slows you down, Angelus," the little vampire laughed, and Xander could feel entirely inappropriate admiration as Baby considered the Anointed One's strength. He was quickly beginning to suspect that demons were slightly on the fickle side when it came to loyalty. Or at least most were, Xander could feel Spike's quivering need to leap into the fight, and he didn't doubt that Spike would choose to fight for Angel, even if the broody one was going down.

"If you would like to submit now, I will certainly consider your surrender. The broken body of a slayer would be the proper gift to offer me after displeasing me so much."

Angel didn't answer, but instead he just glared as he tracked the Anointed One's circle around the perimeter of the room. Minions pressed forward slightly as he walked by them, quick to return to his side now that he had shown his superior strength.

"I will even let you decide which slayer to bring me."

With a growl, Angel threw himself at the Anointed One
again. At first, Xander thought Angel had lost control in a wild attack with no hope of hitting any vital areas. Angel's fists flew with the unfocused rage of a fledge's attack, and the Anointed One easily deflected them while landing strike after strike at Angel's battered body. Angel fell to his knees at one point, only to get up and launch himself again, forcing the child-vampire back even as he took so much damage that his chances of winning dwindled to nothing. Xander didn't realize the strategy until the Anointed One's back pushed toward them.

Xander glanced at Spike, feeling his sire's need to act even as Baby cringed away. The masters fought. The masters had to show strength. Only the masters could fight for control of the clan. A hit sent the Anointed One stumbling backwards and before Xander could blink, Spike had grabbed the child and given his head the same vicious twist that had decapitated Colin.

A sickening crack proved that Spike had broken the boy's neck, but the Anointed One simply growled and went into game face for the first time in the fight. His head tilted awkwardly, half resting on one shoulder as though he had a phone tucked up to his ear, and the small vampire struck out, sending Spike crashing backwards into the beam that Faith had been balancing on earlier.
He turned toward Angel again, his head held at a sickening angle, but he didn't turn quickly enough. Angel threw himself forward, but instead of punching the Anointed One, he grabbed the small body and sunk fangs into the exposed neck.

Xander gasped as the Anointed One's fist punched through Angel's side, cracking ribs while his fingers dug into the flesh. The air filled with the thick scent of blood. But slowly, the Anointed One's struggles weakened as Angel fed. The small hand pulled out of Angel's gaping side and ineffectually pushed against Angel's larger frame; however, the larger vamp just jerked the small vampire's body against his and kept feeding. Slowly, Angel's eyes closed in an expression of bliss.

"Right then, I think that settles who's in charge," Spike offered as he picked himself up off the ground. Angel lifted his head, his mouth red with blood, and now the Anointed One's broken neck flopped so that he looked like a big rag doll. Angel carried the limp body over to a ragged chunk of fallen ceiling where he raised the Anointed One over his head and then flung him down onto a chunk of ceiling beam. The wood impaled the body for a half second, and then the Anointed One exploded into a cloud of ash.
"William, ye challenged me," Angel now said as he turned toward Spike.

Spike cocked his head to the side and stepped to Xander's side.

"You challenged me and have generally annoyed the unlife out of me, childe."

"Yeah, well, ya deserve some annoying," Spike answered, but Xander could hear the uncertainty in his voice. He glanced toward the gap and then toward Spike, but Spike kept his eyes focused on Angel, and whatever was going on, it wasn't going to include running.

Angel moved forward, ignoring the minions and his own still-oozing wounds as he stepped into Spike's personal space. Spike smirked up, and for a second, Xander thought he was about to see round two, but then Angel shook his head, his game face disappearing as he looked around at the groveling minions that lined the room.

"Get out," he roared. For a moment, the room balanced in silence, and then vampires scrambled to race for the door, eager to get away from the very cranky new head
of the Aurelius line.

"Peaches," Spike offered.

"I mean it Spike, get out," Angel said wearily as he limped toward the door. Spike watched for one second, and then Xander found himself pushed toward the gap in the wall behind them. Knowing that he had missed something, he allowed Spike to herd him out into the night.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Spike didn't speak again until they got back to the warehouse, and by then, the first pink rays of dawn were backlighting the buildings, making them appear black against the lightening sky. Baby sent up a random worry which Xander pushed quickly aside as he watched Spike slide the door shut and lock it.

"Spike?" he asked when his sire walked right past him and headed for the main room.

"It's late, get some nibbles and get to bed," Spike said. Xander stared at Spike's back as the vampire disappeared
into the bedroom. Okay, this so wasn't right. Baby squirmed uncomfortably, sending up fear about not being in sire's favor. Xander had to put a hand on the counter just to keep his balance as Baby stirred so strongly that Xander got a bit motion sick, like when he was ten and his father tried taking them on a car trip to the Grand Canyon.

"Pet?"

Xander opened his eyes to find Spike's hands on his arm, steadying him. Baby twisted, knowing he had done wrong again by making Xander ill and worrying sire.

"Xander, you alright?" Spike pulled at Xander, guiding him to a chair.

"I'm fine," Xander said as he shook his head. "It's just that Baby..." Xander stopped, and Spike narrowed his eyes.

"It's nothing," Xander hurried to assure him. "I'll just go get something to eat, like you said." He tried to push up from the chair, but Spike pushed him back down.

"Pet, what is going on in that head of yours?"
Xander looked up as he chewed his lip. Spike hadn't had the best night, and Xander really just wanted to go to bed. And some sex wouldn't be turned away, but given the cranky expression on Spike's face, he'd settle for bed.

"I'm just tired," Xander made his excuse with a shrug even as Baby stilled into a perfect silence.

"Oi, don't bloody start with this shite," Spike snapped. "Now, what the hell has got you so bloody worked up?"

Xander froze.

"Pet," Spike sighed after several seconds, "what has ya wound so tight that you can't even keep yourself upright?" Spike's fingers reached up and stroked a long curl.

Xander shrugged helplessly. "I just feel like..." okay, he was out of words. Spike crouched down in front of him and strong fingers gave his hair a little tug. He really needed to cut his hair. And that would be mental babbling showing up right on cue.

"Oi, now I know something's wrong, ya aren't talking."
"Ha ha, Spike."

"What are ya feeling, pet?" Spike asked, and this time the distracted annoyance of earlier was gone.

"I just don't want to bug you when you're already feeling so bugged," Xander said as he stared across the room at the open door to the bedroom. Hopefully Spike would take it as an invitation.

"So, you're bothered that the great poof has managed to annoy me again?" Spike asked with a frown.

"Kinda. I'm not sure," Xander finally admitted as he looked at Spike. "You're unhappy, and you unhappy just reminded Baby that you're not happy with him, and then he got all worried because his worry got me dizzy, and you're even more unhappy that his unhappiness is making me dizzy and there's just a whole circle of unhappy going on."

"Bloody hell, was that supposed ta make sense?" Spike asked, but he smiled, so Xander guessed he wasn't actually annoyed. He did bite his tongue to keep any more babble from spilling out, though.
"So, Baby wants the punishment out of the way so that things are right between us again, right?"

Xander nodded.

"If I were a right bastard like Angel, I'll let Baby stew in his own worry for a while, let him wonder if he was going to get a second chance or if I was just going to let him twist in my displeasure forever."

Xander's gaze snapped up to Spike's face, worried even as he felt Baby shrink back in despair.

"Spike?"

"Oi, not that cruel, am I?" Spike relented as he stood up. "But I want Baby to the front for this. I know you can step back far enough ta let the vampire bits take over, and that's what I need you to do now, pet."

"Just make him give everything back after," Xander joked, and Spike's hands, which had been stroking his shoulders, stopped.

"You're strong enough to make him do that, pet. I can't do that for ya, so if you can't face this right now..."
"No, no, I'm facing it boy," Xander interrupted. "I just don't want to deal with any more of the sire's-pissed-with-me vibes from Baby. It was bad enough when I went and did the big stupid by flying into that fight with the fledges back at Safari, which, by the way, I would totally do again, but when you're pissed at Baby, he's just not very rational about it. Me? I've had lots of experience with disappointing people."

Xander held up his hand to stop Spike from answering that even as he pulled at Baby's edges, reluctance and shame flowing back into him. Rather than fight those feelings, Xander closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink into them. The pain washed through him, and Xander just focused on breathing, all his attention concentrated on that to prevent himself from countering with his own memories and feelings.

