The year was 2003, and the place was Sunnydale. What was once a hometown and a Hellmouth is now a crater, and Xander Harris leaves behind everything he's ever known to cross oceans and continents in service to the Council, the Slayers, and the friends that he's devoted himself to for years. But the summer of 2004 finds him back in Sunnydale, doing what he never thought he'd do - reclaiming the city - and himself - from the ruins.

In L.A., a magical amulet resurrects the dust of a vampire and William the Bloody is born again. Only this time he's embroiled in fight that pits 'good' against 'evil' in ways that cross all lines and defy all logic. When the battle is over he discovers that 'fighting the good fight' isn't all it's cracked up to be, and he travels back to the place that started it all - Sunnydale, California.

Snakes and Ladders is a game of chance, where 'ladders' let you climb up to virtues and redemption, and 'snakes' bring you sliding back down to the pits of sin and decadence. What if there were no more Snakes 'n Ladders? That's what we wondered, too.
Prologue 1 - Xander

"We found another one! On Barry's left!"

With a groan, Xander pressed the button, leaned into the intercom. "Okay. Everybody stop again on the Northwest quarter."

"Aw, Jesus! Not again!"

Xander shrugged, dragging his sleeve across his forehead, which didn't do a damn thing about that annoying trickle of sweat that kept creeping along the band of his patch. "What do you expect, Russ? It's the site of a natural disaster." And how long was it before Xander could say that without gritting his teeth and without sarcasm?
One week? Two?

Maybe around the time his crew uncovered its first demon and Xander had to convince the Forensics team they had a really weird zoo in Sunnydale before the earthquake. Good old Sunnydale mentality, cause the team seemed willing enough to believe him.

By the time Xander had been on the site four weeks and June was turning the corner into a hot July, the Forensics team just stopped asking about the weird remains and concentrated on the human.

And by the time July had melted into a sticky, scummy August, Xander was ready to kill the next man to pick up a skull and start up the "Alas! Poor Yorick!" routine. Black humor was to be expected leveling out what amounted to the biggest burial ground in California, but at least a guy could show some creativity.

When the work halted every time the big movers
unearthed another body, Xander still sometimes thought of all those people who left town. All those cars clogging the roads trying to get out of Sunnydale like rats before a flood and there were still enough bodies in the crater to make the level and fill work slow, hot and cranky.

Not that anybody called it a crater. Crater wasn't good for future development and pre-sales of prime California real estate.

No, it was a valley now. The sides all leveled off into smooth slopes and the crater eased level with the beaches to the west. Or it would be when Xander's crew and the four others, were done with their work and the new construction around the edges of the valley could start spreading back down toward the center.

And the Hellmouth.

Which officially still didn't exist. Xander shook his head and dragged sweat-damp hair back from his face, watching his step over the uneven ground. His
crew were used to the long routes Xander took to get across the site when the great light towers cast shadows that played tricks even on those of them with two eyes.

When he got to the Northwest quarter, the Forensics team were already there and Barry was slouched in a folding chair looking as hot, sweaty and grimy as Xander felt. "What've we got this time?"

"Couple of legs and a torso," Barry said, tucking his gloves into his belt and pulling off his bandanna.

Xander held up a hand. "Don't you dare make a joke about this guy losing his head over the craziness."

Barry lifted his hands defensively. "Wasn't gonna."

"Yeah, right." Xander snorted, crouching next to Barry's chair with a creak in his knees and a wince, accepting the water bottle from him with a nod of thanks.
"How many times have we stopped this week, Harris?" Barry fished a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his pocket, pulling one out and lighting up. Out here on site, nobody was bothering to enforce workplace smoking rules and Xander wasn't about to start. Since the job included instructions to stop work, notify the crew leader and call in the forensics team every time another body turned up, Xander figured the guys deserved to smoke during breaks if they wanted to. "At this rate, we'd be better off building a dam at the far end and making a lake."

"It's not that bad. Greg's got his guys coming up from Pasadena next week and I'm taking a surveying crew out onto the next parcel tomorrow. Why? Are you looking to be out of a job soon?" Xander reached up, poking a finger into Barry's side, remembering when he could have watched the entire finger disappear in Barry's bulk two years ago when they first worked together. Like Xander and like most of the crew, Barry had come back to work diminished.
"Look around, Harris. Ain't none of us gonna be out of work any time soon. Once we've got the crater leveled how long do you think it'll take to rebuild?"

"We're not contracted for the entire rebuild."

"Enough of it to keep my kids in shoes and Twinkies for the next five years."

Xander laughed, patting Barry on the shoulder. "You're a good man, Bar. Look, the Forensics team is going to be at this for hours and first shift is coming in thirty minutes. Why don't you take off early?"

"Nah. Thanks. I'll hang around another half hour." At Xander's skeptical look, Barry took a deep, contented drag on his cigarette. "First shift brings the good doughnuts."

"And third shift eats all the jelly ones," Xander said, standing up and bracing his hands in the small of his back, stretching. "I've got to get back to the trailer before Carl comes in to let him know about the
"backhoe down."

"You gonna tell him what a mess his blast boys made of the east ridge?"

"With pictures."

"Good. Cause I ain't going up up there again until they've got it stabilized."

"I'll let him know." The walk back to the trailer was easier as the sky began to lighten through the early morning fog, lessening the shadows from the light towers and making everything glow a deep silvery blue. "Hey Carl." Xander smiled in relief, letting the cheap trailer door bang shut behind him. "I can always count on you to come in early, huh?"

"It's the only way to get a good doughnut before your crew eats them all."

Xander lifted and spread his hands, palms out. "I don't get between my guys and the doughnuts."
"Cause you're always too busy running off."

"I'm a man with a ritual," Xander said, dropping his hard hat on his desk and gathering up the time sheets he'd been meaning to go over and putting off. "Made a list and you'll want to have a talk with your blast crew. One of the guys on second shift had to be airlifted out because of a half-assed job. Mark's got the details."

Carl groaned, reaching for the coffee pot before it was even done filling, ignoring the hiss and spit of coffee dripping onto the hotplate as he refilled his cup. "Gonna be a long morning, Alex."

"It was a long night. You need anything else out of me?"

"Nah. Get out of here or you'll miss it." Carl waved him off, sipping gingerly at his coffee, already shuffling the papers on his desk with his free hand.

"See you tomorrow." Xander didn't wait for a reply before he left, walking just a little faster to his truck
so that nobody would stop him before he could get away from the site.

Because he did have a ritual. One he'd only had to break twice the entire summer, because Carl was an understanding man and never minded coming in half an hour before sunrise so that Xander could make it to the beach before dawn, lie down in the sand and watch the sun come up over the crater's edge and through the fog.

It was a Sunnydale thing and when the sun came up, the world changed and it was time for Xander to go home to the sad little stucco tract house overlooking the smoothed out valley that had once been a crater that had once been his home.

This morning, Xander stayed on the beach until the fog began to dissipate, enjoying the cool ocean breeze that never seemed to quite reach his part of the site, letting it dry the last of the day's sweat to his skin until he started to itch and decided that was a sign it was time to go home to a long, hot shower.
As Xander drove, he let his mind wander tiredly. It was his personal rule that driving time was thinking time, getting all of the thoughts and memories that chased each other around in his head out of there before he walked in his front door. At least that was the idea. This morning, his thoughts turned to Africa. To long nights of sticky sweat and mosquito bites, when he'd sometimes go so long without a shower or a bath he couldn't even smell himself anymore. Mornings like this, Xander wished he still had that ability not to smell himself.

Because after a long, hot August night of work, he reeked. And that was putting it kindly. It made the single life almost attractive, since there was nobody waiting at home to gag over his boots and socks, or bitch when he was too tired to do more than drop them on the floor and drag his sorry grimy ass into the shower.

He definitely didn't think about how nice it might be to climb out of that shower and into bed with a nice cuddly body who wouldn't complain if Xander needed to gripe about his night. Which proved that
fantasy man in Xander's head was alive and well, because he was pretty sure there wasn't a woman alive who'd put up with all of that, so Xander had installed the best shower he could afford, loved it, cared for it, lavished it with affection and came home to its welcoming bosom every morning.

Pulling into his short driveway, Xander looked at the garage remote with sad amusement before clicking it. "And the Xand-man gives in to become a true suburbanite." Killing the engine inside his garage, he left the door to close on its own and wandered into the house, feeling his body slow and his feet drag as if they too knew that sweet, sweet hot water and soft, cool sheets were but minutes away.

As he walked, he shed his clothes, vowing to pick them up that afternoon despite Monday through Wednesday's work clothes still littering the floor in a growing path from garage door to master bathroom. Once there, he went straight to the shower, tugging the water on full blast and leaving it to heat, downed two painkillers with a glass of water and closed the medicine cabinet door before
looking at himself in the mirror.

He rubbed a hand over grimy stubble and considered a piratey "arr, matey!" before deciding that he really needed new material and pulling the patch off. He fingered the chafed line across his forehead with a wince and pulled ointment out of the medicine cabinet too, leaving it on the counter as a reminder to himself.

Then, last of all, Xander lifted the small pouch that he wore around his neck on a thong in defiance of all construction site safety rules and held it to his nose, breathing deep of the scent within. There wasn't room for much in there, sticks, stones, dirt, bones, but somehow, even under the musk of the leather and his own sweat, it still smelled of Africa and a tiny wild voice in Xander's hind-brain calmed to the scent of home.

Xander only took it off to shower, leaving it on the counter so that it wouldn't get wet before stepping into the nearly scalding spray and letting it pound away the dust, the grime, the sweat and the
responsibilities.

Shower time was also time to think, but unlike thinking time in the truck, shower time involved only pleasant thoughts. If he wasn't ready to nap on the shower floor out of exhaustion, Xander might have let his soaped hand linger over cock and balls, but instead, he dug deep into the bunched up muscles of his shoulders and leaned on the wall with a blissful sigh, unrolling the happy fantasy of the Swedish Masseuse with size twelve hands and biceps like bricks.

One of these days, he'd treat himself to that massage. He'd need another one by the end of the next shift, but for a few blissful hours, or maybe a long weekend, cause hey, Labor Day coming up, right? He'd feel less like he'd been strung together with high-tensile rubber bands.

Once he was clean, Xander dropped his head, leaning into the spray and letting the water pound against the nape of his neck until he was light headed and the water was beginning to cool.
Big fluffy towels. They'd been another investment Xander had made to his ongoing contentment as a confirmed bachelor, because the guy who'd said it's the little things in life that make life worth living? Had to have known the joy of the big fluffy towel after the long hot shower. And maybe the smaller thrill of leaving the big wet towel on the floor with Monday through Wednesday's big wet towels because he didn't have to pick them up if he didn't want to.

And if his bathroom was smelling a little mildewy by Friday, that was nobody's business but his own.

After dabbing the ointment (which promised to "wipe off Baby's delicate skin easily") onto the redness left by his patch band, Xander slipped the little leather pouch back over his head and wandered into his bedroom, falling spread eagled and nude into the middle of the softest King bed his money had been able to buy, asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.
"What's it look like, Dave?" Xander crouched next to his lead surveyor, peering into the depths of yet another hole in the ground. After the Hellmouth had been destroyed, more than a few buildings had been buried whole. Again.

Dave consulted the map and his measurements, then squinted into the flashlight beam. "Looks like Our Lady of Salvation. Old church. You want me to go down?"

Xander shook his head. "I'll do it if you can get the guys over here."

"You sure you don't want backup?"

Xander shrugged, settling his goggles down into place before sliding the harness up over his hips and buckling it in place. "Yeah. I'm sure. No point in two of us getting magical syphilis."
"Huh?"

"Nothing. Just get the guys over here with a rope." Xander knelt at the edge, on what seemed to be a layer of dirt covering a reasonably stable roof and ducked his head into the dark below, squinting to see further than the vague outline of pews and the watery green-blue-gold glow at the far end where he remembered the stained glass windows, even though he'd only been there once as a child for someone's wedding. "And Dave? Have the guys be careful about a hundred feet over there. Windows on the surface."

On his way down into the murky interior, Xander spun lazily, letting his eye adjust to the dimmer light of his flash as it swept over the ceiling, still amazingly intact after the cave in. What was it about churches being buried whole around the Hellmouth? Did The Powers That Be have a sense of humor or what?

When his feet touched ground, Xander released the
clamp on his harness, giving the rope a tug and unhooking his walkie talkie. "All right up there, Dave?"

"Fine, Alex. What do you see?"

"It looks pretty stable. There's some rock in the pews, bit of brick. More junk in the back cause the floor's slanted now, but I can see the altar and it looks intact." Xander's footsteps echoed in the cool cavern and he shivered, wishing he'd thought to grab a light jacket for going under ground as he walked the aisle between the pews. "Aw, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"We've got another body."

"Priest?"

"I think so. He's all wrapped up, so it looks like he got trapped down here or something. Hang on." Xander tucked his walkie talkie back into his belt and made his way to the altar with its mess of wax
and burned down candles that still smelt faintly of incense and tallow and the body laid out over its length like a sacrifice, head turned from the nave, one pale arm dangling toward the ground.

"He got a collar?"

"I don't know. Let me just roll him over and-"

"Alex? Hey, Alex. What's going on down there?"

Dave's voice seemed distant as the priest turned his head, slow, fitful as if locked in a fever dream and Xander stared down at the pale skin, stretched tight, but impossibly fresh, pliant over sharp bone.

Frighteningly familiar.

"Jesus" Xander said, the word coming out a whisper through a suddenly bone dry throat. "Spike?"
Miles to go before I sleep, Spike thought, struggling to sit up and failing - falling heavily back. The pain of it almost made him cry, and he sighed out a shaking breath and just lay there, wavering in and out of consciousness and lucidity. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he was going to die - was going to fall to dust and it would all be over. An ending he'd miraculously escaped twice in nearly two centuries. The idea of facing it again left a sour taste in his mouth - made him rage weakly, cold tears slipping out from under clenched lids. He didn't want to die - not here, not now. Not when he'd survived so much. But he was so tired, and everything hurt and he was too weak to do anything at all but lay there, his mind worked free of time and wandering...

It took a month for Spike to realize that he wasn't going to stay in L.A. That he couldn't. Wolfram and Hart was gone, and Angel was back in the good
graces of the Powers That Be. The Powers had stepped in at the last moment and snatched Wes out of Blue's arms - fixed him and changed him and made him Vision Boy. And the Council - they had decided they liked Angel again, too. The Circle of the Black Thorn had been known, it seemed, in more places than L.A. and the Council had heard about what they'd done - and approved. And just like that, Angel's back in the fold. Buying some other decrepit pile of a hotel, moving himself, Gunn, Blue and Wes right in - getting dispatches and phone calls from the Council and then getting his own little pack of Slayers-in-training and Andrew, for fuck's sake. Spike suffered too many unexpected hugs and random monologues from the geekiest Watcher ever - suffered Angel's growing aloofness and the twitchy suspicion of the Slayers. And truly suffered Blue's random flash-backs to Fred, when she'd waver between antediluvian god-king and virginal Texas co-ed. He couldn't stand that - couldn't watch her immobile, wind-up-doll face melt into the animated features of one of the only friends he'd had. Couldn't stand to hear that soft Texas slur come out of corpse-blue lips Wes couldn't stand it
much, either, and he and Spike had shared silent, somehow comforting bottles of beer in a little bar down the street. The ex-Watcher really hadn't been half bad, in the end. But it wasn't enough, and Spike had known that he had to go. So he did.

There'd been more explosions, and sounds of shouting, of a siren. All of it dinning in his ears like some sort of off-key symphony and he'd curled into his nest and put his hands over his ears, trying to block it all out. His head pounded - a hangover without any alcohol - and his skin felt too tight - felt stretched over his bones like cheap vellum. He knew he was saying something, but he couldn't hear his own voice, and his lips rasped against the velvet of the cushion he had under his head. "Please be quiet, please be quiet, please, please, please, please,..."

In the oven-hot, brown-tinged air of an L.A. June he found a car he liked somewhere on Rodeo and stole as much blood as would reasonably keep for a week or so from a blood bank and headed north. Didn't know why, really. Dru was somewhere south, and he
really thought he should go see her sometime - see if she'd ever really gotten over Angel trying to kill her. But he didn't. He went back instead. Back to the last place he'd ever thought he'd go. Sunnydale.

He couldn't curl up like he wanted to because it hurt, and after a while it was a lot like the games he and Dru had played once upon a time, with steel and glass and rope twisted tight. But there was no surcease, here - no cool-wet, iron-sweet mouth licking him down and putting out the flames. He writhed, clawing at the quilts and shredding them - wanting to rake his fingernails over his chest and belly but not daring.