In. Out. In. Xander could feel himself sinking under, his vision sliding toward red as the world faded into the distance. Something brushed against his arm, and Xander only realized Spike had grabbed his arm when his body started moving, pulled along by Spike's grip.

The distraction brought the world into sharper focus, and
Xander cleared his mind, focusing on the breathing as he struggled to slip into that small space inside his own mind where once he'd hidden as Cassidy ordered his body around the enemy lair, and there came the sharp edges of the world as that memory pushed Xander toward the surface, Baby retreating from the memory of trying to stake sire, at betraying sire with Cassidy before betraying sire with Angel.

In. Out. In. Out. Xander counted his breaths up to ten and then backwards to one and then up to ten until he had turned off his own mind enough to sink under Baby. And it didn't used to be this hard. Hell, in high school, he had the whole fazing out thing down to a science, some easy science that he actually knew how to do. For a second, Xander wondered if Baby ever surfaced back then, but he turned his mind to counting breaths in order to stay behind Baby.

"Count 'em, then," Spike's voice droned from far away, but Xander couldn't figure out what he meant until the line of fire across his back penetrated his darkness.

"One," Xander's voice called out while Xander still struggled to get the breathing back under control. The pain seemed to brighten the edges of his dim world, but
it didn't pull him toward the surface. A flash of lightening and Xander's voice called, "Two." Baby's shame brightened with each hit. He had disappointed sire. A stripe fell lower than the other hits, catching Xander just below the butt and throwing him forward. "Three." Baby hadn't quite got his balance back before another hit. "Four." Oh yeah, Spike was pissed because that was definitely a whip.

Shame. Fear. A searing pain that Xander was only dimly aware of took his breath away again, and now Xander felt the ache as his shoulders bore his weight. He was hanging from chains. "Fifteen." And Xander realized he'd lost some time there, which would explain the ache from shoulders down to knee.

"Whose are you, childe?" Spike's voice echoed distantly.

"Yours, sire," Baby answered immediately, and Xander could taste the desperation. Baby would rather be dust than be alone or shamed by sire.

"And why did you turn to Angel?" Spike asked. Baby didn't have a good answer for that one, or a bad answer even.
"Childe, answer or we'll do another set." Xander could feel the panicked fear, not about the pain, but about sire's tone of voice and his disappointment and Baby's disgrace. Xander poked, and an answer popped out.

"He's strong," Baby blurted. Oh yeah, Baby had a whole lot more cool because even mired in self-loathing he managed to not babble or cry, and from the emotions rolling from Baby like low-lying fog, Xander knew he would have long ago broken out into both.

"Not bloody strong enough to see what he was doing to ya. Who should you have turned to, childe?" Spike asked, and Baby shivered as a hand stroked his abused back. "Who would do what I wanted ya to do? Who would have understood if you'd given him a chance to work through his pain a bit?"

"Xander," Baby finally sighed, relief washing through him as he understood the right answer to give.

Spike didn't answer, but the whip didn't return. For a still moment, Xander let himself sink into the calm that followed Baby's storm of emotion. His shoulders complained as he shifted, but Xander didn't realize why until the first fingers reached into him, stretching him.
Baby growled his pleasure and pressed back into the feeling just as Spike pulled out. "You're mine, childe. You and Xander are my childer and you always will be." Xander felt the pressure at his hole as Spike pushed in, but he felt it at a distance, a tickle against his skin. "Mine."

Baby roared his agreement as Spike then thrust in violently, his hands bracing Xander's hips as he pulled out and slammed in again. Baby writhed savagely in the chains, making them rattle as something started slowly trickling down the inside of Xander's legs.

"Mine," Spike growled again, and Baby dropped his head to the side in submission, baring his neck happily. Sire wanted him.

Xander had just figured out that he was bleeding from the rough coupling before twin knives seared his neck, Spike's fangs digging into the flesh of his neck so deeply that his front teeth cut crescent shapes into his skin.

"Sire!" Baby snarled, his own cock hard and neglected as sire took his pleasure, took his blood until Baby sagged weakly, his fears gone with his strength, his erection
flagging without enough blood to feed it, but it didn't matter. Sire found him worthy enough to take, to drain.

"Xander, Baby needs you," Spike whispered in his ear, and Xander definitely questioned that comment. Baby didn't need much of anything else now that he had found sire's approval. The pain of the whip, the frustration of his unsatisfied cock, the fears and shame and insecurities all vanished under the sated feeling of being worthy. As Baby sank back, Xander let himself slide forward, the world focusing a millisecond before he gasped in pain, his body screaming at him from so many places that he couldn't even process it all, leaving one blinding white agony.

"Drink, Xander," Spike ordered, and for a second, Xander couldn't even process the words, distracted by the overwhelming suffering in his body. Then a smell penetrated, and something touched his lips. Suddenly something balanced the agony, offering as much pleasure as his backside radiated pain. Xander sucked, the heavenly taste strong in his mouth and warming him with each swallow.

"Heal, pet." Spike whispered, and Xander could feel the heat from his stomach radiating out to his torn back and
ripped hole. He sucked harder, his cock aching so badly that Xander no longer even cared about his backside.

"Sire," Xander complained as the ambrosia pulled back. He blinked up to see Spike shrugging his shirt off, his neck still dripping ruby drops down his strong stomach. Eying the fat red trails, Xander whined unhappily. Then he shifted uncomfortably as his hard cock jutted out in front of him.

"Let me get you down," Spike promised as he reached up to the heavy metal shackles around Xander's wrists. Blood trickled from cuts, but the pain of just seconds ago faded into a dull ache that didn't matter nearly as much as the lithe body pressed to him as Spike stretched out to unhook the chains. With his first hand free, Xander reached up and trailed a finger over Spike's arm, tracing where the muscle curved and dipped toward the bone.

Spike smirked, giving him a wink before going to free Xander's other hand. "See somethin' ya like?" he asked salaciously.

"Oh yeah. Much with the liking," Xander agreed. He ran his hand up to Spike's shoulder, touching the twin punctures where Xander had driven fangs into Spike's
neck. Spike shivered and then reached up and grabbed Xander's hand, pulling on it like a leash to pull Xander into his arms.

"Thought ya might like a little treat, tonight, childe. Ya fought like a champion. Ya fed on your enemies and still controlled the demon without lettin' the demon control you," Spike whispered as he allowed his hands to slide around to Xander's ass. The agony of just seconds earlier had become a dull aching heat that begged to be scratched, and Spike ran a sharp nail over a healing whip mark. Xander hissed and shivered as the warm pain made his whole body come alive.

Xander smiled, ducking his head in embarrassment even as Baby growled his pleasure. "I know what I'd like as a treat," Xander answered, following as Spike backed up toward the bed. "Your cock deep inside me would be a start," Xander finished, blushing at his first attempt at dirty talk, but at least he'd managed to say it without babbling, giggling or stuttering.

"Thought we might try that the other way 'round," Spike whispered back, and Xander found himself falling onto the bed before his brain could fully work out the meaning of that, but his cock had gotten the message
alright and it throbbed in anticipation. Of course, his cock usually did get things faster than his brain.

"Oh fuck," Xander breathed as Spike shimmied out of his jeans, dropping them to the ground before cat crawling up Xander's body. "Fuckity fuck."

"I'm a bad influence on you, I am," Spike offered with a smile as he reached down and kissed Xander breathless. "Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?" Spike asked when he finally pulled back.

"Oh no, no bringing up of mothers," Xander complained.

"Scoot up," Spike ordered with a laugh as he straddled Xander's waist, and Xander squirmed farther up on the bed as Spike reached over for the lube.

"Oh god," Xander swore as Spike reached back and slipped a finger into his own hole, twisting his body so that he could leer at Xander even while showing off that pucker where a second finger quickly followed. "Oh god."

"Close enough, pet," Spike agreed. "Course I'd love to suck that cock of yours while I do this, sucking all that creamy filling while I opened myself, but I'll have ta do
that another time since you look about ready to go. Some other day I'll suck you 'til you can't help but come and then I'll flip you over and drive into you, fill you so full of my cock that you can't help but get hard again, and then I'll slip down onto you and ride you til you forget your name," Spike promised. Xander felt his own cock bob in agreement as his balls drew up close.

"Already there," Xander muttered as he watched a third finger disappear into the depths of Spike's body.

"Just remember, don't bloody come until I say, even if ya need Baby's help ta get there," Spike warned as he shifted back until his hole lined up with Xander's cock, which was sitting up, begging, and very willing to do tricks.

"Oh fuck," Xander answered as Spike slowly lowered himself, the pressure on Xander's cockhead nearly making him come before even getting into Spike.

"Pet," Spike warned darkly. Xander gasped a deep breath, and Baby uncurled from his corner, lending his own fear of disappointing sire, and yeah, that pushed orgasm back far enough that Xander could start breathing again as Spike pushed down. And oh god, it
was so tight and felt nothing like the various hands Xander had experienced.

Spike was almost down when Xander couldn't control himself any more, and he dug his heels into the mattress and bucked up, driving himself the rest of the way into that tight grip. Throwing his head back and fisting the sheets, Xander gasped as Spike pulled off, and then he drove himself up even higher, arching his back as he thrust into Spike's body.

Blind need overwhelmed him, and Xander drove up before Spike could even move again, throwing Spike in the air and then dropping to the mattress heavily before thrusting up again. Tears gathered in Xander's eyes as raw lust overwhelmed him, but he still couldn't reach the final release as he bucked wildly again and again.

"Come," Spike growled, and Xander felt the explosion that tightened every muscle and made him arch and hiss and claw the sheets until he finally sagged back down, his cock still twitching as it remained buried in Spike's ass.

Xander lay, sweating and panting as he watched Spike from half-opened eyes. Spike flopped down on the bed next to him.
"I'm so going to end up in the wet spot," Xander muttered as Spike pulled him close, strong arms wrapping around his waist.

"For a ride like that, it's worth a wet spot," Spike answered in an equally exhausted voice. And Xander would have answered, only sleep pulled him down into darkness.

Part Twenty

"Just promise that you'll actually stay in touch this time," Willow begged, her voice tinny over the phone. Xander sorted the CD's as he cradled the phone between his shoulder and ear.

"Promise, cross my heart, and I'm not saying the rest now that I know we're on a Hellmouth," Xander promised. "I'm just glad that you aren't freaked out about... you know."
"The whole not quite human thing that I know or the whole sleeping with a vampire part I know or the gay thing? Because I'm totally okay with the gay thing. Heck, me and Larry and Wendell all did the gay thing, so I'm almost ready to call gayness a requirement for being on the F-team, only that would be discrimination, which is not really of the good."

"Not sure Spike really wants me claiming membership in the slayer's fan club," Xander laughed. "He's still beating up on himself about helping a slayer, but he really wouldn't let the world end without trying to stop it because he's not evil." There was a long pause.

"Xander." Willow sounded distressed.

"He's not," Xander insisted. "He's a predator and he's dangerous, but he isn't into the evil torture thing, not even back when I was just some random human he ran into on the street."

"I used to think that about Angel, but when his soul came out..."

"Yeah, but Spike is just Spike, he doesn't have a soul"
changing who he is."

"No, he has you."

That made Xander stop and think since he hadn't known Spike before he knew Spike. "In that case, I have to make sure I stick with him." Xander stretched, feeling the newly healed skin of his back. "I'll stick with him for a good long time."

"I'll miss you. Do you know where you guys are going?"

"When Spike gets back from wherever he disappeared to, he mentioned China, but I don't know if that was mentioned as in seriously going to China or just freaking me out with the idea of going to the other side of the world."

"China? Goddess! China has some beautiful temples and wilderness areas."

"I don't think either would be on Spike's list of must-visits, but if we end up there, I'll nag him into taking me to a temple or two," Xander promised as he finally found Spike's favorite CD, the one with the screaming singer as opposed to all the others with the screaming singers. He
popped open his C.W. McCall case and pulled out the CD, snapping Spike's CD in there before putting the McCall CD on top. He clicked the case shut with a smile even as Baby made a soft grumble about annoying sire.

'Yeah, but I'm annoying him, you aren't,' Xander thought to himself as Baby curled back up.

"Xander?" Willow's voice came through the phone sharply.

"What?"

"What happened? You weren't answering."

"Spike's phone is at least twice as old as me. I'm surprised it works at all," Xander lied, feeling a twinge of guilt, but sometimes lies were so much kinder than the truth, and Willow so did not want to hear that he had been debating with his inner demon. "So, are Giles and Jenny and Larry and Tara and Faith still okay with the whole truce?"

"Giles is still cranky, but Jenny threatened to put Lipton in his good English tea if he didn't get a grip, and everyone else is fine. Larry says that he's sorry he never
met you back in high school after he got his act together. He says you're cool in a slightly freakish kind of way."

"Okay, we have definitely reached an alternate universe because Larry Blaisdell calling me cool is more than slightly freakish," Xander laughed. "Gotta go, Spike's home," Xander cut off Willow's response as he pushed all the CD's back into one pile.

"You call, mister," she said, the tone far more threat than request.

"I will. Bye." Xander hung up without waiting for an answer.

"Mornin', pet." Spike commented as he came through the door from the garage.

"Evening, Spike," Xander answered. The sun had gone down a couple of hours ago, and from the green and fading bruise on Spike's cheek, he'd gotten into a fight not long after leaving.

"You packed?"

"Yep, just putting the CD's away now," Xander answered
as he stacked piles of CD's into a small box. Spike looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and Xander smiled sweetly. Spike's eyebrows lowered into a suspicious frown. "So, have you decided where we're going?"

"Thought I told ya, we're heading to China. We just can't leave yet," Spike said, and the tone of voice made Xander abandon the CD box on the counter under the phone as he turned to face Spike. Long fingers played with a cigarette without lighting it.

"What's up?" Xander asked, and he could feel Baby uncurl and crouch, ready to respond to whatever threat had Spike twitchy.

"Peaches is goin' ta be here later," Spike announced nonchalantly.

"Oh shit," Xander breathed. "Um, why?"

"He's head of the line, innit he?"

"And he being head of the line means what exactly?" Xander moved closer to Spike, uneasiness settling in his gut.
"Means for ya to be a childe of the line, he's got to approve ya. I never did present you to the court."

Xander felt a cold panic, equal parts him and Baby, wash through him. Angel had already rejected them once, had refused to take them as childe, and then there were the threats and the choking unconscious and the pinning him to the ground.

"And suddenly I'm liking him even less than usual 'cause I'm thinking that he's never going to approve of me," Xander said quietly, the certainty of it like lead in his stomach.

"Not true. He'll approve of ya, pet."

"Okay, I'm remembering a certain vampire who shoved me out of his way and basically didn't want me around at all, so if he has a chance to reject me, he's going to do it." Xander turned around and headed for the bedroom, feeling a sudden need to be somewhere else... anywhere else.

"He never rejected ya," Spike objected as he followed.

"Oh, you didn't see how much he wanted to get rid of
"Bloody hell, Xan. He can't deal with his own demon, and he didn't treat you right because he ignored your demon. He thought that if he treated ya human you'd suddenly become human because that's what he wants for himself."

"He nearly destroyed me." Xander sank onto the bed, his knees weak, and Baby surged up, desperate to show strength when Angel came. Xander shoved him back again, and Baby relented, grumbling but retreating.

"Yeah, pet. He did. He always was a big soddin' clod, and gettin' a soul didn't really change that. He wants to be human, but he knows less 'bout humans than I do," Spike agreed as he sat next to Xander on the bed. Most of their belongings were in the three suitcases sitting near the door, and the sheets from the previous night were still on the bed, marked with blood and semen.

"So he's coming?"

"Yeah"

"And I don't have a choice?"
"No, pet, you don't"

"And he has the right to say yes or no to me being in the family?"

"Technically."

"And if he says no?"

"I'll bloody well stake him, then I'll be the head of the line," Spike snarled. Then he ran a hand over his hair. "Either that or we'll just leave and forget the git."

"And if he says yes?"

Then you're a full childe, minions made in our line'll recognize ya because they'll smell the head of the line on ya."

"And ewww. Do I really want strange vamps smelling me, and how exactly is Angel planning of making me smell, and do I even want to know?" Xander asked suspiciously as he looked over at Spike, and that sour expression on Spike's face didn't make him feel any better.
"If he accepts ya, he'll recognize my claim mark and drink from it, leaving his scent behind. After that, other masters and minions will recognize ya as a childe, and eventually as a master yourself."