"Dru-love, poppet, please - find me a drink, yeah? Find me a...find me some whiskey, yeah? Dru...Dru..." She didn't answer, and he gasped in dust and the reek of burnt-out candles, tasting blood diluted with vinegar - with something bitter and sharp - on his lips. "Why hast thou forsaken me...?" he mumbled. But he wasn't the Christ, and he wondered if the cross on the altar-cloth would
eventually burn through the quilts and scorch him. He closed his eyes and sank again, letting the loop of time drag him down.

In the battle with Wolfram and Hart he'd taken some good hits - gotten himself pretty torn up. The worst injury was three deep, parallel gashes some clawed appendage had sliced into him. He hadn't really seen it happen - barely even remembered what had done it. But they'd been sealed over and gone in two or three days, surprising even himself with the speed with which they closed. Even if there had been a lingering kind of...irritation. But now, standing on the lip of the crater that was Sunnydale, they itched. A deep, burning sort of itch that was maddening - that really kind of hurt. Irritated, he pulled up his t-shirt and looked down at himself, noticing uneasily that where the gashes had been were now lines of bluish-black. Faint, but there. They radiated a kind of sickly heat and he snatched his hand away from them, wondering what the fuck was going on. Hellmouth vibe, maybe - sympathetic something-or-other, who knows? He waved for a
moment on the lip of the crater, but then shrugged and started the slow trek down to the bottom.

Away over near the far northern edge there were trailers and makeshift huts and piles of material - earthmovers in glaring yellow and halogen lights strung on flex, mounted up high on spidery scaffolding. Someone had finally realized exactly how much money was to be made selling prime, ocean-front SoCal real estate, and the process of reclaiming Sunnydale had begun. Spike wondered what they did with all the corpses buried beneath them - with all the demon corpses. In the last days, hundreds of demons had flocked to the Hellmouth, attracted as moth to flames by the dark, wild energy of the First. Hell - he'd seen at least three kinds of demons skulking in the ruins already, digging for that elusive Hellmouth vibe and looting the skeleton of the town. Spike just wanted to see...everything. Take a last tour before he headed out for real, and got as far away from the Hellmouth - from the memories - as he could. As he picked his way down-slope he staggered a little, and cursed, and went on.
"You bloody bastard. Don't know I can walk, do you -" Spike struggled to stand up - get to his feet - show Angelus that he could walk now. But he couldn't - he couldn't walk, and he scrabbled at his legs, growling, only to snatch his hands away as pain sizzled through his skin. "What did you do to me, you bitch? What did you do?" He hugged the stiff cushion closer, whimpering, and closed his eyes.

A week later he'd drunk the last of his blood - and almost heaved it up - and was contemplating the climb back out with something like despair. He felt...wrong. Felt off, and the bruise-colored marks of the sealed-over cuts had deepened, looking like slashes of plum-black ink on his skin. They throbbed and burned, and he could feel something in him - some sort of sickness, some sort of corruption. Black tide of acid wrongness skeining through him. He didn't know what to do - didn't know if he could make it back up to his car. He'd been sleeping through the days in the half-buried ruins of a
storage locker but idiot vamps and a few demons keep stumbling through so he moved his lair - found a church that was miraculously intact under the layers of sifted rubble. It kept the vamps away - 'credulous god-botherers' - he thought, quoting a mostly-forgotten book and smirking to himself. The parishioners had had a soup kitchen sort of setup going, and in the supplies in the basement he'd found stacks of old, faded quilts and boxes of jumble-sale clothes and tinned vegetables. He found a dusty velvet cushion in one of the confessionals and made himself a nest on top of the altar - curled up there, shivering a little. He'd rest, sleep a bit. Get up at sunset and make his way out.

Some time later - he really wasn't sure how long - he was still there, and faintly hungry, and for the first time in over 150 years he had a fever, which was unpleasant and frightening. He'd stumbled out into the ringing darkness of the crater, flinching from the harsh grinding of the earthmovers' treads over concrete and crumpled steel. They were blasting up there on the ridge and the distant crump of the explosions shivered through him. He found a vamp
rooting through the twisted remains of a Savings and Loan and snatched it - drank its cold blood down. It sat oddly in his stomach but he was hungry. The smell of cordite and petrol and heated metal made him turn his face away and burrow back under - back into the relative quiet of the church, which still had the lingering scents of incense and old wood and must. Familiar and comforting, almost homey. It made him dream of Dru, to lie there in the blue-green gloom of midday. Watching through half-lidded eyes the sun moving behind the stained glass windows that were still, somehow, intact. He slept and woke and slept again, losing track of the hours - of the days. Shuddering in spasms as the fever gripped him and twisted him, making his bones ache. Making his skin ache, and after a while he folded his duster and used it for an extra pillow when the weight of it became too much. It made his shoulders burn - it hurt where the edges whipped around his shins and his boots were too heavy - too stiff. He lined them up by the altar and padded barefoot, flinching from the cold of the bare floor. He tolerated the jeans because he wasn't going to go naked here, but the t-shirt chaffed him - hurt the
scars - and he finally took to wearing an old dress-shirt he found in the charity boxes. Mid-colored grey-blue cotton washed to cob-web thinness and softness. He left it fluttering open over his chest, not able to bear even that whisper-touch of fabric over the scars.

The machine-noises were so loud now, they grumbled and grated directly overhead, shaking his bones, making his head hurt in sharp jabs, making him pant for air he didn't need. He pushed himself upright, grimacing, and tried to shout - tell them he was down here, that he needed quiet!

"Need to get my sleep, need to get some rest! damnit, take these chains off, you sod! Chain me like a fucking....dog..." His voice was a cracked shell of itself, barely more than a whisper and he couldn't stay up on his arms any longer. He slipped back - felt his arm sliding over, out from under the quilt. Cold, but he couldn't pull it back. When the cigarette smoke and coffee and dust and machine-smells got very, very strong he just closed his eyes
and waited, a faint tremor of fear going through him. He hurt, and he was tired - too tired to try to hide. A timeless time later he could hear a heartbeat thudding in his ears like a war-drum, and he smelled leather and sweat and soap - smelled something... Something almost familiar and he wasn't afraid anymore.

**Square One**

"Jesus" Xander said, the word coming out a whisper through a suddenly bone dry throat. "Spike?"

That cold tingle of Sunnydale-brand creeps crawled up Xander's spine.

That was it. The Hellmouth was still up to its tricks. It had to be. That was the only explanation Xander could come up with for what his eye was telling
Spike, stretched out under ragged blankets and whole. Non-smoky, non-crispy, non-dusty, but paler than pale.

And moving.

Then something clicked over in Xander's head and the rusty, disused survival instincts, compliments of twenty two years on the Hellmouth, ground back into motion and he shoved the 'why's down into the back of his mind, and grasped for the 'what now's.

"Spike," Xander repeated quietly, remembering how fast and how mad Spike could wake up when startled, and cursed when his walkie squawked to life with Dave's voice.

"Spike?" someone was saying, and Spike scrabbled weakly at the quilts - at the air, trying for some leverage so he could sit up. But nothing. His bones felt like glass, too rigid and too hollow to support him and his skin burned with every rasp of worn
cotton across it.

But the scent... So familiar. Something he knew, if only he could get his brain going and think. There was sharp burst of noise - painfully loud - and he flinched and then flinched again at the pain in his head.

"Alex? What's going on down there?"

"Shouldn't have had that last..." drink, he was going to say, but his mouth tasted like rusted iron and earth, not like whiskey, and he blinked, bewildered, staring up at the motes of dust that where drifting in the faded beams of underwater light. Someone was talking near him.

Xander yanked the walkie talkie off his belt, turning down the volume before Dave could hear Spike as more than a mutter and before Dave could make Spike flinch like that again. "Yeah. It's fine. Hang on." He turned the volume off completely, wondering why his hands weren't shaking.
"Are we swimming?" Spike asked the voice, utterly confused. "I don't want to..."

Xander wondered why his hands should be shaking and took a cautious step closer to Spike. "Okay. One of us is crazy. And I'm really hoping it's not me."

Crazy? It was Dru that was crazy. Well, and him, too but... Not anymore. He was better.

"It's you, then," Spike muttered and managed, finally, to roll over. Get on his side and look at...whoever it was.

Dark hair, dark eyes... eye... what? Wait. Spike raised a shaking hand and rubbed at his own eyes, but that made them feel as if he were grinding sand into them so he stopped with a small hiss of pain.

"Just - what do you -? I'm just... resting, here... Just let me rest, yeah?"

Spike was aware that sounded pathetic but his head was really pounding now, and he just wanted to
sink back down into the cool dimness. If only that maddeningly familiar scent would stop plucking at him.

Xander watched Spike's limbs twitch, muscles strain under thin skin with those prominent black veins. It was...wrong. Which settled it. Illusory Spike, or dream Spike if Xander was feeling honest with himself, was never that... worn down.

Whatever it was that kept stupid humans needing to do stupid things made Xander reach out to those dusty curls, even though the voice in the back of his head told him it was really stupid to check a vampire for fever.

He let his palm rest lightly against Spike's forehead all the same. "Jesus." Okay, vocabulary. Any time you want to come back is good with the Xan-man. Because Spike - vampire Spike - dead Spike...was burning up. And not in the blaze of glory, saving the world way. "What happened to you?"

Something on his forehead, light and warm, and
Spike shivered all over. The voice again, talking - asking him something.

"...happened to you?"

"Saved the world, din' I? Wen' out like that candle, burnin' at both...ends..." He reached up, fingertips brushing across worn flannel and then skin and he gripped the hand that still rested lightly on his forehead. Strong hand, a little bigger than his own - rough and hard. Working man's hand.

"I - know you, mate?" he asked finally, peering up at the indistinct face above him that was surmounted by a bright yellow hat of some kind. Like that man who'd had that little monkey in the books that had made Dru giggle. "You got a monkey 'round here, then?"

"O-kay. And I'm the crazy one?" Xander found himself smiling despite the absolute weird of the situation and watched Spike's hand shift and grip his arm. Like an over-heated snake. That's what it felt like.
What was weirder was when he found himself answering. "No monkey. I've got a stuffed parrot named Andrew, though." He paused before the rest, because this question shouldn't be the kind he needed to really think about in order to answer. "Yeah, you know me."

Spike squinted again, his eyes dazzling and tearing even in the dim, undersea light of the church. Too much dust in the air, maybe. Frustrated, he tugged on the arm still in his grip.

"Can't see you," he said, aware of a petulant edge to his voice but damnit his head hurt, and the black-void where the person's left eye should be was making him feel - unsettled. The person - A man - it's a man... yielded to his weak pull and leaned in closer.

Jesus! What the fuck -? "Harris? That - is that you? I didn't say anything, 'bout her. Didn't - tell her. Bit's safe, Harris -"
There was a sudden sift of earth and pebbles - a rattling chink of metal from overhead, and a voice:

"Alex! You okay?"

_Bit?_ "Yeah. It's me, Spike. And Dawn's in France. Safe in France." He kept his hand against Spike's skin as if to anchor them both, feeling Spike's flinch this time when Dave shouted again.

"Harris, I'm coming down!"

Reminding himself why it would be a bad idea to fire Dave for actually doing his job and spotting him, Xander turned his walkie talkie back on, holding it to his mouth so that he wouldn't have to shout. "You don't have to, Dave. The guy's alive, but he's confused."

"Shit! How long's he been down there?"

"Long enough to get pretty badly -" Xander hesitated, feeling the unnatural heat radiating into his palm and wrist from Spike's touch, like the fire
that burned him from the inside out was still *in* there somehow. "Pretty badly dehydrated. Just get the crane and basket over here, okay?"

*France? Why would the Niblet be in France? Harmony was the one who wanted to go to France, the silly cow. Turn that froofy actor into a vamp for real.*

"Harris -" Spike started, but Xander was talking, holding something up to his mouth - a radio or something - telling someone something about a...basket? Spike started to feel panic surge up in him. Nothing made any sense and he didn't want to be in a basket like some kind of...of pet. Someone was answering Xander, static-rough voice coming out of the air.

"Okay. You want me to send the paramedics over?"

"Nah. But get a cart. I want to take him over to the trailer. Get a drink in him." Xander turned off his walkie talkie again. "Do you know where you are, Spike?" Somehow, Xander had a feeling he should
be asking 'when', not 'where'.

"...know where you are?"

"What?" Spike jerked his head up, startled, and flexed his fingers around the wrist he was still holding. "I'm - we're here, we're in... It's still Sunnyhell, isn't it? It's - we're still here, mate. She didn't do it yet." Spike looked up at Xander and wiped impatiently at his eyes, blinking against the random flickers of light overhead that seemed to be coming from a torch.

"What're you doin' here, anyway? You never came around before."

A dozen responses flashed through Xander's head, everything from denial, to apology, to the mess that was the truth, but instead he said, "There's a first time for everything, huh?"

His arm was beginning to ache, so Xander leaned his hip against the altar, letting his thumb sweep back and forth, lightly over Spike's skin, between the
eyes, the rhythm matching his breathing. "I'm working up above ground. But the guys aren't gonna understand if they find out you're a vampire."

And then, because sometimes a half lie with a truthful ending was better than confusing honesty, he added, "I came to take you home."

"You did?" Spike closed his eyes against the rhythmic sweep of skin-on-skin that was sending little shivering prickles all through him. "But aren't we... You're not tyin' me up, mate," he said finally, and then flinched, pulling Xander's hand off of him altogether as the touch became too much - became uncomfortable and almost claustrophobic.

Something wasn't quite right and Spike closed his eyes, forcing his mind to work - shuffling aside the scatter-shot images that were flashing past and making it focus. He took a deep breath and it came to him: heated metal, machine oil, cordite. Other humans, but not the ones that he...remembered.
"What the fuck is going on, Harris!" he hissed, sudden panic sweeping over him. He jerked at Xander's arm and felt himself coming unbalanced - felt himself falling and he cringed, because when he hit the floor it was going to hurt.

Xander swore, catching Spike's weight, then swore again when there wasn't nearly enough of it, wanting to put his arms around Spike to steady him, but jerking back when the light touch sent a spasm through Spike's body and he went still, letting Spike lean against him.

Or not.

"What's - what is it?"


"Jesus. Sorry." Xander felt his heart still going like a jackhammer in his chest, making the sweat prickle between his shoulder blades, and run along the band of his patch with the effort of holding
absolutely still, bracing Spike. "You're okay here, Spike. Safe. My crew is up there on the surface with a crane. They're going to lower a basket for us because I've only got one harness, and you're hurt."

Xander wasn't making any sense at all. *Cranes?* What the hell? Spike lay against him, panting, waiting out the surge of needle-prick pain that had washed over him when Xander had grabbed at him. God, he was tired. Just so fucking tired and the damn scars would not *stop*; the maddening itching burn just went on and on until he wanted to claw his skin off.

"Okay, okay, we'll... Whatever you want, Harris... Just - just don't... I don't wanna see the Slayer, yeah? I don't...wanna...fight." Xander's heart was pounding, thrumming through his body and Spike reached clumsily, blindly for Xander's chest, patting at the source of the thundering surge of blood.

"Be okay, Harris," he mumbled. "Just need to sleep a while..." He took in a long breath, comforted by the familiar scents. Coffee, salt, sugar. Some sort of
soap, faintly spicy. And earth - *green* - a smell that took him back to the cave and Africa and *pain*... He twisted in remembered agony, whimpering. God, he couldn't *do* that again, he couldn't...

Spike's hand patting his chest, comforting *him*, was wigging Xander out in a way he hadn't been wigged since the first collapse of the Hellmouth, the first wrongness of weird roommate Spike before it all went to hell.

"Wanna go home," Spike whispered, the grumbling roar of some heavy machine overhead rattling the air.

"We're going home." Xander's hands fluttered helplessly, millimeters from Spike's skin, unwilling to touch when even the vibrations of the crane lowering into place above them made Spike shudder and cringe. "No Slayer," he promised, "No fighting. No ropes. I just need you to pretend to be sane human guy for me until I can get you off site. Think you can do that for me?"
"I can do human, Xan-derrr," Spike said, remembering for a moment a time when he was supposed to be Xander's American friend, hiding from...from something...

"Soldiers here? Harris - the soldiers -" Spike jerked away from the warm, solid body that had felt...so good despite the sandpaper-rasp of pain over his nerves.

Fuck, just want this to end, so fuckin' tired of running... Spike finally looked at Xander - really looked, and felt a moment's clarity return to him. Xander looked - different. Patch over his eye still, but his face was thinner - his hair shaggier. And he was still. His single eye met Spike's squarely, no flinching away or nervous shuffle - no nervous babble, which was new. Get it together, for fuck's sake, he thought, and slowly moved his legs until they were hanging over the edge of the altar.

"Okay, Harris. I trust you, mate."

"It's like I said: first time for everything, huh?"
Because a little witty repartee was so much better for his sanity right now than hopping on the Crazy Spike Train of Thought. "Just keep it together until we're leaving the site." Xander tried not to give in to the urge to wrap an arm around Spike's waist, the way he was moving like an old man. Like a really old man. "And Spike?"

Xander waited until Spike looked up at him, scarred eyebrow raised in an expression that shouldn't still be so familiar after so long.

"Be English. Please."

*What the fuck is that supposed to mean?* "M'always English, Harris," he drawled, eyebrow going up. "Fuck..." He paused half-stoo ped over, groping for his boots. They were under here somewhere, he was sure. His head pounded in this position and his vision was going dark - black-edged tunnel as knives sawed at his mid-section where the scars were being compressed.

"Fuck, I can't - Harris, fuckin' hell..." He groped for
the edge of the altar - hauled himself into something like an upright position and looked over at Xander, who looked - a little terrified. "Just - get my boots, yeah? Can't - see." An appalled look crossed Xander's face and then he was crouching down - coming up a minute later with the boots in his hand.

"Ta, mate," Spike said - gaped for a moment when Xander stayed down, tugging gingerly at his jean-leg.

"Help me out, here," Xander muttered, and Spike did his best to help while Xander maneuvered his feet into the boots. It hurt and Spike shut his eyes - tried not to think about it.

"Never should have fuckin' come back here, Dru," he mumbled, and flinched as Xander tightened the buckles.

Xander jerked when Spike called him Dru, tugging the hem of Spike's jeans down gently over the boot in apology and lifting Spike's other foot in an odd
parody of all those times he and Willow had played Cinderella as kids. Always her idea, but maybe some part of him had liked being Prince Charming. And okay, not following the playing Prince Charming to Spike line of thought any further. "They feel all right?"

"They'll do."

Though Xander noticed Spike shifting his weight gingerly onto his feet, and lifted a hand to Spike, waiting for him to find his balance. Which really didn't help the not thinking about playing Prince Charming to the undead thing either.

"What else do you have? And it's gonna be bright up there. We've got the big lamps all over the site, but it's night. About eight o'clock, okay?" Since the last thing Spike needed was to give the game away by freaking out in the artificial sunlight that had left Xander's internal clock permanently screwed up for his first month on site.

"I..." Spike just stood there for a minute because
the room was slowly revolving and it was...quite horrible. He was so fucking cold, and he plucked at the edges of his shirt - hissed in pain as he drew it closed and fumbled with the buttons.

"My - coat, it's... It's up on the - altar." He could see Xander out of the corner of his eye, fumbling in the nest of quilts looking for his coat and Spike concentrated on the shirt-buttons, the edge of the altar like a razor cutting across his back. Felt like when he was in the wheelchair and he closed his eyes, trying to push that away. Rustle of leather, and the sudden weight of it around his shoulders; cold, heavy, feeling like needles where it pressed down. Feeling like nails, digging in and he jerked away, stiff-arming the dark figure that was too close, too fucking close!. The coat slithered to the floor.

There was a scuffling - a sharp gasp of breath into someone's lungs and he hunched there, his hands curling tightly into the shirt, buttons forgotten.

"Don't fuckin' touch me, you bastard, don't fuckin' -
touch me, this is my house...guest in my house and you don't touch her, you don't -"

"Spike!"

Right. Xander had not missed being thrown into the nearest handy hard and bruising object. Good old Sunnydale. Finally felt like home.

And ow.

He could feel the rumble of the crane moving into place and he bundled the leather of Spike's duster under his arm. "Spike. Come on. Time to get out of here."

"-fuckin' touch her! Gonna get out of this fuckin' chair, and make you-"

"Spike!"

Spike stuttered to a stop and Xander held his lantern where it might give Spike at least an impression of his face. "I don't like it here, Harris,"
Spike said with sudden wide-eyed lucidity.

Xander took a deep breath, calming breath, and let it out. "We're getting out of here." He could hear the grind of the basket being lowered for them. "Now." He held his hand to Spike again, palm up to steady him across the rubble, kicking the bigger pieces out of the way before them and trying not to think about how badly Spike's hand shook against his.

The grinding ratchet of the machine above them was like steel bones in an iron cup and Spike wanted to huddle down into a tight ball I'm a bad man... but he didn't... wouldn't. He was pretty sure that if he did he wouldn't be able to get back up again and he wanted...

Wanted to try and be - something approaching normal. For Xander, who was doing what he didn't have to do, by any stretch of the imagination. He wondered if Xander had even known about him. Not that Angel had spent much time broadcasting his return to the world - or even the fact of his
soul...

Bastard, he muttered. Xander was standing there, the radio-thing in one hand, his other arm upraised, the torch acting like a beacon for whoever was running the equipment up there. The basket that was inching down toward them was an open-work construction of aluminum pipes and flooring; a dull silver-grey, spattered with pale mud.

God his feet hurt - like he was standing on broken glass - and whatever fucked up poison in him that had given him a fever was making him shiver hard enough to chatter his teeth. He wanted desperately to wrap his coat around him but he knew he couldn't bear the weight of it.

"Fucking cold," he said, and flinched at the whimper he could hear in his own voice. Please get me out of here, Harris...

Xander circled the light, holding the walkie close to his mouth so that Dave could hear him over the noise of the basket. "Another three feet, guys."
Xander's eye watered from the light shining down with the basket, and he couldn't shake the urge to wrap an arm around Spike; not when his voice shook like that, not when Xander could see Spike's hands tremoring like moths in his peripheral vision. "It's warmer on the surface." Though he had a feeling even that wouldn't help with the heat radiating from Spike's skin.

*Shades of high school basements. What the fuck is it about this place that brings us all back?* He wasn't, wasn't going to think about what it meant that even death, apparently, wasn't enough to get away from Crazy On The Hellmouth.

Yet.

And he wasn't prepared to think at all about how many people might have been lying to him when he'd been told Spike was dust.

The basket swayed under them and Spike clutched desperately at the rail, trying not to let himself be
thrown into the sides any more then he had to be. The light coming from above them was bright, and even with Xander's warning still fresh in his mind he cringed a little, squinting his eyes nearly shut. His jaw ached from clenching it, from trying to keep his teeth from rattling right out of his head and the vibrations that traveled up through his feet and hands were like shocks from a cattle-prod.

"Harris, god... Can't -"

"What? What'd you say, Spike?" Soap-sweat-sweet, comforting scent that moved closer and Spike bowed his head and let it rest on Xander's shoulder, shuddering in what was nearly tears again as the onslaught of sensations became too much.

"Hurts, it hurts, please... Just - gimme a drop of something, yeah? Just - something - Jesus!" As they cleared the edge of the hole the lights spangled to full brightness and even through closed lids it was like hot metal shards, stabbing his eyes. He felt his knees going and gasped, scrabbling at Xander's shirt and the heavy, webbed harness that circled his
body still.

"Fuck, Harris - help me..."

No thinking. Sometimes, no thinking was easier. Xander flicked the latch on the basket gate and scooped Spike into his arms, awkward with the coat. Speaking as close to his ear as he dared, feeling the shivery touch of Spike's curls against his cheek.

"Hide your eyes against my shoulder if you can. I'm gonna get us to my trailer first. There's whiskey there." Not that there was supposed to be. But between the human and demon bodies, it wasn't the first time Xander'd had to carry a shaking friend into his trailer for a stiff drink.

Xander's collarbone pressed against Spike's forehead and he rolled his head a little, easing the crackling pain as he simultaneously sought to burrow deeper, away from the light and the machine-stench of oil and heated metal and petroleum. And people, other people, all sweat and
aftershave and decaying dinner, blood like poisoned iron in their veins and Spike thought he might be sick.

He clutched at Xander's shirt, the humiliation of being carried like a child outweighed by the curdling ache of the weight of his boots as they pulled on his ankles; the sharp press of the harness-buckles, the bones in Xander's arms.

*Christ, I'm a fuckin' mess*... Dimly he heard Xander talking - someone answering - and he pulled in breath after breath, taking comfort in the good scent of leather and skin, of honey-sweet that just seemed to be *Xander*.

"Jesus, Alex. What happened to him?"

"Dave, if you call Carl and ask him to come in early, I'll explain it all tomorrow, because I am so not up for it tonight."

"Want me to call ahead to Alicia too?"
"Nah. He doesn't need a paramedic." Xander glanced down at Spike's hair, dusty against his shoulder as he headed to the parked golf cart, trying not to jostle Spike any more than he had to. "He's just tired and dehydrated."

"But-"

"And crazy."

Dave took a half step to the side.

"Jesus, Dave. Harmless crazy. Just crazy."

"Okay, so he's crazy. Why's he here?"

Xander murmured wordlessly as he eased Spike into the light cart's passenger side, then climbed over legs and into the driver's seat, making sure Spike was settled safely against him before answering Dave, meeting his eyes with a half shrug. "Same reason we all are. It's home."

The seat was cold - too hard - and Spike shuddered
all over, his coat a cold weight in his lap. He heard Xander still talking - saying something about home.

Home...home...god, wanna go home... He reached clumsily for Xander's arm - plucked at his sleeve. "Wanna go home, pet."

Xander looked down at Spike's fingers moving against his arm with all the strength of a kitten and something flipped over painfully in his chest. He took his hand off the wheel, twining his fingers briefly with Spike's, palm to palm before bringing Spike's hand to rest against his sternum, the better to cushion him for the ride across the site. "Yeah. We're going home."

But home meant home to a house with lots of frozen dinners and no blood. And while he was pretty sure Spike wouldn't say no to the whiskey, he doubted it would do him much good. He winced along with Spike when he popped the brake and the cart shuddered. He looked out across pocked and uneven ground - there was no way this wasn't going to hurt him.
Grimacing in silent apology, Xander eased the cart into gear, trying to drive over the smoothest ground in the least amount of time. "We're gonna stop by the trailer, Spike. Get some whiskey in you while I let the guys know Russ and Carl are covering the rest of my shift." He didn't know if Spike was listening or if Spike was even making sense of the words, but without his crew listening to them anymore, it felt good to talk. Productive. Sane. "I have a new truck. You'll like it. All leather interior. Great sound system."

Xander winced at an explosion on the ridge, feeling its echoes shuddering through Spike until he whimpered against Xander's chest, which hurt even more than the percussion. "Okay, maybe the sound system isn't what you want to hear about yet, but once you're better, you're going to love it."

Because there was no way. No way Spike wasn't going to get better.

Vampires got dusted. Or decapitated. Or blown up,
or melted from the inside out saving the world.

They didn't get *sick*.

Or lie trembling against his chest, smelling of incense, dust, and something bitter.

Spike felt every one of his joints on the short ride; they all seemed to be creaking and popping and *grinding* in an escalating chorus of pain. Xander's heart beat *tum-tum-tum* against the palm of his hand and Spike just tried to relax - just lean onto the solid, warm mass of the man and let him cushion Spike from the jouncing and swaying.

When the explosives went off it was a tangible thing - dense air compacting against him and pressing his flesh onto his bones and he whimpered again, softly. His coat was cool and too heavy and his eyes were still tearing from the lights. The tears seemed to sting faintly on his cheeks.

*Know you want me to be Not Crazy Guy but...dunno if I can, Harris...* The temptation to slip back into the
cluttered, fever-twisted darkness of dreams was very tempting and he fought it - fought it with deep breaths of Xander-scent and the faintest twitch of his fingers, stroking the bit of warm skin that was under them.

It was like the night Xander had come home from the hospital. Still logy from pain-killers, stinking of old blood and fear and anger. Finally at home, finally quiet and Xander had settled carefully on his couch and leaned his head back, bandage stark white over his missing eye. It had taken a couple of minutes for Spike to realize that Xander was crying and then he hadn't known what to do.

Finally he'd just crouched down behind the couch, one arm up on the back, his hand hesitantly and gently combing through Xander's hair - stroking over his hot forehead. Again and again, while he hummed a skein of tuneless notes under his breath and after a while - ten or fifteen minutes - Xander had shifted and sighed and rolled his head a little - let his cheek bump Spike's wrist and just rest there, and he'd fallen asleep.
Trust. Gotta trust him...**do trust him...brothers in arms an' all that rot...** "You'll have to get my bad side this time," he said, but he wasn't sure if Xander heard him or not. And then the little cart ticked to a stop.

Xander felt the muscles in his neck give an odd twitch and shudder at Spike's words, and he turned his head slowly. "It's my turn to take care of you, huh?" He set the brake on the cart, not moving yet, giving Spike a moment's stillness before Xander would have to gather him up again.

He took the time to look at Spike, *really* look, from the snarled grown-out curls to the too-hot hand that still rested against his chest. "Been a long time coming," he said, brushing his fingers against Spike's wrist then plucking Spike's hand off his chest to rest on his leg. "Stay there. I'll come around and carry you again."

This time, in the shade of the trailer, Xander circled the cart, draping Spike's duster over his forearm for
extra cushion and pulling Spike's arm around his neck carefully. "Okay?"

"Just do it, Harris." Spike's eyes were closed and up close, Xander could see clearly the pale blue veining his lids. "Won't be a better time."

"Right. Hold on."

And then back to playing Prince Charming, only he'd dropped Willow so many times that she'd switched to making Prince Charming's manservant Jesse carry her instead.

Xander wasn't going to drop Spike. He was going to carry Spike into the trailer, set him down on the couch, get his boots off, and give him as much whiskey as he could keep down.

Which all went fine up until the setting Spike down on the couch part when Xander's back popped and twinged. He closed his eye, leaning on the arm of the couch with a wince, muttering. "Jesus, Prince Charming is getting old."
"I'm no sodding Sleeping Beauty, Harris," Spike grumped, but the hairy, worn couch was rasping at him through his shirt and he twitched miserably, too exhausted to move away, to weak to sit up and stay up.

He watched as Xander shot him a quick, smiling look and then straightened slowly, his hand to his back.

"Something me and Willow and Jesse used to do," Xander said, rubbing his back slowly and watching Spike. Spike watched him back - twisted his fingers into the edges of the shirt in an effort to keep from clawing at the scars on his torso. He'd done that once a few days ago and almost passed out from the pain. The way he felt now - he'd pass out for sure. Another wave of clammy cold swept over him and the shakes kicked back in, winding his muscles up tight on his bones and he gasped softly, lost in the white-hot flashes of pain that stabbed from his stomach out, again and again.

He closed his eyes, unwilling to meet Xander's
steady gaze any longer - not when he could feel the tears drying on his cheeks, and not when he could feel the hazy darkness slipping back. Voices were rushing and whispering at the limit of his hearing and any moment he was going to really be Crazy Guy. He didn't want to do that in front of Xander. Again.

Just hold on, hold on, hold on... Jesus, hurts... Like those damn tasers... "Fuckers - wouldn't dare come after me without your damn...special equipment an'...an' drugs... Stop it!" He shuddered all over and went limp, but he could feel the spasm gathering again, deep in his muscles and he gritted his teeth tight shut and waited, hoping to ride it out - feeling more tears well and slide down his skin, utterly out of his control.

Xander looked up from the cabinet at the shout, whiskey in hand and chewed his lip - watched the tension build in the too-thin body again. There was something wrong, very wrong, about watching Spike cry. More invasive than walking in on him naked and god knew he'd done that enough.
Xander knelt in front of Spike, watching the play of phantoms over haggard features. Not being able to touch him made it harder, so his fingers only brushed feather light at the silvery tracks on Spike's face, remembering Spike doing the same for him, his fingers blissfully cool to fevered skin even under the pall of painkillers. Remembered *knowing* it was Spike's fingers touching him, not Caleb's. "Spike."

Spike shuddered under the touch, turning his head away and Xander withdrew his fingers hastily, curling them in against his palm. "Don't want you seein'..."

"Hey," Xander said quietly, "Brothers in arms, remember? Seen it all. Here." He uncapped the whiskey, wrapping Spike's hand around the bottle and almost smiling when sense memory kicked in and Spike lifted the bottle immediately to his lips, tipping his head back to let it flow down his throat.

With Spike drinking, Xander let his hands fall briefly to rest on his thighs, taking in the visible damage for
the first time in the harsh light of the trailer. He reached out, letting his hand hover over the three black slashes across Spike's torso, murmuring the kind of calming nonsense words he'd used so much at African sickbeds when Spike's muscles quivered beneath the not-touch.

Then he dropped his hand and his head, opening the buckles on Spike's boots. He didn't know where the urge to say it came from, but as he eased Spike's left foot out, he found himself saying, "You did good, Spike. Holding it together back there."