"So I don't have to do anything?"

"Nothin' except keep your mouth shut."

"Keep my mouth shut? I can do that. I can totally do that...this is me keeping my mouth shut." Xander stayed quiet for about thirty seconds, a new record for him. "Does he have to bite me?" he asked.

"Oi, you're really not goin' to be able to do this, are ya?"

Xander thought about that for a minute before sighing. "Probably not. It's not that I don't understand the whole approval of the line stuff...or actually I don't understand, but I can see it's important to you, so I'm okay with it all. I just don't really want Angel anywhere near me after that whole mess." Xander stopped and thought about what he was really feeling. "Actually, I do want Angel near me because I really want to tell him what a thoughtless, heartless, thick-headed son of a
bitch he can be."

"And he soddin' well deserves to hear it, but probably not tonight, pet," Spike said with a wry smile.

"Right, being quiet now." Silence had no more settled before a new thought occurred to Xander. "You know, someone should tell him off for what he did to you too. I mean, you helped him with the Anointed One and he didn't even say 'thank you,' which, if he's trying to be human, really is the polite thing."

Spike sighed, and Xander realized that he was being remarkably unquiet.

"Right, quiet," he said as he sat back on the bed.

"Pet, go get the muzzle out of the suitcase."

"What?" Xander felt a bubble of panic. "No, no I can be quiet, really." Spike reached over and ran a finger down his cheek. He closed his eyes and just enjoyed the touch, happy to once more feel whole and complete in his devotion to sire.

"It'll be easier for ya and maybe for Peaches too," Spike
said and Xander felt himself nudged off the bed. He knew better than to argue when Spike had that expression, so he went and retrieved the tangle of leather and metal. When he came back and handed it to Spike, he could feel his hand tremble, and Spike must have noticed too.

"Talk to me, pet. Why does this bother ya?"

"Talk, don't talk, talk...make up your mind," Xander tried joking, but he could tell from Spike's expression that he wasn't going to get away with it. Spike sat silently waiting for a real answer. "I don't want Angel to see me like..." Xander gestured toward the contraption Spike held.

"Why not?"

"Okay, I think that's a little obvious, isn't it?"

"Maybe for someone with a soul, but not for me. As far as I'm concerned, you're my childe and I have the right to do what I like with ya. If I have ya naked and chained, it's because I want you naked and chained, and it's not your soddin’ choice.”
"And I'm very grateful that you don't want that," Xander said, hoping that Spike wouldn't decide on doing exactly that now that the thought had crossed his mind. Okay, actually, he hoped Spike did think that at one point, but just not with company coming.

"You bloody like knowing I'm sire and feeling the leather and steel, and I won't have ya hidin' yourself from Peaches. He thinks of ya as human because that's how ya act in front of him. You need to hit him over the head if ya expect him to notice somethin', and I plan on presenting ya as my childe, not as some human I'm playin' a game with."

Xander didn't respond as Spike stood up and stepped in front of him, running fingers through his hair. When Spike lifted the leather, he didn't move as the loose straps settled in over his head. Spike brought the metal bit up to his lips, and he opened without voicing his complaints, shivering as the cold steel settled in over his tongue before Spike fastened it at one side and then tightened the straps, pulling his chin closed over the bit and ensuring that he couldn't even open his mouth, much less say something stupid once Angel came. Once Spike had tightened the last buckle, the vampire pulled him into an embrace, and Xander allowed himself to
relax into his sire's grip.

Now that Spike had taken the choice away, Xander sighed in relief. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't ever seem to control his mouth, saying things that probably should have gotten him killed. Lord knows he'd said things to Spike that a less controlled vamp would have killed him over. Xander snorted in laughter. Yep, most vampires took relatively little prompting to kill. Instead, Spike had forgiven him every stupid comment and every stupid move he'd made. Okay, so Spike had punished one or two. Xander flexed his back as he looked at sire.

Feeling Spike's strong hands around him and Spike's muzzle over his face, and feeling Baby's quiet acceptance of Xander's decisions, Xander finally understood Angel's sin. Spike commanded Xander and Baby, but Angel didn't command Spike or answer to Spike. Xander could relax knowing where he was in the clan, but Spike couldn't.

Xander felt a flash of sympathy, suddenly realizing what it meant when Spike had described taking Dru and running from Darla. Spike had been Dru's childe, but then he'd had to protect her, and he'd had no elders to impress with his kills and earn status. His demon had no
place in the clan, and the very fact that the Anointed One made Spike fight for his title showed that other demons recognized it. Of course, he had fought for a place, and the Anointed One recognized him, but then again, the Anointed One was dead, so maybe he didn't. Okay, slightly confusing. Sharing his thoughts with Baby, Xander only got back an overwhelming feeling of despair and loss.

Xander ran his tongue along the now warmed metal, feeling the flat bit press into his lips and trap his tongue in the bottom of his mouth. Since he couldn't tell Spike what he felt, he slipped off the bed and onto his knees at Spike's feet. When Spike looked down in surprise, Xander pressed his face into the flesh on the inside of Spike's thigh, looking up as Spike cocked an eyebrow in surprise.

"So, you alright with it now, pet?" Denied of words, Xander nodded. When Spike reached down to play with the hair not trapped under the leather, Xander closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, enjoying his sire's attentions and enjoying the feeling of his own demon happily circling within.

"You're mine, pet. Angel or no Angel, you'll always be
mine," Spike promised softly, and Xander could only moan at the words that made Xander Jr. stir to life. He guessed that Spike had noticed when the vampire chuckled.

"William," a dark voice came, and Xander turned on his knees, a panic momentarily causing his vision to slide into red before settling back into the normal color spectrum. He would have stood at the sight of Angel standing in the doorway, but Spike's firm grip on his shoulder warned him to stay down, so he settled in on his knees.

"Peaches," Spike replied, mimicking the warning tone.

"Take it off him," Angel ordered, and Xander started breathing faster through his nose as he realized that the anger was over him.

"He's my childe and I'll do as I please," Spike quickly shot back.

"He's a human being," Angel replied, and Spike only snorted.

"You nearly destroyed him thinkin' that the first time
round. Thought ya learned your lesson there, Peaches."

"I made a bad judgment," Angel admitted cautiously, and Xander could feel Spike's leg muscle twitch. He wondered whether the younger vampire was surprised or amused or angry, but he really didn't have a chance to ask or even throw himself in the middle of the fight since his sire had chosen to muzzle him.

"Bad judgment," Spike snorted. "Bad judgment is that hair cut. What ya did to Xander was cruelty."

"And that thing on his head isn't cruel?"

"No, it isn't, and even if he didn't want it, he's my childe and I'll teach him to control himself the way I see fit. I won't bloody teach him control the way you taught me." Xander watched as the fight flowed out of Angel like a popped balloon.

"William," Angel said again, and this time Xander could sense the guilt as if it were painted on the vampire's face.

"Oi, enough. You're here to accept Xander as a childe of the line, and that's it. Rather go to Darla or even the Anointed One for this, but you're it now, so soddin' well
do your job as head of the line." Angel was silent for several minutes, and then he started chuckling. Xander looked up to Spike, but he could see the confusion there too.

"Finally lost your mind then?" Spike asked when the quiet laughter continued.

"I'm trying to picture Darla's reaction to a half-human childe of the line," Angel confessed, and Xander watched as Spike expression wandered between annoyed and amused.

"He's as good as any childe of this line," Spike finally announced. Angel looked down, and Xander fought an urge to squirm under the gaze. Here he was, one time vampire hunter who brought down the mighty Cassidy and he was muzzled and kneeling at the feet of one master vampire waiting for another one to bite him. Life was funny.

"He's better than most," Angel said quietly, and Xander could feel his demon stir, creeping out of the corner into which it had retreated at the sight of Angel. His cock started stirring as well.
"So, you're goin' to accept him?" Spike asked, and for the first time Xander heard the uncertainty and the desire. How old had Spike been when his sire had abandoned him? Xander felt a flash of anger as he realized just how painful that must have been. Had Darla taken him on as a childe or treated him as a minion? When they'd run, had Dru been sane enough to ever play sire? When it came to being accepted into the line, Xander couldn't say he cared one way or the other because he knew that Spike would stay with him either way, but if Angel denied Spike this bit of respect, Xander was going to stake Angel himself. He must have made a noise because both vampires looked at him.