"Tried. Didn't want... Didn't want to make you..." Everything sounded like a plea for reassurance, and Spike just couldn't let himself go there. Not...yet. He was fine. He hissed softly as Xander eased his boots off and took another sip of the whiskey. Not his preferred brand, but better than nothing. It was already taking the edge off, in his underweight condition, and the slow heat curling out from his belly felt good.

It also made his fever-shakes worse, and he gripped
the bottle tightly so it wouldn't slip free of his grasp and wished for a blanket. Shuddered to think of how a blanket would feel, but god - it seemed like he'd been cold forever.

His boots thudded to the floor and he stretched his toes, grateful to have the weight and chaffing gone.

"What...next, Harris? What're you... What're you gonna do with me?" His voice was just a little bit slurred, he realized, and his limbs felt weighted with stone. His head did. His brain was buzzing and blanking and sending him the strangest images, blotting out the dark-haired man who was on one knee by his feet, elbow on upraised knee and a look of mixed sorrow and worry on his face.

*Please take me home, please do it, Xander... Can't stand to be alone now, can't stand it...* He didn't dare say that aloud, but he met Xander's steady gaze and hoped the man could read it in his eyes.

"Do with you? Thought you'd know already, since we've done it twice before." The affectionate
teasing came so easily after the long year of emotional distance it surprised Xander, and he found himself smiling again, watching that haunted, fearful expression flit over Spike's face.

"Tell me." Spike's voice was harsh around the edges - from drink, dehydration, dust, or tears Xander didn't know - figured it for all three.

"I'm taking you home with me, Spike. And running you a warm bath, because don't think I never noticed my hot water bill increasing when you lived with me, pal. I'm on to all your secret indulgences, including the honey almond bath oil - which, yes, I still buy." Xander bundled Spike's boots and coat together, inhaling that leather-smoke-Spike scent he remembered so well. "Then I thought a nice dinner of O positive with a chaser of A neg and a big soft bed to sleep in."

Xander held up his hand to forestall any possible objection. "Word of advice. Do not turn down the offer of the bed because my bed is about as close as either of us are gonna get to heaven any time soon."
This expiry-free offer void where prohibited, must be 18 or older, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." He rested his forearms on his knees, fingers laced loosely together. "Does it meet with Monsieur's approval?"

_Come on, Spike. Stay with me. Don't go back there again._

Spike yearned toward the heat that was coming off Xander - even that far away, he could _feel_ it, like a tiny little sun.

_I remember, I remember..._ he thought, feeling his eyes blink and blink again; lids almost too heavy to keep open, his head sagging back on the couch, his grip on the whiskey bottle going weak. His hands and his feet and even the burning across his chest and belly going very far away. Xander's face swam in the dull-yellow light of the lamp he'd turned on; shadowy and bronzed on one side, starkly white on the other from the fluorescent bulbs in the kitchen area.
He'd been about this out of it when Xander had hauled him out of his closet - dragged him into the bathroom and gotten him into the tub, tight-lipped and silent. Rubbing briskly - almost hurtfully - at the dirt and blood and tears that stained him, detritus of the basement - of his nearly killing Buffy. Whipped dog cowering at the First's feet, and he hadn't wanted anyone to see him - to have to see the useless creature he'd become.

But the bath had felt good, and the too-large robe Xander had loaned him and been soft and deeply scented with the human's good, salt-sweet scent, and he'd silently accepted the mug of blood and the plate of cheese and crackers and sat there, shaking himself to pieces and letting Xander's soft, slow voice babble on about work and money and Andrew and the First. Somehow sticking him back together as effortlessly as he'd mended the broken window at the house on Revello.

Spike blinked and lifted his head a fraction - looked at Xander who was just waiting, unaccustomed patience and silence from the boy who never shut
"Guess you know me pretty well, Harris," he slurred. He lifted the whiskey bottle marginally, sloshing the liquid against the glass. "Hope you got better than this shite at your house."

He did. One lone unopened bottle of Jack Daniels sitting in the spare bedroom gathering dust.

When he'd bought it, he'd told himself it was for guests, without letting himself dwell on which guest had been the only one to drink JD, or why it seemed right to put the bottle in the second bedroom.

Instead of admitting it out loud though, he said, "You must be feeling better. Which means it's time for Alex to go be responsible so we can get out of here before you reach the bottom of that."

No response greater than a familiar, if weak curl of Spike's lip and Xander pulled himself to his feet, reluctant to leave Spike on his own for the time it'd take. A small Hellmouthy part of him was afraid
he'd come back to find nothing but a dusty bottle of cheap whiskey. "Spike-

'Spike' what? Spike, don't leave? Where would he go, and when did I turn into such a woman?

Xander cleared his throat, reaching out to brush his hand over a curl, reassuring himself of Spike's solidity. "Don't get lost in there before I get back."

"Do my best," Spike murmured, sinking a little lower on the couch, grimacing at the scrub of it's upholstery across his back. He watched Xander just stand there for a moment, looking at him with his lower lip caught between his teeth. Then Xander turned and went out, easing the door shut and Spike gave up fighting and let his eyes close, letting out a weary sigh.

Changed, he has. Grown up. Guess we all did. Had to, didn't we? No more seein' the world with my best girl. No more hair-braiding and...and whateverthefuck for Harris. Spike took a half-hearted pull at the whiskey and made a face. It
really was shite. *Harris looks good, though. Like he used to, kinda...*

The heavy, unhappy man Spike had shared a last drink with over a year ago in Sunnydale was gone, and this leaner, *harder* man looked more like the boy who had plunged into a dark alley, risking his life for some stranger - for the Slayer.

*You don't know what you missed out on, Buffy,* Spike thought, and he slipped into a half-doze.

It seemed like moments later there was the creaking groan of the aluminum steps outside and the door swung open. Spike started upright, the whiskey slopping over his hand and knee and he hissed as the alcohol stung his skin.

"Makin' me waste it, Harris -" he said and then froze in confusion as a hulking man - as big as Angel - shouldered inside. The pinkish-tan skin of a descendant of Vikings, corn-gold hair and blue eyes wide in astonishment. Camo pants, white t-shirt.
The man shut the door behind him and Spike struggled to his feet, gasping. The man was too big and too blond, and too - too everything. He looked like some kind of - soldier, he looked like that soldier and Spike stumbled away a step, the bottle slipping out of his grasp and thudding to the carpet.

"Fuckin' back off," he growled, effect ruined by his chattering teeth. The man blinked, frowning at him. "Haven't got that fuckin' choke-chain round my neck anymore, do I? So get the fuck outta here." Spike inched back another step, wincing, letting his eyes flicker over the cramped space, looking for a weapon.

"Hey, look. Alex said -" The man advanced, hand held out, and Spike jerked away, staggering back two more steps and catching his heel on something - tumbling down in an agonizing heap of limbs.

Get away from him, get away, get up, damn-it! God, god - Spike tried to scrabble backwards on heels and hands, but his arms gave out and he sprawled there, looking up in horror at the looming figure
that advanced, eyes dark with anger, hands reaching.

"Don't!" Spike moaned, and curled himself up - got his hands over his head and clenched himself tight, feeling the high wheeze of breath escape him as the scars pulled and compressed and flared into newer, sharp-edged agony. "Don't, don't, don't -" He tried to stop himself but he couldn't and he didn't notice the pound of footsteps outside, or the crash of the door.

"Russ! Russ, Jesus, man! I asked you to stay out of the trailer." Xander struggled to edge around Russ to Spike, crouching low to the floor as every whimpered 'don't' felt like it tightened an invisible band around his chest.

"Christ, Alex. I'm not going to hurt him. Just wanted to -" Russ trailed off, holding up the blanket he kept behind his desk for those rare cold mornings, and Xander spared him a glance, deflating at the look of unhappy apology on Russâ€™ face.
"Yeah - I know, man." Xander reached for Spike and froze when he drew in a deep, shuddering breath, curling in on himself so tightly Xander was afraid the fragile skin would split, stretched as tight as it was over his bones. He didn't - couldn't take his eyes off Spike. "Wait outside. Please?"

He felt Russ hesitate then the blanket dropped to the floor next to him before Russ retreated to the door.

"Call me from home, Alex. I want to be sure you got him there all right."

"Thanks, Russ." Xander waited until the door closed before approaching Spike again, speaking low and soft the way he did when the tone mattered more than the words. "He's gone, Spike. I won't let anything happen to you. Come on, we're almost out of here." He heard the words vaguely and couldn't have repeated what he said again after.

He set the whiskey upright and out of the way, kneeling next to Spike. He was close enough to
smell the bitter underlying scent of him, stronger now, and held out his hand as he would to a skittish animal.

Loud voices raised in anger or panic, and Spike curled up even tighter, hating himself for it but utterly unable to stop. He couldn't take...whatever they were going to do. Not on top of everything else, not on top of the pain that was already shuddering through him.

*Hurts, hurts, hurts, fucking god...hurts... Sick. I'm sick...been sick...* Wait - Something was different. He could smell alcohol, sharp and medicinal. He could smell earth *buried in here, buried again!* and the musty stale odor of indifferent cleaning. But also...sweat. Sweat and a kind of lemon-spice scent, soap scent. And sweet like baked apples. Spike abruptly lifted his head, hope blooming in his chest as he tried desperately to focus on the figure kneeling beside him.

*Please, don't be - don't - "Who is it. Who is it? H-harris?"*
"Yeah. Harris. Xander, Spike. It's Xander. Won't let anybody hurt you -"

"Thank Christ," Spike said - sobbed and grabbed Xander's hand - jerked weakly until he could pull hand and arm to him, against his chest, hot as a burning brand and smelling right, smelling of...

"I know you, I know you...know you... Sick is all..." Spike murmured, over and over, shaky sigh of relief and Xander's hand in his hair, light as a feather.

Xander watched Spike rock, helplessly resting his hand against snarled half-blond curls. "It's okay. You're gonna get better." Xander turned his hand in Spike's grip to pull back, holding still when Spike whimpered, and pressed a fingertip against his jaw. "We're leaving here now. I need to carry you out to the truck."

"'M not a sodding child, Harris," Spike mumbled into Xander's fingers, breath hot like a sick human.
"No. You're a very sick vampire who's freaking me out because vampires aren't supposed to get sick." Xander gently disengaged his arm from Spike's grip, sliding it under his knees, the other around his back, and gathered Spike to his chest again, carrying him back down the steps and out of the trailer. "You just had to be the attention seeking vamp again, didn't you?"

"F-fuck off." The epithet would have been much more effective if Spike's teeth hadn't been chattering and if he didn't burrow against Xander's chest like a child, fingers gripping the edge of his flannel with blue-white knuckles.

"How weird is it that I worry less about you when you're telling me to fuck off?" Xander thought he felt Spike's shakes change a little, maybe something like laughter.

"Harris. Stop."

"Not of the plan, Spike."
Spike lay his hand against Xander's clavicle and pressed, and Xander followed the line of Spike's gaze to Russ who was watching them from the wall of the office trailer. "Please."

"You sure?"

"'M sick, not helpless."

Xander decided not to point out that Spike didn't have much of a case against helpless while being carried around. "Okay. Hey, Russ?"

"Yeah? Look, guy, if I'd known what would happen - "

Spike cut him off with a sharply upraised hand, masking the wince with a dose of Big Bad. "'S me who should be apologizing, mate. I'm sorry for -" Spike cut himself off abruptly, and nodded. "Just sorry."

Russ waved the apology away and jammed his hand back in his pocket. "Let Alex take you home and
make with the mother hen instincts. But if he offers you his chicken soup, run away."

"Ha ha, Russ. I only tried to make it once."

"Once was enough to declare it a biohazard, man. Get out of here. Carl's coming in a couple of hours, and Daniel from C crew'll be here to fill in till then. And tomorrow night." Russ folded his arms and fixed Xander with a glare. "Non-negotiable."

"Thanks, Russ."

Russ shrugged. "You let Dave take time off for his mom. We're returning the favor."

His moment of old-school-Spike had cost him, and the vampire let his head sag down to rest wearily on Xander's shoulder, too tired to even flinch anymore. The warmth made him shiver and Xander made a wordless, soothing murmur, fingers stroking over Spike's ribs.

"Sorry, mate. Didn't mean to..." Spike said, and
Xander just shushed him. A minute later they were at the truck - a looming, glittering expanse of dark grey and chrome, impossibly tall to someone used to the low-slung lines of the DeSoto and Angel's Viper.

There was a crunching of feet on gravel and the blond man - *Russ, he's Russ* - jogged up.

"Forgot your stuff, man," Russ said, subdued, and he swung around Xander to open the truck door, Spike's duster and boots going into the back seat. Warm air, strong leather-and-Xander scent and then Xander was carefully lifting him up and *Russ* was, large, callused hands drawing a moan from Spike he couldn't suppress. Xander stood up on the running board and carefully, gently, drew the seat-belt over him, locking it in place.

"Can't be too careful, huh Spike?" he said, and Spike managed a bit of the Big Bad - lifted eyebrow and curl of lip. But that was all in the face of the agonizing pressure of the seat-belt. Then Xander was climbing down and Russ was handing
something over and shutting the door. Xander walked around and climbed up, keys jangling. He settled a heavy flannel shirt and a worn, dark-brown leather satchel between them on the seat and a moment later the truck roared to life, smooth purr of a powerful engine. The air-conditioning had been left on and it kicked in, semi-cool air blowing strongly from the vents and Xander hastily shut it off.

"Okay - ready?" he asked, and Spike rolled his head on the soft leather of the seat, looking over at the human who looked back, unblinking.

"You gonna kill us with that bloody patch an' all?" Spike croaked.

"I hardly ever hit anything," Xander huffed, and Spike managed a rusty laugh.

Xander felt a knot of tension in his shoulders ease.

Because while rusty, rough, and weak, it had still been a laugh.
Square Two

Spike managed a kind of half-doze for the drive to Xander's house. The truck purred along, solid and comforting around him and he closed his eyes and breathed in the scents of Xander and of leather and let it calm him. His shivers were strong enough to cramp the muscles in his belly and thighs and he tried to distract himself - to think of anything but the burning, aching pain that simply would not leave him be. That threatened to drag him back into that maelstrom of memory and emotion that had brought the past back to him with a vengeance.

He was conscious, in a dazed sort of way, of Xander's hand resting feather-light on his - of Xander's voice rising and falling, telling him nonsensical thing. Anecdotes from his job, what they were doing - the things they'd found. Nothing
Xander had recognized, so far.

"Just you, Spike. You're the only thing from...before," Xander said quietly, and Spike couldn't help the snort of weak laughter.

"Not how I planned it, Harris. Was just gonna...see. Then..." He didn't finish that - it was obvious what had happened. As they pulled into a short driveway and Xander hit the button on a remote clipped to his visor, Spike managed to turn his head - look over at the man who had once more lapsed into silence. Lines of weariness visible in the low light coming from the opening garage door. Lines of pain, and doubt. The remaining eye liquid with some emotion that Spike could not, just then, decipher.

"You didn't know I was alive, did you, mate," he said softly, not a question and Xander took a deep breath - and then sighed, letting it out. He let the truck roll forward into the garage and pushed the button again, shutting them in. Then he put the truck in park and turned it off. His hand went up, to touch lightly at the little leather pouch Spike knew
was beneath his shirt.

"No. Nobody - told me. I didn't know, Spike," he said finally, and Spike just nodded, closing his eyes again - surrendering to the exhaustion and the whirling black that was held at bay by sheer force of will.

"S'all right, mate. Neither did I."

"You knew before I did," Xander said, feeling sticks and bones shift under his fingertips; a faint memory of twigs snapping in the night and the scent of old, old earth. "It's not like I was anywhere with telephones."

He pushed those thoughts aside, where they belonged. *Because that way lies madness.*

Xander gave Spike's hand a pat, then pulled away. He could feel Spike's eyes on him as he unbuckled his seatbelt and slid from the truck, circling around to the passenger side and opening the cab door. It felt like he should say something - make some kind
of quip or offer some kind of reassurance to Spike that Xander didn't mind being out of the Scooby loop. But there wasn't one to give, and if he'd learned one thing in Africa, it was silence.

He still felt as if he should give something as he slipped Spike's arm around his shoulders and eased him out of the cab, so he went with simple honesty. "But I'm glad you are. Alive."

*I'm not sure I am, right now,* Spike thought, but he didn't say that out loud. He flinched when his bare feet hit the cold cement floor and Xander's arm tightened around his ribs on reflex and he couldn't stifle *that* flinch either.

"Sorry! Fuck -" Xander made a move as if to let him go and Spike gripped his shoulder as hard as he could.

"Just get me in, yeah? Just - I'm okay."

"Okay," Xander said, subdued, and they made their way in increments up a couple of steps and into the
main house, Xander's unhesitating "Come in, Spike," a pleasant little jolt.