"And that'd be the reason for the muzzle," Spike said, and Xander felt slim fingers give his hair a little tug.

"Is this what he wants?" Angel asked, but Xander didn't even try to answer with a nod. He leaned back against his sire who had now started running hands down his chest. Xander put his own hands on Spike's legs, holding himself steady under that touch.

"Think he's happy enough," Spike pointed out as he thumbed open several buttons and put those talented hands to work inside Xander's shirt.
"I mean it Spike, let him talk and tell me this is what he wants."

"Is that the way it's done now, Peaches? These modern vampires givin' their childer a choice? 'Cause I have to say, I don't remember anyone askin' my opinion on the matter." Spike's hands had found his nipples, and Xander leaned back, feeling Spike's hard cock between his shoulder blades. He knew this game well enough to know not to touch back, so he closed his hands around Spike's thighs and tried not to squirm as Spike rolled a nipple between his finger and thumb.

"William," Angel said, but this time in such a strangled tone, Xander's eyes flew open in time to see Angel morph into his vampire face, the heavy brow and wider face making his demon features far more menacing than Spike's, although Xander was bright enough to never say that out loud, not that he had a choice at the moment he mused as he used his tongue to play with the bit in his mouth.

"You want to know whether he consents, use your bloody nose like a vampire," Spike said, his hands never stopping their travels across Xander's body. "Stop tryin'
ta be a soddin' human and do what ya need to do, Peaches."

Spike pulled suddenly, and Xander felt the last couple of buttons pop as his sire pulled the shirt from his back. Xander would have yelped or cursed or asked what the hell Spike was doing, but with his current situation, all he could do was take a larger than normal breath through his nose before snorting it out and glaring at his sire who didn't seem bothered at all.

"Just because he wants you doesn't mean he want this," Angel waved his hand around in a wide sweep, and Xander had to assume Angel meant being part of the line. He would have had something rude to say back, but the muzzle kept his mouth closed, and Spike's hand creeping into his jeans distracted him to the point of forgetting his own name. Xander quickly found his button and zipper opened as Spike began playing in earnest. With a heavy groan, Xander thrust his hips forward as Spike's hand closed around his shaft, but a sharp slap on his thigh reminded him of the rules.

"Stay still," Spike ordered, and Xander dug his fingers into the flesh above Spike's knees as he struggled to do just that even as Spike used feather light touches that left
him panting through his nose. Suddenly remembering their audience, Xander looked up to find Angel staring at them with open lust. Xander flinched at the expression, but the demon lunged forward, eager to show obedience, and his cock now began to leak.

For a moment, Xander panicked thinking that Baby was turning to Angel again, but he could feel Baby's unrelenting devotion to Spike even while it sought to tempt Spike's sire. Xander realized that his demon wanted Angel as the head of the line, wanted to be found worthy of being Spike's childe.

Assured that his demon was under control, Xander gave his lust free reign, throwing his head back onto Spike's stomach even as he tilted it to show his neck and his deep claim mark. Rubbing his cheek into Spike's abdomen like a giant cat, Xander raised himself up on his knees so that Spike could reach more easily. Of course this created even more need to thrust, but Xander fought to control the urge.

Slowly, his jeans slid down his legs leaving his cock sticking up and weeping even as he tried to ignore it, concentrating on his sire's naked stomach beneath his cheek and the feel of the leather muzzle straps between
their flesh. Occasionally he couldn't control the urge to drive his hips forward, and each time Spike's hand would slap the same spot on his thigh, hard enough to sting and undoubtedly leave a red mark, but not hard enough to actually hurt. The slaps simply reminded him of his duty to remain still.

Xander heard a low menacing growl, and he felt his own demon issue a much smaller version which was even more muffled by the muzzle, but Spike's answering growl drowned out his own, and suddenly he felt himself pulled from his master's embrace and nearly tripped as his jeans settled around his ankles effectively hobbling him. He stood there with Angel's large hands immobilizing his arms for long seconds, waiting for the bite, for the rejection, for something.

"So ye think ye can come in here and tell me how to act?" Angel asked in lilting accent, and Xander lowered his brows in confusion until he realized that Angel was talking to Spike over his shoulder. He turned his head to look at Spike, but Angel came to life, shaking him as if he were a puppy, and Xander turned his attention back to the older vampire before his brain could rattle free.

"I'd ask that you accept my childer into the line of
Aurelius," Spike said in a quiet, cultured tone that sounded more college professor than punk vampire.

"And have ye taught him to sit at yer feet?" Angel asked, and Xander now recognized the ceremonial tone of the exchange.

"Yeah, both of them." Spike answered, and Xander realized what Spike was truly asking for. Baby stilled to silence, fear of doing the wrong thing leaving him motionless in Xander's mind.

"And do ye take responsibility for their actions?" Angel asked, changing to the plural.

"Yes."

"And will ye teach them of the line?"

Spike ruined the somber mood with an amused snort. "Bloody hell no. Bein' that Xander's human, I don't think ya want him knowin' most of our line's sadistic history, and Baby probably doesn't really want to hear that we come from a soddin' insane lot. More insane than most vamps even." Xander felt the hands at his arms twitch and tighten until he winced, but he
remained silent. And thankful...thankful that Spike had muzzled him because he very much wanted to add his two cents, and he knew this wasn't the time to point out that Angel didn't have to act like a cave man even if he did look like one. Angel remained silent, his hands spastically tightening and loosening on Xander's arms until he finally continued with the ceremony.

"And will ye teach them to hunt?"

"Yeah."

"And will ye teach them to respect the elders of his line?"

Another snort of laughter from Spike. "Bloody hell mate, all that's left is you, me, and a bunch of soddin' minions left over from the Anointed One. And if ya think I'm goin' ta teach him to play respectful childe at your feet, you don't remember much about me, Peaches."

"If they stray from the line, do ye accept the duty to punish or kill?" Whoa, that one made Xander study Angel's face, the whole kill thing being a little out there, but Angel's face remained impassive.

"I'll punish them as I see fit, but I'll be dust before I let
anyone kill either of 'em," Spike snarled, and that answer seemed to cause something in Angel to snap because the vampire dropped back into human face for just a second before the ridges returned and Angel continued as if nothing had happened.

"I accept your childer into the line of Aurelius as the childer of William who was made by Drusilla and sired by Angelus." Xander barely had time to register his relief at the words before Angel struck, driving his fangs into Spike's claim mark even while wrapping arms around Xander's torso. Xander stood there, unable to do anything else until Angel raised his head, his mouth still red.

Suddenly Xander felt Spike at his back as he was pressed between as Spike's mouth descended on his still tender mark, biting deeper than ever before, and Xander squirmed in the grip of both vampires. When Spike raised his mouth, the two vampires kissed over Xander's shoulder, and Xander breathed a sigh realizing that it had all ended without any dust and he and Baby had just been accepted into one very strange family consisting of a souled vampire, an outcast vampire, and a half-vampire. Sadly enough, it wasn't any stranger than his first family. Expecting Angel to leave now, he wasn't
prepared for what came next.

"I've missed ye, boy," Angel whispered, and Xander could feel Spike shudder at the words. Spike's hand closed over his neck, and Xander felt himself being pulled toward a corner of the room. He struggled to step out of his jeans without tripping, and Spike snagged a pillow on their way past the bed. When Spike tossed the pillow on the floor in the corner, Xander looked at it in confusion until he felt the hand at his neck pressing him down. He quickly knelt, and Spike knelt in front of him, taking each of his wrists and pressing it to the small of his back before letting go. When Spike stood, Xander remained kneeling, holding his hands behind his back.

"Stay still," Spike whispered hoarsely and then turned his back before Xander could even nod in agreement.

"I never left, mate. Like I said earlier, actin' like a human git doesn't change who you are."

"Spike," Angel said with a helplessness.

"Oi, not again. The boy's a ruddy white knight, but he still feels his instincts, so don't even bloody tell me how you don't. You came to us in China; you sought out your
sire."

"And she rejected me," Angel cut him off.

"Because she was a bloody cow," Spike snapped. Spike walked over to Angel who had stood unmoving.

"Spike."

"Just don't bloody ruin the one decent thing you've done since you got here," Spike asked, his voice low and then Xander watched as Spike's slender hands reached up to unbutton Angel's shirt. At first, Angel's hands twitched as though he would stop him, but then he remained standing as Spike undid another button and another. Xander had to grip his own wrists to keep from reaching out and touching the two vampires or himself.

Closing his eyes and groaning, Xander could smell the lust and need in the air. However, his closed eyes flew open at the sound of thick ominous growls, and Xander watched as Angel reached out and grabbed Spike's neck, only to have the younger, smaller vampire roll out of the embrace and jump back. Angel growled even louder and lunged forward, snatching at Spike's arm, but Spike laughed and dodged away. Xander had one moment of
panic that something had gone wrong, and he half stood before noticing Spike's expression. At the sight of his sire's lust, he sank back down and clasped his hands at the small of his back again.

Spike sprinted for the door, but he couldn't get past Angel fast enough, and the larger vampire used his bulk to slam Spike into the wall so hard that Xander could feel the wall tremble from eight feet away in his corner. He could hear Spike hissing, but Angel closed an arm around Spike's neck and tossed him on the bed. Spike hit the bed and used the bounce to make a hasty exit on the far side.

"Ye won't win," Angel said, his lilting Irish accent still coloring his words, making Xander tremble in anticipation. He'd always thought the whole accents being sexy thing was pure crap, but obviously accents did it for him. Spike's voice always got him hard, and now this new Angel with his calculating grin and soft Irish accent was so much sexier than the Broodmeister.

"Bloody wanker, can't just walk in and take back your title as sire," Spike said, and Xander heard the pain and the hope. From the way Angel temporarily faltered in his stalking, he did as well. "Besides, you never liked playin'
these games with me, remember?" Spike demanded as he crouched, and now Xander could see the determination in Spike's eyes. He wondered what had changed, but asking questions wasn't an option, so he would just have to wait and see.

"Won't deny I lost my mind for a while, but ye are my childe, and you'll remember yer place, even if ye have proved your worth as a master." This time Spike lost his concentration, coming out of the crouch and stepping back at that comment, and Angel took the opportunity to dive forward, grabbing Spike by the waist and forcing him to the wall.

Xander raised himself up on his knees, eager to see over the bed, and he saw his master pressed face first into the wall with Angel biting into his neck from behind. Spike’s struggles grew weak, and Xander wondered if it was because the lust was overcoming the anger or whether the blood loss had debilitated Spike. Either way, Angel took advantage by reaching around and ripping the jeans from Spike's body, tossing the younger vampire onto the bed as if he were no more than a doll.

Spike lay there, unmoving, and Xander settled back onto his heels, assuming the main portion of the evening’s
entertainment was over as Angel slipped out of his own pants and boxers before kneeling at the foot of the bed, his knees straddling Spike's feet. However, Spike wasn't out of it yet, he sat up and got a fistful of Angel's hair, but instead of using it to push Angel away, he pulled him closer, and buried his own face in Angel's neck, biting it with blunt human teeth that Angel quickly pulled away by grabbing his own handful of hair.

"Now, now, boy. Ye haven't earned that yet," Angel chided, and Spike growled and abruptly the two became wrestlers, clutching at each other's limbs and throwing each other around with such force that Xander pressed himself into the wall. They started on the bed, but Spike, in an attempt to roll Angel off him, pushed both of them to the concrete floor with such force Xander suspected he would have broken bones in the maneuver.

Angel grabbed for Spike's cock, and Xander knew from experience that would have ended the wrestling match, but Spike turned his hips at the last minute, leaving Angel holding the less vulnerable leg. Angel then used his grip to force Spike's leg up into the air, pressing Spike's upper body to the ground, but Spike twisted his leg, taking a swipe at Angel's cock with his own heel, and Angel released him to avoid the hit.
Spike sprung to his feet, and Angel moved in again, slamming his child to the wall not two feet from where Xander knelt, and Xander watched as Angel reached down and worked a finger between Spike's cheeks, Spike bucking and growling as Angel forced his finger up inside Spike, and then continued until Spike stood on his toes, forced to use Angel's shoulders for balance as Angel slowly lifted him from the ground until Spike's legs dangled and Spike threw his head back and to the side.

Angel struck swiftly, biting Spike again, and now Spike's noises sounded less aggressive than needy, and Xander found himself moaning with his sire at the sight. When Spike's feet found ground again, Xander watched in fascination as Angel forced a second finger in with effort, and Spike widened his stance, allowing his face to fall to Angel's shoulder.

"Lube," Angel hissed, and Xander didn't realize that the comment had been for him until Angel's foot nudged him out of his daze. Realizing that Spike couldn't exactly move impaled as he was with Angel holding him tightly enough to force him onto his toes, Xander hurried to the nightstand and grabbed the tube before returning to the pair. Angel kept one hand on the back of Spike's neck,
forcing Spike into his own chest as he held out the second hand and growled "A lot of it."

Xander quickly opened the tube and put a large amount on Angel's two fingers before going back to his kneeling position which gave him a unique view as Angel opened his sire. Angel used his now wet fingers to impale his childe again and then threw him to the bed.

This time instead of fighting, Spike rolled to his side and watched Angel with pure, undisguised lust, and Angel must have known he had won because he slowly approached the bed with the confidence of a victor, and Xander could only groan at the sight of a naked Angel closing in on a naked Spike, and here he was stuck in the corner, gripping his own wrists so hard that he feared he might draw blood and dripping pre-cum on the floor at regular intervals.

Meanwhile, Angel had reached the bed, and Xander watched his large hand run down the length of Spike's side and thigh, bypassing Spike's hard cock, and without further preamble, he flipped Spike onto his stomach and Spike arched like a cat as Angel arranged himself straddling Spike from the back and thrust in without further fuss, and Xander could hear the same strangled
cry that he had heard so often when Spike rode him, and he nearly came at the sound, only Baby's desire to impress Sire and his own lack of permission kept him from turning into a regular fountain.

Angel thrust so powerfully that Spike traveled up the bed until he could brace himself on the headboard. Both vampires now made low growling noises as Angel lunged forward. Xander could see Spike struggle to his knees and once he had that leverage, he drove back into Angel so hard he could hear the larger vampire grunt with the impact as skin hit skin with a sharp slapping sound.

Xander closed his eyes in frustration, struggling to not come as he heard the sounds of the wild coupling continued on long past what a human could have endured. Finally, he heard an unfamiliar roar followed by Spike’s own cry of completion, and he opened his eyes to see Angel collapse on top of Spike.

Xander tried to stifle his whimper of frustration, but he knew he’d failed when gold eyes turned to consider him where he squirmed on the pillow, desperate to just reach around and give his cock the one or two pulls it would take to reach orgasm.
“Your childe seems to be having a problem,” Angel commented, the accent now almost gone under the tones of his everyday voice. Xander heard a muffled reply, but he couldn’t make out any words until Angel’s body arced up into the air slightly as the smaller body under him squirmed to work free.

“Move your soddin’ arse, Peaches,” Spike voice finally demanded, and Angel laughed right before Xander heard the unmistakable sound of hand hitting flesh. However, Angel did in fact shift over to the far side of Spike. Xander watched as Spike rose up and considered him. The blond flipped over onto his back and arranged the pillows under him so that he was reclining without being flat on his back.

Xander knew that Spike might want time with his own sire and send him away, and he knew that he’d have a hard time coming outside Spike’s presence, but he tried not to let his desperation shine through his eyes. Spike had waited a hundred years for Angel to pull his head out of his ass, and Xander wasn’t going to interfere with that. However, Spike didn’t even hesitate.

“Come here, pet,” he ordered, and Xander rose and went to Spike, standing by the side of the bed still dripping
from his cock which now looked rather scary-purple.

"I should," Angel looked over at the door, but Spike reached up and pulled at one of Angel's nipples.

"You should bloody stay. You've got new childer to welcome to the family."

"I..." Angel glanced toward Xander, and Xander could feel Baby curl up tighter, burying himself in Xander's thoughts.

"You're a vampire, and if you want to be some do-gooding vampire like my pet, that's fine, but you won't change what you are."

"You're still as mouthy as ever," Angel said as he looked down at Spike.

"Not nearly as mouthy as Xander," Spike countered.

“He minds a good deal better than you ever did,” Angel said and Xander blushed as he realized that Angel was openly examining Xander’s naked and very aroused body.
“Yeah, but you should hear him prattle on when he’s nervous. It’s enough to drive ya as batty as Dru.” Xander blushed even redder and looked down, realizing that Spike spoke the truth.