Spike's first impression was colorless, featureless white and for one awful moment he was slapped, reeling, straight back to the Initiative and the cell and the labs. But then his gaze, flicking madly over the room settled on a bright smear of color and he felt himself relax. A brilliantly yellow coffee cup was in the dish-drainer along with one striped in green and blue. There was a bowl in terra-cotta with bright red and green chili peppers painted around the rim, and a plate with an abstract geometric design: yellow and red and blue on green.

*Xander's house, this is Xander's house, not... Fuck's sake, get a grip!*

They inched across the cold tiles and onto stiffish beige carpet and for a moment Xander wavered.

"Let's just - go straight into the bath, yeah? Don't want to have to sit down and get back up," Spike muttered, coherent enough finally to start hating
his helplessness. Xander made a sort of agreeing kind of noise and steered him across a blank expanse of beige and white and white - dining area with sliding glass doors and no table, living room with a squashy, comfortable looking couch in a worn cocoa color. But the walls were bare - the floors were except for the dull carpet and Spike couldn't believe that the man who'd paired lime green with puce and sky-blue would live in such a total visual negative.

"Need some pillows or somethin', mate," he said before he thought, and felt a slow grin creasing his face as Xander froze for one second under his arm and then shuddered in the grip of poorly suppressed laughter.

"I'll get right on that, Martha," Xander said, and steered him gently toward the bathroom.

Spike snorted, muttering to himself, and Xander felt the worry lift a little more at Spike acting more like... Spike.
Xander spared a glance for the rumpled sanctuary of his bed and made a note to change the sheets while Spike was in the bath too, adding it to his mental "Care and Feeding of Vampires For Dummies" list.

He eased Spike down on top of the toilet lid and leaned over to turn on the tap of the big oval tub, hesitating over whether he should add anything else to the water before abandoning that idea in favor of pure hot water to quell the shivers that only seemed to be getting worse. "Hot?"

Spike twitched, as if startled out of something by the word, then nodded. "Hot."

"One boiled vamp coming up." Xander turned the heat up until the water ran hot enough to steam the air, still expecting Spike to make a sarcastic comment about the oversized tub that took up roughly the space of his entire bathroom in the old apartment. "No snark for the girly bath?"

"Mate, you can leave me in there and come back
next week if the water stays hot." Spike struggled to sit upright, shaking hands plucking at the cuffs of his shirt without the coordination to do more than get himself tangled, shirt half way down his arms.

And it shouldn't have come so naturally to Xander to scoot forward and ease the shirt off Spike's arms, or open his belt buckle and buttons when Spike's fingers shook too badly to keep a grip.

It made him...remember. Africa.

That feeling of helplessness with the dying, when all you could do is what they can't for themselves, and try to make them comfortable, too many times.

Except that Spike wasn't dying. Because he was already dead. And when had that become a good thing?

"Harris." Spike's hand brushed the left side of Xander's face, startling him and making them both flinch at the contact. "Y'see something you like?"
Xander blinked slowly and felt a light flush spread up his neck as he realized he'd opened Spike's jeans and then... stopped. "Sorry. Here. Lean on me and stand up." The sooner Spike's jeans were off, the sooner Xander could help him into the steaming tub. He'd already caught Spike looking at the rising water with longing, even through the winces when the work-roughened skin of Xander's palms brushed over his thighs.

Spike wobbled when Xander pulled his jeans off over his feet, gripping Xander's shoulder painfully to remain upright, and drawing air through his teeth when Xander put a hand to his hip to steady him.

"God." Utter disgust colored the word, and Xander found himself looking up at Spike, really looking this time.

Even with the dimmer switch turned down low Spike looked like hell, his skin an unhealthy gray over protruding bones and those three blackened slashes that swam like spots before Xander's eye when he looked away and stood up, holding out
steadying hands to Spike to help him across the tiles and into the tub.

When Spike's right leg sank into the water he drew breath with a sharp hiss and Xander froze. "Too hot?"

"God, no. It's bloody perfect." A violent tremor ran through Spike's body, and he sank into the water with a groan that ended in bubbles as he slipped beneath the surface, an expression between pain and bliss on his face as his eyes fluttered closed.

Xander leaned forward and snapped off the water before it could overflow, watching Spike become utterly still beneath the surface. "Spike? Um. If you can hear me, I've gotta get my things out of the truck. I'll come back." Xander really hoped that was a nod, and not another spasm or Spike wanting to feel the water currents around his hair, which was beginning to unfurl and spread like seaweed.

Who'd have thought? Harris with a setup like this. Spike ignored the 'laying on a bed of dull nails'
feeling all along the back of his body in favor of the absolutely delicious feeling of heat soaking into his skin and bones. His hearing was dulled by the water - his arms nearly floated and the warmth was everywhere. This was as close to bliss as he'd been in...a long time. Since he'd kicked Angel's ass, actually. But this was better. The shivers were easing off, his muscles were un-kinking, and he could feel his itchy, unkempt hair gradually giving way and untangling as the water floated the strands to and fro.

He hadn't been kidding when he's said leave him there for a week. Just let him rest, just let him soak in this heat for a while and he was sure - Pretty sure... he'd start feeling just...fine. He tentatively let his hands drift around to his belly - touched the scars. Little lightning bolts of pain - like pressing a handful of needles into his skin - juddered out from the tips of his fingers, flashing through the scars and getting worse when his body tightened instinctively.

Fuck. Maybe take a little longer... But it didn't matter. He was warm and he was...he was safe. Not
the word he generally associated with Harris, but for some reason it just felt right.

*He's changed. Plays things a bit closer to the vest, now. And on the site - he was the one in charge. Got himself a spine, he does, and his own life here...* Dimly through the water - more vibration than anything - Spike was aware of Xander walking through the house - shutting a door. *Didn't know I was alive which means Andrew kept his silly mouth shut. Imagine that. Or...nobody told him. Maybe they pushed him out of the loop. Sent him off to bloody Africa, and what the fuck was he doing there?*

Spike felt himself frowning and shook his head slowly, enjoying the drifting sensation and the feel of his hair waving gently around his head. The past year - everything that had happened - seemed to be drifting, too; settling out of his mind like silt to the bottom of a glass. He knew it wouldn't last - his own tendencies to push and stir and pick at things wouldn't leave that mess undisturbed for long. But for now - just for the moment - he was at peace.
Via Xander Harris and his bloody great bath and his...caring. The Hellmouth's got a lot to answer for.

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Xander paused only long enough in his bedroom to ditch his flannel shirt and wifebeater, pulling on the softest old pullover he owned, something that wouldn't hurt Spike's skin if he had to carry him again. The week's trail of clothes and Big Wet Towels were still in his Thursday morning Meant-To-Do-Laundry heap against the living-room wall. Marinating in stink and evolving new life forms and possibly intelligent colonies.

And since, at this point, Xander's choices were to wash them or burn them - and since burning them might require explanations to the local EPA or ASPCA, he held his breath and gathered the ripe pile into his arms. Hauling it to the washing machine, he crammed it all into one load and slammed the lid with relief. Spike must've been more out of it than
he thought not to smell them. Funny how laundry never stank until a guy had company.

After a quick sniff check, Xander deemed his pullover still acceptably spring fresh and made his way back to the garage and into the back seat of the pickup, hauling the cooler out from under its blanket.

He knew he should probably feel guiltier about stealing blood from the on-site paramedics, but the way he figured it, the blood was for people injured on site. Technically, Spike was a person injured on site.

And it'd just go to waste anyway.

He hoped.

And he really hoped that Alicia wouldn't notice the shortage until it was too late for her to pin it on him.

Xander loaded the extra blood into the fridge and
the last packet into a mug and the microwave on autopilot, then leaned back on the counter and closed his eye, finally allowing himself the space to think.

Five hours ago, his life was still on course for normal; bits and pieces of his old life dropping neatly, competently, back into place. Sure, he was back on the Hellmouth and digging up corpses, but paid a regular salary for it with all the benefits and a crew of guys he'd known since -

God, since he and Anya had still been fumbling toward whatever it was they'd had.

But that was part of him. He'd grown up on the Hellmouth for sixteen years before he'd even heard of a Slayer. It was home.

*Normal*. The way cold London skies and colder Watchers weren't.

But now, his life included a mysteriously ill vampire soaking in his bath tub, a mug of stolen blood in the
microwave, and the scent of church dust and incense lingering on the air.

And it still felt normal. Somehow more normal than it had before, as if one more of the missing pieces of his life had been found.

Xander wasn't sure yet how he felt about that.

The microwave dinged, and Xander popped the door, taking the mug and feeling the side against his wrist, grinning in spite of himself. And another perfect 98.6 degrees for the Xand-man! I have not lost the touch.

He kept a close eye on the blood as he headed back through the house to the bathroom, and for the first time spared a moment to wonder what the hell the interior designers had been thinking when they'd set up this development with pale beige carpeting.

Homes built to last, my ass. But he couldn't complain. The home loan had been part of the
contract, part of the deal, part of the lure back to Sunnydale and for monthly payments that low and a promise of steady work he knew he could do, Xander figured he would have moved just about anywhere in the free world.

Even if he did owe his soul to the company store.

*Heh.*

He was still humming *'16 Tons'* under his breath when he bumped the bathroom door open and waved the mug of blood over the tub. Could vampires smell plasma through water? "Hey, not-so-evil dead. Tub-side service has arrived."

The vibrations were getting closer and Spike slowly collected himself, getting his mind out of the unproductive speculation of 'how' and 'why' and into 'here' and 'now'. It was where he was most comfortable, anyway. He knew when Xander came into the bathroom again and then he heard the muffled words, the questioning inflection and opened his eyes.
Xander was standing over the tub with a bright red mug in his hand. Spike, Leviathan-like, rose, and the scent of warm human blood flooded him as he took a breath to speak.

"Drinkin' blood from a cup in a bathtub. History does repeat itself." He couldn't help saying it, and was rewarded by a flashing grin from Xander.

"No chains, though. And no bendy straw although -" Xander's gaze went a little distracted. "I probably have some bendy straws. I mean, what household doesn't?"

"Angel never had bendy straws. The git," Spike added, trying to settle into something approaching comfortable so he could drink.

"Oh, wait -" Xander carefully put the mug on the rim of the tub and opened a cabinet on the opposite wall. A stack of towels was revealed - a mix-and-match affair of solid blues and striped greens and patterned reds and yellows and oranges
that looked as if he'd simply chosen one from each stack. The lower shelf was empty and for the first time Spike noticed a crumpled purple and black towel in the corner behind the door. Xander rooted out a red towel with yellow stripes, looked at it for a moment and then shrugged.

"Guess some things haven't changed," Spike muttered, and there was that grin again, flashing out, happy smile that crinkled up the skin around Xander's eye and made him look about ten years younger.

"Don't mock the Big Fluffy Towel, Spike," Xander said, the capitals obvious. "You will come to love and cherish them just as I do."

*Will I? Maybe I will,* Spike thought, aware of what that statement implied. That he'd be there for a while. He wondered if *Xander* was aware. He didn't seem to be. He was tucking the folded towel behind Spike and holding it as Spike eased back, making sure it was in the right position to cushion his spine from the hard side of the tub.
"And dinner is served." Xander handed the cup over with a flourish and Spike took it carefully in both hands, his grip weak and his wrists trembling a little. He lifted it and just drank, knowing he had changed but not really caring.

*He'll get used to it or he won't,* Spike thought. He was done with being uncomfortable with the demon. Let Angel pretend and hide and take his meals behind closed doors. To hell with that.

"To hell with what?"

Spike blinked, jolted out of his thoughts. The cup was empty and he's apparently spoken out loud. *Have to watch that.* "To hell with pigs and cows, mate." Spike lifted the cup in salute. "Ta very much." The cup slipped and Xander dove for it, grabbing the handle before it hit the water and Spike's hands were just dropping away, limp. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Want some more?" Spike
closed his eyes - opened them again, studying the familiar, changed, unchanging face that was so, so close to his own. "Yeah, pet. I do."

Xander lifted his eye to find Spike still inches away, watching him, and suddenly grinned as the pose overlapped and matched another memory. "This is the point in the whole Cinderella and Prince Charming game when I'd run away because girl kisses had cooties."

"Cooties?" Spike's eyebrows arched, the odd stillness between them broken, and Xander sat up straight with a stretch.

"Yeah. I was about five years old." Xander paused, blinked, and then rolled his eye. "Jesus, I miss being able to wink."

Spike's ragged chuckle followed Xander out of the bathroom and the band around his chest eased some - made him believe that the tired Spike wouldn't last. Get more blood in him. More rest.
And find out what the hell was wrong with him.

Dropping the cup bothered him.

Like Spike was tired. And that's something he'd never seen in Spike before. He'd seen Spike beaten. Hell, he'd done the beating once, and that wasn't something he was proud of.

Wasn't something he'd ever been proud of to tell the truth.

But he'd never seen Spike this worn down and wrung out.

This weak.

He didn't like it. Finding Spike in the church had been too much like stumbling on an old animal who'd crawled off to die.

Xander filled the mug absently and drummed his fingers on the counter while it heated. Spike had sounded as if others knew, as if he was surprised
that Xander didn't know he was alive. Xander snorted. Big surprise there. What he didn't know could fill Sunnydale Pit these days.

So what was Spike doing all alone?

The microwave dinged and on a whim, Xander riffled through the cabinets and emerged triumphant with a bendy straw but no answers. And there was only one way he was going to get those.

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Spike leaned back on the towel, sliding back down a little into the water. *Human blood. That's a change...* Spike felt himself smiling - felt the good, fresh blood curling through him and making him feel... *Not much different. Not different enough. What the fuck is wrong with me?* He hated to admit it, even in the privacy of his own mind, but... He was scared. He'd *been* scared, which was why he'd gone to ground. There was nothing for him to fight, so he'd gotten *away*, because showing that you were
weak was the worst thing you could do, in his world. And he'd done it before - done it for Buffy - and look how that had turned out. He wasn't willing to do it again.

Except... Except Xander knew. Xander saw his weakness - saw how absolutely wrecked he was. And he was...okay with that. Xander...made him feel safe.

Prince Charming, indeed. I am not the girl! I really have lost it. Sunnyhell strikes again. But Spike was still smiling when he heard Xander come back into the bathroom.

Finding Spike still sitting up and smiling, Xander crouched on the floor, elbows on the rim of the tub as he handed over Spike's mug of blood, bendy straw poking jauntily out of it. "Wanna share the joke?"

"I'm not the sodding girl, Harris." Spike snapped before he thought about it, and then he cringed just a little, because the old Xander would be... Well,
would never have admitted such a thing. He took the cup carefully and got the straw into his mouth, smirking again.

"Kinda obvious from where I'm sitting." Xander flashed Spike a grin, though he didn't look down. It was like locker room rules. It's there. You just don't stare at it. At least, not where anyone can tell.

"Damn straight," Spike mumbled, around the bright purple straw. The blood was half gone before he looked up again and the odd little smile on Xander's face made him smile back. "Now what? Look like the cat that got the canary, you do."

"Do vampires have locker room rules?"

"Do we have what?" Spike sucked up the last of his blood, pleased at the obscene slurping noise the straw made. "Don't much care for locker rooms - they're always so...moldy. Steam rooms, now..." Spike grinned, remembering, and then had to frown when the cup slipped again, and Xander rescued it again.
Xander let out his breath slowly, feeling the adrenaline burst of the quick save shiver through him and dissipate. God, he didn't want to ask any of this, but if he kept looking at the mug instead of Spike's ravaged skin, it was easier. "Spike, what happened? To you?"

Well, had to happen... Spike sighed and shifted a little lower, a shiver going through him. He wished he had the strength to lean up and turn the hot tap on again but he was pretty sure he'd just tip over onto his face. "Where should I start? I'm thinking... You didn't know I was alive, so... You don't really know anything, yeah?"

And okay, that didn't hurt any less than Xander was expecting it to, hearing it out loud. He bought himself time leaning down to the end of the tub to flip the drain, letting the lukewarm water out around Spike's body, watching the gray water level sink lower against the edge. "I know Buffy's in Italy,"
he said finally, flipping the drain and letting the hot water back in before twisting to look along the length of the tub to Spike. "Because she sent me a few letters about shopping. Dating. Dancing." And could you sound any less enthusiastic about that, Harris?

He trailed his fingers in the water, watching them turn pink and Spike's skin not change colors at all. "Dawn goes back and forth between Paris and Italy where she sends me letters about shopping. Dating. Dancing. Once or twice, school. Willow's in Rio, pretending she's in Sao Paulo and sends me letters about -" God, he couldn't even say it. It was just tiring. "- pretty much the same thing. No, I don't really know anything, but I can tell you when the biggest Star Trek convention in London takes place and who won the masquerade."

Well fuck. Bastards. That thought was instinctive and it came directly from the spot of white-hot hurt that still lingered from his first few months at Wolfram and Hart. When he'd discovered that not only had Angel not told anyone that he had a soul,
but that he'd pretty much told them to forget it and move on.

"Guess they kinda forgot you were there for all the - world-savin' and best-friend-stakin' and...stuff, huh?" The hurt that Xander was trying desperately to conceal made Spike want to kick something. "Been there, pet. Sometimes...they throw the wheat out with the chaff." Xander's fingers stilled in the water and then moved again, making small ripples.

"'Bout...a month or so after -" he waved his hand vaguely in the air, "all this, I just - popped back into existence in the middle of Angel's office. Like - burning up in reverse. Hurt just as much the second time around..." Spike watched Xander's hand, his own making little sympathetic circles down by his hip.

"There was a catch, though. I was a ghost. Couldn't touch anything...couldn't eat or sleep..." That time - that dreadful time - returned in his memory full force and he felt silent, not trusting his voice.
Xander watched Spike trail off and caught his waving hand, folding it carefully between his. And where was the babble? The easy words? He was pretty sure Spike was expecting more from him than a dumb stare at their hands, but for the moment, that was all Xander could offer him.

And he was glad that Spike didn't pull away.

"What'd Angel do?" he asked finally, because he had to say *something* to release the pressure building up inside, even though he already didn't want to hear the answer. Because he could guess.

Spike couldn't help the sigh that rattled out of his chest, just then, and he curled his fingers around Xander's, holding tight. "Oh, he just...did what he always did. What I always let him do. Reduce me to my...lowest common denominator. It's always fight or fuck, with him, and he hasn't bent over for it for a couple hundred years, so it's fight." He felt the little jolt go through Xander at that and risked a glance up, but there wasn't condemnation in
Xander's gaze, just surprise.

"He just made it very clear that what I did - my soul - didn't measure up. Made sure they knew it, and made sure they didn't..." Spike shook his head, not wanting to finish that. "I got to kick his ass, though. Right after I got my body back. Was bloody brilliant."

Xander felt a savage sort of joy rip through his chest at that and let out a chuckle straight from Africa that wasn't at all nice, or entirely about being a human construction worker. "Good. Saved me the trouble of hunting him down and doing it for you."

"Why, Xander Harris," Spike drawled, thrilling to the dark little snicker. "You are the evil little human, aren't you?" Spike can't help but grin back, flashing a bit of fang because that was the one thing that he and Xander had agreed on, early and always. Angel was a git.

"He got turned into a puppet, you know," Spike said, knowing Xander would love that - hoping to
get that little flash of darkness out of him again - or that grin. Either would do.

Xander felt *that* laugh bubble up from somewhere primal, choking on the words before he was able to shape them into speech. "A *what*"

"Puppet," Spike enunciated, making a puppet motion with his hand.

The laughter crawled its way down into a fitful giggle that shook Xander's shoulders, and he peered up at Spike through his lashes. "God, tell me he was cute and cuddly."

"Oh, he was *adorable*. He was a wee puppet," Spike measured with his free hand, "with a caveman forehead and these fuzzy eyebrows... An' his girlfriend was down in the basement havin' her monthly howl at the moon and she ripped his stuffing out!" Spike *giggled*, he couldn't help it. "He bribed me with a car so I'd pretend he kicked my ass when I laughed at him."
"Like anybody'd believe you got your ass kicked by a puppet." Xander snickered, reluctantly letting go of Spike's hand so he could settle more comfortably on the floor before his knees gave out entirely. He laid his cheek on one arm, letting his fingertips dangle in the warm bath water, and watched Spike through a screen of hair. "So what about the other time you kicked his sorry undead ass - and Angel's who was having her what?"

Spike rolled his eyes and slid an inch lower, letting his hand bob up next to Xander's and touch - take hold. It felt good.

Xander glanced up at the touch, startled, and curled his fingers around Spike's.

"Nina. Silly bint he 'saved'. She got bit, turned into a werewolf and he did his Batvamp impression all over her. Next thing you know they're shaggin' each other seven ways from Sunday. Kept him occupied, at least." Spike flexed his hand in Xander's, watching the laughter dance in his eye. "She used to come to the building there so she could get locked
up. He got a little too close and - stuffing everywhere! Took the stubborn bastard half the night to stitch his innards back in."

"God forbid he ask for help, huh?" Xander opened his fingers, letting Spike's slip between them to a more comfortable hold for both of them, part of him wondering how long it'd been since he last had that kind of simple..*touch*. "Why did you stay with him?" There was no rancor in the question, no accusation. How could Xander accuse when he'd stayed with someone equally stubborn for so much longer than just a year?

Spike shrugged, worming their hands closer, glad, so *very* glad that Xander didn't seem to mind. It hurt, that pressure of knuckle and bone on his skin but he didn't care. He'd take it, and not let Xander see a single flinch. His shivers had eased a bit, at least, even if the scars still felt like acid thorns clawed deep into his body - even if he was still so *weak*.

"Didn't have any place *else* to go. I figured
something out, when I was burnin' up in the fuckin' Hellmouth. I didn't do it for Buffy and I didn't do it for - for apple pie and America and freckle-faced kids. I did it for me. I did it to prove...I was as good as anybody." Spike lifted his other hand and ran it over his face, slicking his hair back clumsily. It was longer than it ever had been, curling down onto his forehead and he wasn't used to it yet.

"And when I...did it... When I followed through... I knew I didn't love Buffy anymore. Didn't love - anybody, anymore. And you know me - love's bitch." He tried a small smile to lighten his words because Xander was biting his lip and his hand was tightening down in sympathy.

"I'm just not happy when I don't have somebody around to stalk. 'Sides, the office had all these cars, an' free blood... I could go out and fight, or fuck, or drink... Wasn't so bad."

Spike's hand shook so badly yet that Xander uncurled an arm, reached out to brush his hair out of his eyes for him, then folded his arm back under
his cheek. He wished he could do more; say something clever or even just agree, but it was all a jumble in his head of egos, champions, special people getting special treatment, and then...Spike. Saving the world and getting...that.

And it made him remember what it was like, putting yourself between the world and its end because that's the only thing to do, and what it was like to go down fighting and wake up to find yourself an uncomfortable inconvenience. "Did anyone ever thank you? For saving the world?"

Another shrug, and Spike wondered when he'd started channeling a twelve-year-old. "Don't need 'thanks', pet. Thanks is...the polite thing to do, you know? Just...want some respect, is all. Just...respect." Spike shivered violently all over suddenly, the water having gone tepid again. He looked down at the grayish film that floated on its surface and grimaced.

Xander felt the shudder all the way to the bones of Spike's hand twined with his, and he gave it a gentle
squeeze, letting go to lean forward and drain the water out of the tub. "Thanks is respect, Spike. It means someone respected what you did enough to do polite." He snatched the nearest towel and waited until the water drained down enough to keep the ends from getting soggy and wrapped it around Spike for what warmth it offered.

Another violent shudder from Spike broke the quiet between them and Xander held the towel around Spike until trembling hands came up to hold it closed on their own. He gave Spike a grin. "Me, I respect you enough to tell you that you are not getting into my nice clean bed without a shower. It's warm. It's steamy. It's soapy. It's the latest craze and all the cool kids are doing it."

"I've always been one of the cool kids," Spike agreed, getting his legs under him and trying to push himself to his feet. His knees weren't doing a very good job of it, though, and he leaned against the edge of the tub, panting a little. Seeing frustration and sympathy in Xander's gaze but not pity, and thank Christ for that.
Xander bit his lip. How do you offer a guy help with something as simple as a shower? Because yeah, Spike looked like he'd fold if Xander breathed on him too hard, but Xander remembered how demoralizing it was coming home from the hospital the year before only to have Willow of all people insist he not be allowed in his own bathroom alone for more than a couple of minutes at a time. "Do you want to take a quick shower? I'll find you something to wear, grab some blankets. And uh, shove junk into a closet so I won't look like a complete slob."

"You mean there's junk?" Spike asked, gathering his will and every bit of his waning strength to lever himself slowly, slowly upright. He could sense Xander wanting to lean forward and grab him - but he could see, quite clearly, that Xander wasn't going to even as Spike wobbled a bit getting his leg over the tub-rim. "Thought I was in a cave, before." Small gasp for breath. "Distinct echo out there." He was breathless at the last, but out of the tub, on the green and brown patterned bath-mat Good god, is
that a harlequin pattern? ready to shuffle into the glassed-in shower stall.

"That just means you need glasses." Xander itched to make a grab for Spike every time he wobbled - instead he left the water to drain and turned the shower on, pulling down the shower head and hooking it into the bottom of the toiletries rack, in easy reach either standing or from the floor. Without comment. While avoiding looking directly at Spike, Xander caught an incriminating glimpse of Wednesday's Big Soggy Towel and started to edge casually toward its lurking place behind the door. "Help yourself to any of my stuff you need, though I do not recommend the coconut body wash Dawn sent me unless you really want to smell like a Pina Colada." Xander ducked, snatched up the towel, and slipped out.

The shower hurt, and Spike was doubly grateful Xander wasn't there to see it. The hard, hot spray was like a rain of embers on him and his knees buckled when he inadvertently turned it on the scars. He leaned his forearm on the wall, breathing
in jerky pants, rubbing a lump of soap over his body that looked like a chunk of black and green marble and smelled richly of cloves and mint and spice - of Xander, and that was a comfort.

The shampoo was the same mix of spicy and minty but his arms trembled and he rinsed it out as quickly as he could and then he was done, utterly incapable of taking any more and dizzy from the heat besides.

He dialed the shower off and stepped carefully, carefully out, onto the bath-mat. No sodding dry towel. Cabinet's just there... He made it to the cabinet and finally worked a towel free, wrapping it around his hips and then just standing there, miserable. The shivers were hitting him hard and his whole body was singing with needle-darts of pain, feeling as if he'd been flayed.

Fuck pride. Xander, wanna come check on me before I fall down? Spike took a long breath, trying to calm down - get his balance back. He clutched the towel a little closer around his hips and began
the slow walk to the living room, listening to various, inexplicable noises - listening to Xander's heartbeat. When he reached the end of the hall - the living room finally in sight - he stopped.

Impossible, incongruous mounds of pillows were gathered into a nest before the couch, fluffy blankets stacked in a pile nearly as high next to it, and all of that was before a crackling, warm fire in the fireplace he hadn't noticed coming in.

His legs were trembling and he knew he couldn't cross that empty space unaided, so he just stood there, watching Xander. Watching the firelight flickering across his face as he stared into the flames. Waiting, and hoping he wouldn't fall flat before he was noticed. Finally realizing he was on Xander's blind side, Spike opened his mouth to say...something...but all that came out was a ragged croak.

Lost in the flames, and the memories of dancing shadow shows against mud-brick or crumbling concrete walls in Africa, Xander started and for one
half-wild second thought Spike's pale and trembling form was one of the ghosts in the stories he'd only understood by gestures.

Spike looked more than merely ghostly, he looked like some sort of tormented spirit; leaning there against the wall with his cheekbones and collarbones and ribs showing stark and harsh, pushing up against skin that was ashy and tight-looking. And the way Spike trembled in the firelight made him waver strangely before Xander's eye, and made the blackened scars seem to writhe. It was a relief to wrap a steadying arm around Spike's waist, because thin as it was - unnaturally feverish - it was solid, and he could feel Spike sag wearily against him as they made their way to the pile of pillows and blankets.

Not that he was going to tell any of that to Spike. Because the last thing Spike needed to hear was that he looked like complete shit and Xander didn't have anything else on tap to say, so he crouched by the blankets, sifting through until he came up with another of the gifts from Dawn he'd had no use for
in Africa.

"This one's silk or something. I couldn't find anything soft enough for you to wear that wasn't wet, but it's soft, and the rest of them are warm, if you don't mind being toga guy until the dryer finishes."

Spike stood there looking down at Xander, who was all gold and black and mahogany in the firelight - whose single eye was full of concern and gentle humor. Who was holding a scarlet silk sheet in his hands like a spill of blood and Spike blinked and blinked again - saw him writhing in agony under Caleb's hands, blood pouring from his mangled socket and down his chest.

"Oh, that's -" bad he started to say, and then things went a little pear-shaped and he sat down hard, unable to stop the yelp that came with the nauseating flare of pain - pain like a wash of acid flashing out through his legs and up his spine.

The moment Spike dropped Xander let go of the
sheet, but too late to catch him. His hands on Spike's ribs drew another pained yelp from him that made Xander jerk back. He had an apology on the tip of his tongue for setting off the chip - and bit it back with a reminder that there was no chip. The chip was gone and this was still happening.

Jesus fuck it hurt, it hurt so fucking much and Spike just sat there, teeth clenched, his breath whinnying through his nose and his head singing; tears slipping down his cheeks, on the verge of going out completely. He groped blindly and almost sobbed in relief when Xander's hand caught his and held on. He gripped as tight as he could because he needed that pain - needed that connection that told him he was there. He didn't want to slip back into the waking nightmare that he'd been lost in down in the church.

"Spike." Xander's fingers itched and ached to hold and smooth away the pain the way he knew they couldn't, and he hated being helpless. He'd had enough of that in Africa. Fuck, that was why he'd left Africa. "Spike, listen to me breathing. Breathe
with me," he said, because that was all he had.

'Breathe with me...' Xander's voice, tinny and faint in Spike's ears and he gulped air and did it. Frantic in and out that gradually slowed and steadied and finally tapered away all together. He gingerly raised his head and found Xander right there, an agony of concern and empathy on his face.

He...is so grown up, now. Guess it had to happen sometime...but he's... Just not that kid, anymore... Something else, now. Someone else.

"Thanks, mate," he managed to grate out, squeezing Xander's hand a little tighter in his.

Xander folded his hand over Spike's where it gripped his fingers. "What happened in there?" He reached out, brushing a curl from Spike's face - habit-forming if he wasn't careful.

Spike resisted the urge to push, just a little, into Xander's hand because his head was pounding now, and his scalp wasn't in any better shape than the
rest of his skin.

"It...hurt, was all. Good water pressure, yeah?" Half-strangled laugh and a rusty, jerking cough. He wished he could fall unconscious. "Think you could...could get me some blood, pet? Might help. And this..." Spike plucked at the fold of silk sheet that lay over Xander's knee. "Bloody brilliant idea, mate."

"It'll be a better idea once it's wrapped around you and doing you some good." Xander tightened his grip carefully, wishing he'd thought more about the water pressure before leaving Spike to his shower. Helped him up, winding the sheet around Spike's lower body in a loose toga, careful to avoid the black slashes.

And how... wrong... they seemed.

He eased Spike back into the pillows carefully, trying to create a soft nest for Spike in them and cushioning his head with a softer blanket, one he could wrap around him if he got cold. "Okay?"
"Yeah."

Before Spike could say more, Xander rocked back and stood. "I'll be right back with the blood."

Spike sagged back amidst the pillows, the silk slippery-smooth and cool around him, the pillows enfolding and cushioning him. *Who knew one man could have so many? Must like to nest, same as me...* Spike grinned to himself a little at that, but the grin faded as he recalled too many nights when the tension and weight of blankets and sheets were all he felt - all the contact he had on his skin - and his bed was more lonely with every passing day. He suspected that it was the same for Xander because all the bedding, all the pillows - they only had *his* scent. His warm salt-sweet scent, and the faint scent of his soap and of his hair. Nothing else.

*We're both of us alone. Both of us...lonely. Wonder where his demon-girl is? Wonder if I should ask...* The sound of the microwave alerted him and he looked around expectantly, knowing his expression
was eager - was wanting. *Love's bitch. Even this little bit of love...friendship-love... Got me all...tangled up. Think I'd learn, after so many fucking years...*

In the kitchen, Xander leaned heavily against the counter and dragged the sleeve of his pullover across his forehead. It was a little cooler in this room, but not by much. He'd pulled down the hot cocoa mix because that's what you *had* in front of a roaring fire before realizing that drinking hot cocoa when it was probably over a hundred degrees in his living room was just this side of *fucking insane*.

So when he returned to the living room, it was with a mug of blood - and an icy cold refreshing Coke-and-a-smile, already half drained. And when he saw Spike, nestled in the pillows and wrapped in silk, he laughed before he could stop himself, breaking into a grin.

"What's so funny?" Spike's words slurred a little, and he mustered a glare.
"You. I mean. You with the drying fluffy hair and the silk and," he gestured with the can of coke to the pillows surrounding him. "You look like a harem g-." He caught Spike's glare and corrected himself, "Boy."