“He doesn’t seem very talkative to me,” Angel said, and Xander looked up as a large rough finger touched his cheek. Angel reached over Spike to initiate the touch, and Xander felt the finger slip under the leather strap running down his cheek. Angel’s finger forced the bit even deeper into his mouth as Angel pulled him onto the bed.

Xander followed that pull, climbing onto the bed with the two vampires, and thinking again how glad he was that he didn’t have to talk because nothing in his life had ever prepared him for this. ‘Hey, how ya doing’ seemed a little casual, but ‘wow, nice cock’ wouldn’t have won him any style points considering the other occupants of the bed had about three hundred and fifty years of sexual experience between them. Yep, pretty damn intimidating his brain concluded. His cock had other ideas as it continued to twitch and drip.

He felt Spike’s familiar hands on him, guiding him to lie on his back between his sire’s legs, his back resting
against Spike’s chest. Angel now shifted so that he straddled four legs, and Xander could feel his urge to babble really hit high gear as he noticed how his own tanned and hairy legs contrasted with Spike’s pale and nearly hairless ones. He shifted his feet uncomfortably as he tried to avoid eye contact with Angel, but a firm hand under his chin lifted his face so that he looked directly into Angel’s yellow eyes.

“A very pretty boy,” Angel decreed, and Xander started fidgeting even more, at least until Spike curled his legs so that his calves rested on Xander’s knees, pinning him down. Angel gave a smile that was less than reassuring before shifting first one knee and then the other to the inside of Xander and Spike’s tangled legs, Spike helping by using his own legs to pull Xander’s knees open. Angel’s hands reached up to rest on his chest, and Xander couldn’t take any more, he reached up and covered those large hands with his own, begging with his eyes for one of the vampires to take pity on him before he died of sexual frustration.

“Oi, control yourself, pet,” Spike said in a slightly aggravated tone before grabbing his wrists from behind and pulling his hands down to the bed on either side of his chest.
“Certain fledge I once knew would have come all over himself by now,” Angel said with a quiet laugh. “Come to think of it, a certain fledge I know did come all over himself when he got caught in a bed between his sire and his sire’s sire.” Xander snorted his amusement, the only sound he really could make, as he realized that the baby pictures his mother had pulled out over his nineteenth birthday dinner couldn’t compare with twenty years of embarrassing fledge stories that Angel probably had on Spike.

“Watch it pet. You’re the only bloody person I know who could be muzzled and still get himself in trouble with his mouth,” Spike warned with a nip at Xander’s ear, and Xander rolled his head to the side to give Spike better access.

“Not even a hint of fear,” Angel said with something like awe in his voice, and Xander turned toward Angel as the vampire sat up slightly, the ridges fading into human features before he put large hands back on Xander’s chest. This time Angel bent down and took a nipple in his mouth so suddenly that Xander bucked and tried to scream his lust, but Spike held him as Angel bit.
When Angel transferred to the other nipple, his nipple simply shone bright pink and stood out at attention, and his cock throbbed in time with his heartbeat. He bucked again as Angel repeated the procedure on the second nipple, but Spike had tightened his hold so he really couldn’t move much. Angel’s hands moved down to his hips as Angel moved up to nip at his claim mark, and Xander felt the familiar warmth he always felt when Spike touched that sensitive spot.

“Don’t come,” Spike warned, and Xander felt that feeling of impending release retreat. He groaned loudly, and Spike just laughed as Angel turned from nipping to licking the claim bite. “Told ya he’s vocal,” Spike said, and Xander could feel Angel chuckle as the large body pressed down into his rippled.

Angel drew back, and Xander found himself face to face with those deep brown eyes right before Angel kissed him, dull human teeth pulling out his lower lip and gnawing at it gently. Xander could only writhe caught between the pleasure of the act and the pain of his own delayed orgasm. Angel kissed him again before moving to his upper lip. Angel placed one last kiss on his closed lips before sliding down and running tongue over Xander’s hip, and Xander really would have come if Spike
hadn’t tightened his grip and whispered “no” in his ear. Angel looked up and slid into game face before flaring his nostrils in an expression Xander recognized as the vampire’s attempt to smell his mood, his pheromones.

“No fear,” Angel whispered again, this time in game face before lowering his head and biting the inside of Xander’s thigh. Xander mewled pitifully behind the muzzle, now almost dying to come, but Spike had taken up a slow chant of “no” in his ear, and the desire to obey sire and the desire to just fucking come battled so fiercely that Xander shook his head in frustration, that being the only part of him not held motionless by Spike. He felt Spike twitch below him, and he looked down to see Angel now licking a wound on Spike’s calf.

“Flip him,” Angel said quietly, and Xander felt himself released and immediately grabbed by two vampires who turned him so that his head rested on Spike’s shoulder. Luckily the angle meant that his now painful cock was kept off the mattress by the position of Spike’s body below him. Unluckily, Spike once again tangled their limbs.

Xander could feel Spike’s feet braced at the back of his
knees, his legs held wide open, which wasn’t actually a problem for him as long as someone did something soon to allow him to come. He didn’t fight when Spike once again grabbed his wrists, holding his arms slightly away from his body; he just rested his head on Spike’s shoulder and tried to concentrate on breathing and not having his cock explode because he really would miss that piece of anatomy.

The bed dipped again, and Xander felt movement on the inside of his thighs as Angel moved into position, but he closed his eyes and allowed himself to ride the waves of sensation. Large hands started at his shoulders, but the hands didn’t linger this time, they moved swiftly up his trembling back and then down to his butt where a cold wetness told him that they were near the final event now. He wiggled a little as the first finger entered, but the finger ignored the prostate, and Xander didn’t know if that was a good or a bad thing, but no one asked him and he definitely didn’t have any control over the situation, so he relaxed into his sire’s body and concentrated on allowing the fingers to do their exploring.

He had lost track of fingers, time, and generally his own brain by the time he felt something larger than fingers
pushing into him. He took a deep breath and breathed out as Angel pushed in, willing himself to relax. Where Angel had taken Spike hard, the vampire now moved so slow that Xander would have cursed him and begged him to do something if his mouth wasn’t occupied by steel and clamped shut with leather. When Angel finally pushed all the way in and he could feel the vampire pressed up against his ass, he waited for the action, but Angel pulled back so slowly and slid in again so slowly that Xander thought he’d lose his mind. He flexed his arm muscles, but Spike held him immobile as Angel continued his slow torture.

Xander mewled into his muzzle again, tossing his head, and maybe Angel got the hint because the next thrust came so hard that Xander felt himself pressed into Spike’s body, stars and black spot appearing in his vision as Angel pressed into his prostate. Another hard thrust and another and suddenly Xander was struggling just to breath as he felt his body warm and he struggled against the imprisonment. Angel went faster, and suddenly he could hear Spike whispering.

“Come, come now, pet. It’s all right, let go now.” As soon as Xander’s overtaxed brain processed those words, he felt his cock explode and he spasmed and jerked,
Angel’s cock ramming into him suddenly seeming much larger as his muscles involuntarily tightened, and then he could feel Angel’s release. Angel draped himself over his back, the vampire pulling large unneeded gasps of air, and Xander could feel himself fading into the post release daze.

“Sleep, pet,” he heard a voice suggest from a very long distance away, and he allowed himself to sink into that darkness, so completely sated and relaxed that he couldn’t guarantee that his muscles hadn’t just been magically turned to jello.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander woke to the strangest morning he had yet experienced, and considering some of his mornings since hooking up with Spike, that was something. He was spread eagle on the bed, Spike below him and Angel above him, which wasn’t as strange as Angel still buried deep inside him, and Xander could feel his own cock respond instantly to the presence. He tried to yawn, only to discover that the muzzle was still in place, and when he went to raise his head, he found something hard and fuzzy pinning it to his sire’s chest. Xander moved an arm
restlessly, not really sure what he could do with one free arm since the other seemed trapped under a weight, but then he felt fingers at the back of his neck.

“Shh, pet. Just relax, the big ox isn’t awake yet.” Ox was right, Xander thought as his attempts to move led to a dull ache in his backside where Angel’s still engorged member held him open. Damn vampire anatomy, he thought as he honestly tried to relax, wondering if Spike had any idea just how uncomfortable he was.