"M'not the sodding girl, Harris. But even for you, one harem...boy is pretty pathetic." Spike struggled halfway up onto his elbow and poked at a pillow that was under his thigh. "Where in hell did you get all of these, anyway?" he asked, looking in bemusement at the nest of bright blankets, king-sized pillows in jewel-color pillowcases and the more solid, thick cushions that were keeping him off the floor. The faint but unmistakable odor of leather was coming from somewhere - probably the couch - and it was pleasantly familiar and homey.

"American ingenuity," Xander answered, settling himself carefully onto the edge of the nest so he wouldn't disturb Spike and handing over another mug of blood, this time with a festively green straw. Hand free, he pointed to the couch and easy chair,
now stripped of their cushions. "The couch cushions are why it smells like cow, and the rest came from the beds." He shrugged. "My office here pretty much gathers dust, so I spend a lot of time sitting up in bed doing my paperwork." He sipped at his coke, stretching out on the pillows and shoving the sleeves of his pullover as high as they'd go. "And I dunno. One harem vamp. A guy's gotta start somewhere if he wants to grow up to be an evil sultan."

"'Harem vamp'? You're barkin', mate." Spike guided the straw to his mouth and sipped. Drinking it this way - with Xander, of all people - didn't seem like such an insult. It was just...teasing. A good kind of teasing. The blood sent little tendrils of warmth through him and eased the pain in the scars a bit. *Still hurts, but that's a little better. Maybe all I need is some rest and some blood and...* A glance along his own body, at the lines of black that marred him, made him snarl silently. *Maybe I need a fuckin' miracle. This isn't going to get better with a little blood.*
He'd known that - had known it in the church, but admitting it here, in Xander's clean, warm house...was something else entirely.

"'Sides," Spike said, forcing his mind away from unpleasant thoughts. "I have more experience with the evil-doing. I should be the sultan. You can be the - boy." He grinned over at Xander, his eyes heavy-lidded with fatigue and caught the flush of blood that rushed to Xander's face.

Xander drained his coke, tossing the can at the waste basket and missing before he answered. "What's an evil sultan need a boy for? Maybe I'm the nefarious young and nomadic raider who's sneaked-" Xander frowned. "Snack? Snuck?"

"Sneaked, pet."

"Sneaked into your opulent chambers with plans to-" Xander realized that Spike was watching him with a very amused tilt to his eyebrow and laughed. "And this is starting to sound like a cheesy romance novel, so unless you want to be ravished in the next
line, we have *gotta* find a new subject." Xander found himself relaxing into the pillows and propped his cheek on his hand, reaching out the other to lie close to, but not quite touching, Spike's. Unsure if the touch would hurt him again, but more comfortable than he'd been around another person in what felt like years.

"Too tired to -" Spike's mouth gaped wide on a yawn and he blinked slowly, finding his hand losing its grip on yet another cup. He set it carefully down in front of him, not even interested in the last inch or so of blood left. He was tired. The blood, the exertion of the bath and the wonderful, stupefying heat that just rolled out of the fireplace was making him feel as heavy as lead, as thick as -

"*Thick as a brick,״* he murmured, absently petting a fold of the silk sheet. Letting his hand creep along until it touched Xander's. Hot human skin, roughness of calluses, edge of a bitten-off nail.

"*I'm a bad dream that I just had today..."* The voice - the music - sang in his head; the turntable in a flat
in Paris, Dru skipping like a mad fairy all around the room and Ian Anderson playing his flute like the Great God Pan.

Xander looked up from the touch on his hand, wondering how a vampire's skin stayed that soft. Always soft. Even a vampire like Spike. He had a feeling Spike was quoting... something. "Is that crazy vamp talk for bedtime?"

"Mmmmm?" Spike couldn't stay up on his elbow anymore - felt himself collapsing downward and winced even as he sighed in pleasure. So tired, and he could close his eyes and sleep, now. Safe now.

"S'Tull, you...philistine. Need lessons, you do."

The hand under his twitched and he pressed down, not letting it get away - not letting it go.

"Shh. Human here, Spike. Let me get out of this shirt before I roast, okay?" Xander pulled his hand free gently but then it returned before Spike could fully register the loss, fingers curling with his, warm
and rough. "See?"

"Safe now," on a breath, and then nothing at all.

Xander stretched out his leg, pushing the mug with blood out of the way so Spike couldn't accidentally knock it over. Did vampires thrash in their sleep?

On impulse, Xander reached across with his free hand to tuck an unruly strand of hair out of Spike's face one more time. "Yeah. Anybody wants to take out the big bad, they've gotta go through the one eyed carpenter first." He tucked his arm around his ribs, cooler now in just the white wifebeater. "And you know, one eyed carpenters can kick serious butt."

Xander trailed off, watching the patterns the firelight left on the silk and on Spike's skin. He should get up. Take a shower.

Maybe get the rest of Spike's stuff out of his truck before he forgot it was in there completely.
But it was kinda...nice right there.

With his shirt off, the heat soaked into his bones, made him feel lazy even if he wasn't tired yet, and reminded him of those rare nights when he had a warm fire and a full belly, maybe some friendly aid workers sleeping not so far away in the darkness. When he could curl up and feel more...complete.

Not that he was pondering feeling more complete with Spike holding his hand in any romantic way or anything. But yeah, maybe it felt kinda nice, familiar-nice, the way it felt when he remembered working the day shift under Carl, or whenever Russ threw an arm around his shoulders to tell another bad joke the way he did in Old Sunnydale.

Missing pieces, slotting into place.

Xander shifted his fingers in Spike's grip to get more comfortable, and smiled when Spike tightened his grasp. "Hey. Not going anywhere." The fingers relaxed minutely, and Xander laid his head back on his arm, watching the fire through his eyelashes.
Really should take that shower.

Any minute now.

Yep. Shower taking time for the Xand-man, for he is dusty and needs to shampoo.

And get the stuff out of the truck.

Maybe...call Carl, see how he's doing on shift.

...in another fifteen minutes.

Square Three

Xander woke abruptly to a blow across the chest, knocking the wind from him, and before he could draw breath, a second caught him hard across the cheekbone, wrenching his patch askew as he flailed half awake to grab, stop, still, hold, something.

Gradually, Xander became aware of frantic mumbling - until the sharp dig of a bony knee into the juncture of Xander's hip and thigh woke him
fully and immediately, and he grabbed an armful of Spike, holding on before the knee could land somewhere else.

"Spike!" Xander coughed, Spike's elbow catching him in the sternum, and fell back with a groan as Spike rolled off of him, skittering to a crouch against the sofa. Then, Xander heard it, the shrill ring of the telephone, still turned up full volume to-

Oh yeah, wake him up because he could sleep through just about anything.

Except a panicked vampire fighting his way over him to safety. "Oh, Jesus." Xander groped for the band of his patch, bringing it back down into place, and flopped bonelessly, allowing himself the span of several luxurious seconds in his best impression of roadkill. "Spike?" His voice came out in a sleep-roughened croak and he extended his arm to the figure he could just barely make out.

"Back the fuck off." Spike wasn't sure exactly what was going on, but he hurt, he fucking hurt, and he'd
been cut, his chest - stomach - something. He clutched at the object under his hands, puzzled when gave easily. *What is it what is it...* The noise - sharp and hurtful in his ears abruptly cut off and he blinked, seeing flame, seeing a dark form reaching out. Blinked again and the flames receded to memory and he saw a swath of bright red and a heap of pillows and suddenly everything *clicked*.

"That you, mighty sultan?" he asked, and his voice was cracked and wavering - too rough and too weak.

"Most of him." Xander groaned, resisting the urge to look down and check for damage before rolling over and crawling across the floor to Spike, flopping down next to him against the couch and resting his head on its arm. "Thought you wanted to be the evil sultan." He winced, shifting into a position that didn't make his leg feel quite so much as if it was about to pop off at the hip, and leaned his shoulder lightly against Spike's. "I'm thinking turning off the phone might be a *really* good idea at this point."
Spike pushed a shaking hand back through his hair and looked at Xander, who looked - sore. "Did I hurt you, Xander? Didn't - sorry, yeah? Sorry." He grimaced and eased into a more upright position, the scars screaming, hot and sharp and *twisting*, somehow.

*Fuck, I need a drink. A lot of drinks* There was a strong glow coming around the blinds, and Spike sensed it was sometime after mid-day.

"I'll be the evil sultan tomorrow. Still...tired." He sighed and leaned against Xander's shoulder, closing his eyes. "Thought you said you had some good whiskey here."

"Yeah. More blood, too." Xander resisted the impulse to turn his head, rest his cheek on the dandelion riot of Spike's hair, just for a moment. Instead, he took the edge of the silk, drawing it up and around Spike's waist, wrapping it carefully around him, between him and the roughness of Xander's jeans that he was still wearing. "Let's get you back into the pillows. And sorry, but you've
gotta be the sultan today. Can't have the sultan waiting on the harem boy."

Xander felt more than heard Spike's quiet snort of disgust, getting an arm around his back, and another under his knees and lifting. "Sorry about the phone. I sleep like the dead- Or, okay, the really dead dead. Because believe me, there is a difference."

"Yeah, okay, sultan for the day. Already got you trained -" He gasped sharply as the button on Xander's jeans caught his hip. "I don't - don't even have to walk."

"Fuck - sorry -" Xander said, and Spike lightly patted his cheek, clutching at the silk sheet.

"S'okay, pet. No worries." He braced himself nevertheless as Xander gently lowered him back to his nest and sighed in relief as he was once more cradled in the softness of all the pillows. Xander stayed hovering over him, looking upset, and he reached up and patted his cheek again.
"Did fine, pet. I'm fine. Thanks, yeah?"

Xander let his head drop against Spike's hand, the adrenaline surge draining out of him slowly. "What's really going on, Spike? What are these?" He didn't touch, but his hand hovered over the slashes, their heat. "This isn't just a blood-needy thing."

Spike flexed his fingers minutely against the pressure of Xander's cheek - soft and stubble-rough and warm. "I...hoped it might be. I guess it's not. A while ago we had this big dust-up with the fuckers that run - ran Wolfram and Hart. Took the bastards out, too. Bit of a fight." Spike let his hand drop, too tired to hold it up anymore and Xander settled back on his heels, watching him.

"Well, we all got hurt...Wesley got almost-dead...'memeber him? That other Watcher?" Silent nod from Xander and Spike nodded back, sparing a moment's thought for that intense, intelligent man who'd shared a beer or two with him, and who'd quietly and utterly died inside, when Fred had been
"He got tapped by the Powers - got him some visions, now. I got - cut by something. Clawed. Something kinda...like a spider or something. Chitinous..." He really didn't remember much of it, except for the faceted eyes and the ear-splitting chitter of pain when he'd hacked it in half.

"Thought I was all - healed up but these kept...bothering me. Itchy. Didn't want to think about it, I guess, and everybody was so...busy..." Spike shrugged, sighing. "They just got worse. Got dark. Don't really know what it is, pet." Spike closed his eyes, burrowing into the nest a little deeper, wondering if he could stay awake long enough to drink some blood. "Dunno what to do, really," he added softly. And he really didn't.

"We'll find out." Xander arranged another bed pillow beneath Spike's shoulder, wishing Spike didn't feel quite so much like a man-sized doll. A very fragile man-sized doll.
"Once a bloody Scooby always a bloody Scooby."

*Smiling shouldn't hurt so much,* "Yeah, well. No Watcher here, but we'll find out what it is. Get you better." Xander climbed to his feet, careful not to jostle the patient, and crouched by the fireplace, beginning to build up the fire again to warm the room. He could feel the sweat already prickling at his scalp, itching with the increased heat as he closed the latticed metal doors. "Keep you in the Opos until then."

"Ta, pet." Spike's fingers twitched, as if too tired to even lift his arm, so Xander shuffled back until Spike could clasp his hand on top of the pillows. "But maybe later, yeah?"

"Yeah." Xander gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to take a shower before I start to offend your delicate sensibilities. Call around for some more blood, maybe."

"Mmmmm..." Spike felt his awareness slip a little and then he forced his eyes open again, in time to
see Xander scrub wearily at his face and then wince as he lifted the patch's band off his forehead. He took the patch off altogether and rubbed at the skin above his other eyebrow for a moment. The red mark that had chafed itself there showed clearly.

"Don't care if you leave that off, pet. Doesn't bother me," he said quietly and Xander stiffened just a bit, not quite looking at him, the patch dangling from his fingers.

Xander's fingers slowed in their rubbing of the prickling, reddened skin. He rested his elbow on his knee, head and hand hanging down, then lifted his face with a rueful smile, the hollow pale from being covered all the time. "Seen worse, huh?"

"Done worse." Spike blinked, heavy eyed, Xander's face swimming a little in his vision. The deeply shadowed socket looked skull-like for a moment and he shivered, but then it passed and it was just Xander, tired smile and one eye and his scars that made him old before his time - younger than Spike forever. "Still pretty enough to be a harem boy."
Xander started, looking at Spike with incredulous good humor. "Have we already discussed getting you glasses? Because I think we should. Besides, you're the harem boy. I'm the dashing - I'm the dashing what again?"

"Harem boy," Spike repeated, a touch of a smirk on his face.

Xander snorted. "Right"

"Oh, fine, you can be Rudy bloody Valentino, I don't care." Spike made a huge effort and lifted his hand again, wincing as skin and muscle pulled all down his torso. He caught the damaged side of Xander's face in the palm of his hand and just cupped it for one long moment. "Still pretty."

Unconsciously, Xander leaned into the touch, winced when Spike's hand slipped gently away and flopped back onto the pillows and the vampire flinched, just a little.
"Okay, okay. I'm pretty, and you're the Crazy Harem Vampire living in my nest of pillows." As he spoke, he arranged Spike's arm more comfortably, making sure a fold of silk was tucked between it and the pillows. He frowned, thinking of the prescription bottle in his leather satchel. "Do human pain killers work on vampires?"

"Takes more, is all. Got more..." Spike yawned and reached again for contact, bumping his hand into Xander's knee. "More resistance, I guess. Why, you got something?"

"Yeah. For my eye, but I don't like to take them. Don't like the way they make me..." Xander groped for a word, waving his hand to indicate loopiness. He then let it drop to Spike's, the gesture of contact, even that small, already becoming familiar to him. "Guess I don't have to worry about you ODing on them, huh?"

Spike snorted. "Not hardly, pet."

"They're the good stuff. And it can't hurt
"Nope, can't hurt. Bring it on." Spike had to let his hand slip off Xander's knee but this time Xander guided it to the pillows instead of letting it flop, and that was nice. The fire was nice, so deliciously warm, and the promise of good drugs that might ease the pain for awhile was more than nice. Blood and something to just ease the way, and wasn't that what unlife was supposed to be all about? "A sip of the good stuff and...some of the good stuff." He chuckled softly to himself and snuggled a little deeper into the pillows.

"And then you sleep and the whiffy human showers." Xander smoothed the silk under Spike's arm again, and laughed suddenly, the smile crinkling the skin at the corner of his eye and socket.

"What's so funny?"

"I never imagined becoming a weekend dealer to the undead." The warmth of the fire felt good on
the lid of his empty socket, drying the clammy, sticky feeling it always got when he left his patch on too long. He gave Spike's hand a pat and levered himself to his feet, grimacing as the knots in his back unkinked. "One mug of blood and The Good Stuff coming up."

Spike looked - not good - but at least better, reclining in the pillows in the firelight's glow. It seemed somehow more...right...than his first plan to put Spike in bed, where he'd have had no place to burrow. Nothing to gather and hold the radiant warmth around him.

Spike drifted, half awake and half asleep, the pain dimming to an all-over ache like a bad, long fall - Like falling from the tower, god, don't, don't... Listening to Xander move around his house - go out to the garage and come back; fridge and microwave door and the small, domestic sounds he hadn't heard in...so very long. He wondered idly what color straw Xander would find this time.

Pink. With cheerful yellow candy cane stripes
swirling up the sides. And best of all, a full bottle of rattling white pills.

"I've got three of these, full. And three more to pick up next time I drive to L.A..." Spike's eyebrows lifted, the only part of him that didn't look to be heavily weighted into the mass of pillows and silk. "I told you I don't like taking them."

"Why pick them up at all then?"

Xander shrugged, uncapping the bottle and passing it to Spike to choose as many as he wanted from it. "Doctor's orders, but I'm fine with aspirin. It's just headaches, right?" Mind-numbing, brain-searing, but no worse than a head wound from being thrown against walls by the monster of the week.

And nothing compared to having a guy shove his thumb into your eye socket. Despite the heat, a violent shudder ran down Xander's spine, and he shut his eye tight against that memory.