“Don’t bloody know how I ended up on the bottom since I’m the smallest one here. If I’d been human you two woulda soddin’ crushed the life outta me,” Spike complained quietly, but Xander felt Spike’s cock beginning to press up into his own body, so he suspected that Spike wasn’t suffering too much.

“Course it’s nice to wake up ta the quiet,” Spike teased as the hand moved to the cheek strap and gave it a tug. Xander just snorted his opinion of that and pressed up with his head which was pinned below Angel’s own head he realized. “Shh,” Spike repeated, and Xander stopped his little movements, allowing Angel’s weight to press his head back down firmly into Spike’s chest.
“Been a long time since I woke up with my sire in my bed, and havin’ a sire and a childe is about more than I can believe when I stop to think,” Spike said, and Xander used his one free hand to reach up and touch Spike’s cheek. Spike stopped stroking his neck and took the hand in his own grip, bringing it to his lips where he kissed it gently.

“Never told ya, pet. But I figured when I got the last of the wankers who took out Dru, I scheduled myself to watch a sunrise.” Xander had told himself to just be still and wait, but that statement made him jerk, frantic to see Spike’s face, but pinned in such a way he could only see Angel’s shoulder and the wall.

“Hush. Not goin’ to now, pet.” Spike murmured in his ear. “Had just lost everythin’ and thought I couldn’t get any of it back. My whole line had been destroyed by Peaches and his soul, but I couldn’t stop loving the bastard because he was still my sire, and I couldn’t stop bein’ angry that he left. When I couldn’t protect Dru, I just figured that this world didn’t have anything in it for me.” Xander could feel tears slide down his nose and drop onto Spike’s chest, the only way he had of telling his sire how he was feeling.
“No need for that,” Spike said more firmly. “Since I found you, life’s been lookin’ a little more fun. Got my sire back although I don’t really plan on having him around too much, and I got to mess with a slayer and have a bloody hell of a lot of fun kicking some demon arse.

"And now, for the first time I have a childe of my own, one I bloody well won’t ever leave.” Xander felt Spike’s hand move back to his neck, and he suddenly felt his demon rise up and start purring, the first time ever it had done so without Spike initiating it. Spike’s hand stopped for a minute before resuming, and now Xander could feel the purr below him. Xander wondered if Spike would have ever made such a confession if Xander had woken with his normal talkativeness, and he resolved to try to be a little quieter in the future. Didn’t expect to succeed, but he planned to try.

Above him, Angel remained motionless but started his own rumble, a rumble that traveled through the vampire’s entire body, including his cock, making Xander feel like he had a very large very gentle vibrating dildo pressed into him, which would normally be of the good, but after last night, his cock sent as many pain signals as pleasure signals. Oh yeah, two vampires plus one mostly
human in the same bed led to one worn out human, Xander mused. Xander’s first indication that Angel was waking was the twitch buried deep in him. Figures, vamps wake up cock first, which is pretty appropriate for their lifestyles, Xander thought. He tried to relax, but the twitching and the rumbling purr and the slow beginning to wake movements in the body above him, combined with the evidence of Spike’s interest below him, soon had Xander Jr. up and begging despite a steady soreness.

Angel began making small thrusts even as he made the small sounds that usually accompanied waking. Xander groaned as the soreness competed with his prostate and his demon’s pleasure at being so completely taken. By the time Angel’s hands started making purposeful movements, his hips rocked back and forth, pressing Xander into his sire as Angel pulled out no more than an inch before pushing back in. As Angel started pushing himself up, lifting his head, and using his arms to hold his own weight, the thrusts grew longer.

At first, Xander panicked at the lack of lube since he could feel skin pulling skin, but the more Angel undulated the more he could feel the skin slide smoothly. Xander realized that Angel’s deposit from the previous evening was now the morning lube. Handy. Well, either that or
taste gross, but he'd worry about that later.

Soon Angel’s thrusts had grown stronger than the previous evening, and Xander found himself grunting with every thrust, his cock hard as he started pushing back into it, Spike lying below without restraining him. As Xander felt Angel start coming, he pressed his forehead into the crook of Spike’s neck, and he felt his sire holding the back of his head as he struggled to hold his own orgasm. Spike hadn’t told him he couldn’t come, but he hadn’t said he could, and Xander decided to err on the side of caution. Suddenly Angel pulled out, and Xander felt strangely empty without that presence in his body. He wondered how long he had slept intimately attached to the other man. He really didn’t have time to think about it as Spike slid out from under him and took up his own position behind Xander.

Xander lowered his head to his arms, not knowing how long Spike would draw out this exquisite torture, but Spike just slid in smoothly and began to powerfully drive in almost immediately. Xander felt a hand reach around and grab the base of his cock even as Spike stopped. He knew this game. Xander drove himself back onto Spike before thrusting forward into that welcoming fist. Throwing himself forward and backwards, Xander
didn’t have long to wait before Spike lost control and began pounding him. When Spike started coming, Xander released his own orgasm, his cock sending waves of both pleasure and pain.

When Spike withdrew, Xander sighed and rolled onto his side.

“Are you all right?” Angel asked from the far side of the room, and Xander could see the guilt rising up to high tide. He nodded, not really able to do more reassurance than that.

“He’s smellin’ a bit more than okay,” Spike pointed out as he held out a hand. Xander took the hand and stood up, feeling liquid running down the back of his thighs as he wiggled his ass trying to reduce the feeling of strangeness. Yes, he’d worn plugs at night before, but Angel was a good sight bigger than any plug.

“I shouldn’t have...” Angel started, and Spike snorted his disgust.

“Last night was the only time since you got to Sunnydale that ya haven’t cocked somethin’ up. Say you’re happy and make your way back to your own little humans,”
Spike suggested.

“William,” Angel began before switching tactics. “Spike, I just need to know both the demon and the human are okay with what happened,” Angel asked so softly that Xander found himself wondering what it would be like to carry so much pain and guilt in one body. Spike snorted again, but Xander felt himself pulled toward Spike as clever fingers quickly undid the clasps that held the muzzle in place.

Once Spike loosened the straps, Xander opened his mouth and pushed the bit out of it, moving his tongue around to get the feel for it again. Spike tossed the contraption on the bed, and Xander was left just as speechless as when he’d worn the thing. What could he say to ease 250 years of guilt? Xander took a lesson from the previous evening and bypassed words all together.

Xander walked up to Angel and went up on his toes to reach up and truly kiss him without the muzzle keeping him from participating. He moved his lips against Angel’s slowly opening them in invitation, and Angel’s tongue took him up, as they kissed deeply. Xander felt himself unexpectedly pulled from Angel’s mouth as Angel tilted his neck and pulled Xander into the curve where neck
and shoulder meet.

“Drink,” Angel said, and Xander felt the demon rise in near rapture. His vision went red and the familiar ache in his mouth told him that his own fangs had dropped as he sunk his teeth into the skin. The first taste nearly knocked him off his feet, and he hadn’t pulled but a few mouthfuls from Angel when he started to feel light headed, so he withdrew, unable to even keep his balance for a few seconds. Angel smiled at him and then tucked him under an arm.

“Childe,” Angel held out his hand and kept his head tilted, and Xander watched as Spike approached cautiously, almost as if expecting a trap. When he came close enough, Angel reached out and pulled the blonde head into his own neck, and Xander could feel a shudder go through the large frame as Spike bit in and drank significantly more that a few mouthfuls.

When Spike finally pulled back, he whispered the word “sire” and Angel touched his cheek once before snagging his clothes off the floor and walking out.

“Well I seriously hope he’s planning on putting those clothes on before he goes out on the street,” Xander said
a few moments after Angel had disappeared.

“The muzzle’s still out, childe,” Spike said with a friendly cuff to the back of the head. “Let’s get breakfast.”

Xander suspected that the touchy feely portion of the program had ended. “Um, I’m thinking shower first because eww,” Xander said as he felt the trickle down the back of his legs.

“Not nice to call the remains of a passionate night ‘ew’,” Spike pointed out as he headed out into the main room.

“Yeah, say that when it’s running down your legs and getting on your carpet. Well, actually it is your carpet I’m dripping on here,” Xander pointed out and Spike reappeared in the room quickly enough.

“Ew,” Spike complained. “Get your arse in the shower.” Xander would have been more convinced if Spike hadn’t laughed the whole time.

The End