Spike's amusement over the straw Where in bloody
**hell did he find something like this?** faded rapidly as Xander's scent - salty and dusty and a bit strong, but not *bad* - changed in an instant. Acquired the sour tang of fear and Spike stopped digging in the pill bottle and looked up at him sharply. Xander's eye was squinted tightly shut and he looked *diminished* somehow - looked...spooked. *Fuck. Remembering that bastard Caleb and...fuck...*

"Xan? Xander...it's all right." Spike rubbed at Xander's knee helplessly and the man shuddered. And finally, *finally* relaxed, just a bit.

Xander drew in a sharp breath, holding it until spots floated before his eyes and he could feel Spike's fingers where they rested against his leg, then let it out hard. Head hanging down, he waited for the world to settle again, and laid his hand on top of Spike's. "Yeah. Sorry. Just...sorry." His smile felt shaky when he tried it on, looking up at Spike.

At Spike who was the only reason he still had one good eye, and god *damn* he was not going to cry. He'd never thanked Spike. But if he tried now, there
was no way the words were getting out without embarrassing himself, so he blinked quickly and gave Spike's hand a soft squeeze. "Thanks," he got out; one word coming out fine when more would stick.

"Sure, pet," Spike replied, certain somehow that there was more to that 'thanks', but not wanting to poke at it any more than he wanted to remember the tower, and his long, long fall. Fall from grace, fall from...sanity. It all started there, didn't it? All started then. That fall that should have brought Doc down with me, the fall that killed Buffy... We all fell into darkness then...

"Sure...anything..." he repeated, just above a whisper, and for a moment the utter misery on Xander's face was too much - was so wrong. The shaky little smile hid nothing at all. And then the smile got a little more solid and Spike had to smile back.

"Couple of old queens, aren't we, blubbin' all over each other." Spike had to laugh at that, and he
hoped Xander would, too.

Xander was relieved when the laughter seemed to take the last of the tightness in his chest with it. "We're last year's harem girls. We've been replaced by newer and sportier models, and I guess this is where I'm supposed to say 'but we still have each other' but even my capacity for cheesy lines has its limits." The words came out in a rush that left Xander breathing easily again, *smiling* easily again. "We're pretty screwed up, huh?"

He helped Spike to hold the mug of blood, too heavy for the light grip that'd rested on his thigh, wrapping his fingers around both the mug and Spike's hand.

"We're not so bad off. Got drugs, anyway." Spike sipped the blood - tipped four of the pills into his palm and downed them, grimacing at the acrid taste and the unpleasant way they scraped down his throat. He sucked down another inch or two of blood and then it was all just too much and he leaned back and closed his eyes. "Can't keep my
eyes open, anymore. Just gonna rest a bit, yeah?"

Xander took the mug from Spike's hand, adjusting the silk sheet one last time. "Yeah. And me. Stinky man go shower now."

Spike's tired chuckle followed Xander to the kitchen, but as he came back through the living room, it was to find Spike deeply asleep in the nest of pillows.

Xander let out a breath of relief, stripping quickly in his bedroom, wondering if he'd remembered to put anything in the dryer the night before and if it'd smell too badly of mildew if he waited another hour or two to get around to it.

Because thinking about that kind of thing was so much easier than thinking about everything else in his life that'd taken a turn for the Hellmouthy in the last day.

Not that he'd expected to avoid Hellmouthy entirely, what with working on the fucking
Hellmouth.

He just hadn't expected Spike and the memories he brought with him.

And had a feeling that if- when, he corrected himself sternly - Spike recovered, it'd be the only good thing the Hellmouth ever gave him.

Xander pulled up short in the bathroom, just about to reach for the tub tap and made a face at the thin gray scum that covered every surface inside the tub. *Shower sounds good.*

~/~/~/~/~/

Spike woke with a start, lifting his head sharply and lifting an arm, as well. Fending off something that wasn't there and when was he going to wake up like a normal vamp again? It took him a moment to get his bearings *fireplace, pillows, clove-spice-Xander-smell, silk...* and then he heaved a sigh and pushed himself up. He'd only slept a couple of hours - the
intensity of reflected sunlight coming through the blinds wasn't that different now then before - and he leaned on his arm a moment, trying to figure out what had woken him.

_Pain's not bad at all...damn good drugs...still tired, but... That's all I've been, lately._ He lifted his head, scenting the air, and noticed another smell - faint but different.

It took him a moment to recognize it. Cordite. _What the fuck?_ He pushed himself to his knees and rocked there a moment, getting his nerve and his strength up. Then he pushed, _hard_, and he was standing, the silk sheet slipping off his hips and he snatched at it, dragging it up around him, flipping one corner over his shoulder so he wouldn't trip over it. A wave of giddy lightness swamped him, and for a moment he felt like he was flying.

_Oh, yeah...good drugs._ He could hear something, as well - rise and fall, measured cadence of voices and he made his way slowly over to the sliding glass door. The blinds were down - almost but not quite
closed - but it didn't seem that the sun was hitting the window just yet. He saw the little control by the door and stepped into shadow anyway before he touched the button that would activate them. The blinds slowly tilted open then scrolled up; showing him the back yard, the patio, Xander and...some man. Dark, dark-haired, goatee and mustache and casual, stained work-clothes. He was the one that stank of explosives. Unthinking - in fact, a little dazed - he reached out and pushed the door open.

"-so Matt came in early, and Russ called Julio from the Pasadena site-"

Xander looked up when Carl stopped talking to find Spike in the doorway, pale, rumpled, and still wearing only the sheet. Okay. Blush? Any minute now? Huh. No blush. Though there was a big grin. "Uh, Carl? This is Spike. The guy who got stuck in the old church."

"Somehow, I wasn't expecting you to look..." Carl trailed off, not quite sure where to look on Spike, but frowning at the scars and hollows on his body.
"So unhealthy. Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? Alex explained it's against your beliefs, but man..."

Xander held out a hand to Spike, the concrete cool and still free of sun though it was beginning to slant in to warm the western edge of the patio floor.

Spike found himself answering the grin on Xander's face with one of his own and he stepped out onto the patio, anticipating pain and finding that the pills he'd taken had blunted even the rasp of cheap concrete. He stepped carefully across, his hand going out to Xander's and the silk flowed off his shoulder, sssssing faintly as it burned over his chest and arm. He grabbed at it and managed to catch the trailing edge, but not before he heard the soft gasp of surprise - or maybe horror - from... Cedric? No...

"Oops," he said, and giggled, Xander's hand warm on his elbow and the breeze that was blowing in at them stiffish and cool and tinged with the unmistakable scent of the sea.
Xander reached behind him, fetching a second chair, careful to position it away from the sun, for Spike to sit in. "Spike, this is Carl. He works the day shift."

Carl still looked more than a little nonplussed by the slipping sheet. "Alex, when you said you knew him - "

"We were roommates before the collapse," Xander explained, letting Spike keep a grip on his arm as he eased onto the cool canvas of the patio chair, because while the drugs seemed to be doing enough to leave Spike stoned out of his mind, he doubted they could withstand Spike falling on his ass on the concrete.

"School of hard knocks," Spike said, having a little trouble getting his tongue to work exactly right. He squinted over at Xander, then at the other man, frankly surveying the short, stocky man whose bared arms bulged with muscle and whose waist was showing a bit of a spread. "Not much keeps Harris down, though," he mumbled, and plucked at
the sheet that lay over his legs. "Wanna get me somethin' to drink, mate? Could do with a bit of the..." Spike made a gesture that was meant to convey blood, mug, and bendy-straw but looked more like something Dru might do - or maybe jazz hands, he wasn't sure. "Hair'a the dog, yeah?"

Xander raised his eyebrows, giving Spike's arm a pat. "Some of the good stuff," he confirmed. "Carl, you want anything?"

"Yeah. Got anything lite?"

Xander groaned. "No. But I do have iced tea and a couple of kinds of soda. It's two in the afternoon. What are you doing drinking beer?"

"It's also over ninety five in the shade. Have a heart."

"Have a soda!" Xander answered with a laugh, leaving the door open behind him as he headed for the kitchen.
"So," Carl said, still chuckling a little, "I heard the story from Dave. How'd you end up down there?"

Spike realized he could see the ocean as well as smell it and he sat for a long moment, watching the distant glint and swell of the blue-grey-green horizon that was confettied with the white tops of rushing waves. Gulls called, their harsh cries muted by the distance and Spike took a long breath, filling his senses with the clean, *living* thing that was the sea.

"You okay?"

Spike blinked - looked over into dark brown eyes and a troubled frown and he shifted a little in the chair - hitched ineffectually at the sheet.

"Oh, yeah, m'fine mate. Fine."

"Seemed a little out of it. So - how did you get down there, in that church?" The man Xander *said...Charles? No...Ches....damn it! Something with a c...*
"I was just...lookin' around, you know..." Spike made to rub over the scars on his chest but stopped himself in time. "Got late, and I got tired and...it seemed like a good place to... What did Xander tell you?"

The man shrugged. "He didn't have time to tell me much. He said you were in LA. On medication, that he figured you must have run out, got confused." A frown. "How'd you get on medication if you don't believe in going to doctors?"

Xander ran the last few steps onto the patio, passing Spike a thermal coffee cup with a (yes) blue straw sticking out of the firmly closed lid, and handed Carl an orange soda. "Just hospitals. The psychologist's okay because he doesn't poke and probe." Xander tried to ignore Spike snickering quietly at that. "I called him and picked up Spike's medication this morning. He's a little loopy readjusting to it."

"Fuckin' seein' Aztec temples, mate," Spike
muttered, and giggled when Xander coughed to cover an bit of out-of-control laughter. Yeah, *supposed to be crazy...* *Could give him a bit of Dru, I suppose...* Spike contemplated that for a moment, sucking on the straw, and then shot a sly look up at Xander.

"Know what the stars are sayin', pet?" he asked, and saw Xander's eye go wide as he got it. "They're sayin' that June is a very good month for me." Xander's face lost its half-amused, half-horrified look and went deadly serious, and Cade - no, Cooper? - chuckled politely.

"Too bad for you, then. Your stars are almost two months too late."

Spike *heard* what the man said, but it took a moment for it to sink in. "How, two months too late?" he snapped, and the man looked uneasy - looked at Xander, who was reaching for Spike, mouth opening to say - something.

"It's August, man," *Carl* said, and Spike...just closed
his eyes.

"Carl, could you give us a minute?"

Carl looked from Xander to Spike, and stood up. "Yeah. Gotta let Mariel know I'm home. We'll drop by this evening. Her grandmother bought out a tamaleria in San Diego by the look of it, so it's share the wealth or buy a second freezer."

Xander forced a smile for Carl, holding out a hand to shake with him. "Thanks, Carl. This evening?"

"Yeah. Nice meeting you, Spike. You take care."

Spike gave a tense nod, the lines of his body tight and rigid as he stared out to sea. Xander slipped from his chair, resting his hands on Spike's knees, palms up, looking into his face. "You didn't know?"

"Bloody hell. Fucking August?? Xander - it can't be August. I was just -" Spike wanted to throw the cup in his hand - instead, he leaned a little sideways and let it thunk softly to the ground. "I just lay down,
Xander. I just wanted to *sleep* is all. Just -" Spike made a frustrated motion with his hands, feeling the tremble in them - feeling the jitter of tension and *Fear*. *That's what it is, mate, fuckin' fear...* twist his insides as tight as a wire.

"I just wanted to sleep. I didn't... I didn't sleep for...for *weeks*, Xander! Did I?" He hunched over, fists to his temples and the fear roaring through him like a wave, because he'd come so close to death, so fucking close and hadn't even *known*. And was still there, right *there*, because the pills were fuckin' brilliant but they weren't a cure and the blood wasn't *helping*, wasn't doing a damn thing, he was in some kind of limbo, some kind of stasis -. He didn't realize he was shuddering - almost *whimpering* - with the crushing realization. *Vampires don't get sick but I am, I am, and it's not getting better and I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do...*

"Spike...*Spike.*" Xander curled his fingers into tight fists, wanting to reach out to Spike, pull him into his arms until the whimpering stopped, until the
shudders eased, and at last reached up to wrap his hands carefully around Spike's wrists, conscious that it was the pills pushing him into this new hysteria.

He spoke low and fast, back to the murmur where it was all tone because it'd worked before, and it was all he had. "We're gonna find the cure if I have to go to London and rip apart the Council's library myself. And I'll call fucking Angel and stab him through with hot pokers until he agrees to help. I'll even let you watch."

Spike's head shot up at that, and Xander's answering smile was almost wicked. "What, you didn't think Oz would come back with stories to tell?"

"Xan - pet, you -" Spike couldn't help it, he laughed, and that broke the tension and broke the tight, twisting knot of panic that had seized up his insides and brought him right back to the edge of incoherency.
"He told me all about it, Spike," Xander said, still with that wicked grin and his hold on Spike's wrists eased, until he was simply holding them, one thumb rubbing up and back in a mindless, soothing caress.

"Soddin' dogboy rammed me with his van. Shot a crossbow at me!"

"The nerve!" Xander huffed, and Spike laughed again, leaning forward until his forehead could rest on Xander's shoulder. The spicy, mint-citrus scent was stronger now, and Xander's hair was damp along his neck - curling a little.

"You're barmy, mate. Thank you," he added, almost a whisper, and closed his eyes.

Xander tilted his head, feeling the fluff of Spike's hair tickling his cheek and brought a hand up to carefully cup the back of Spike's skull. "Hey, you think I want to live with Mr. Traumatized Crazy Guy?" His tone was too gentle to carry any sting, though, or snark. He just rested there, one hand around Spike's wrist, the other petting his hair.
"I meant it, Spike. Whatever it takes. Whoever it takes."

**Square Four**

Spike swam into consciousness slowly, stretching himself carefully in The Nest. He'd started thinking of it like that sometime Saturday - long about the third visit from a 'just was in the neighborhood' co-worker. From what Xander said, they all *lived* in the neighborhood, so what you actually had were people - a *lot* of people - who were worried about Xander. *Alex.*

It made Spike smile a little, thinking about it. A far cry from the Sunnyhell of old and the Scooby gang, whose self-absorption knew no bounds. Spike yawned and contemplated getting up, but not for
long. It just felt so *good* here, snugged in and warm. *And weak. Don't forget the legs that barely get you across the room.*

He dismissed that inner voice, and pushed himself up on one elbow. He could hear Xander outside on the patio, talking. A moment later the door in the dining room was sliding open and Xander came in.

"No, I *left* a message, what I'd really like is an *answer*...no...look, can you just...hello? Hello? Damn it!"

Xander stomped around the end of the dividing wall, the cordless phone in his hand, looking pissed off. His hair was dripping onto his shoulders and he had a towel around his waist and Spike could smell chlorine. Xander'd been swimming between calls.

"Morning, pet. Or - is it afternoon?"

Xander snorted, dropping the phone onto the couch end table and unwrapping his towel, using it to scrub at his hair. "Still morning, but you wouldn't
know it from how many people have hung up on me already. You'd be amazed how touchy magic shop owners get when a stranger calls asking about a supplier for human blood."

He gave his shoulders a quick rubdown then tossed the towel at one of the bar stools at the counter as he wandered into the kitchen, calling back to Spike. "O neg or O pos? Sunnyside up or...no, that doesn't work." Xander opened the refrigerator, surveying the contents before yanking out the milk and cereal for his own breakfast. *Still cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs after all these years. Thank you, Saturday Morning Television.*

"Either'll do."

"Eenie meenie minie..." Xander shook his head, just grabbing the bag on top and preparing Spike's blood alongside his cereal. "You know places to get blood in LA, right? Because we really are down to the last few, and I think stealing it from Alicia is only something my heart can stand once in this lifetime."
"Sure we can come up with something," Spike answered absently, blinking into the empty spot where Xander had been standing. *Guess he...went native in Africa. Never was that casual in the basement.* Xander didn't have the dark tan his day-shift counterparts did, but he *was* tan. Tan all over, because Xander apparently swam in the nude, and also, apparently didn't mind Spike knowing. *Spike* didn't have a problem with it himself, truth be told, but his experience with Harris in the past hadn't been one of casual, comfortable nudity.

*Startin' to rub off on him,* Spike thought with a small smirk. Abruptly he changed his mind and decided he wanted to get up. He gathered himself together and slowly pushed himself upright, tugging the folds of the silk sheet around him. The cheap pine of the barstools was rough and unpleasant and he'd need the sheet for padding. He went carefully into the kitchen, a little floaty from the pills, and folded the majority of the sheet onto the stool and eased himself up onto it, making sure the sheet was under his feet as well when he put them on the bottom rung.
"I hope so, because it's that or pig blood, and I really don't want to feed you pig blood. Pause to marvel at the amazing evolution of Alexander Harris." Xander peeked back over his shoulder to find Spike staring at him with a nonplussed expression on his face. "I ate a lot of unpleasant stuff in Africa, Spike," he said, and hoped Spike would get the rest. If pig blood was to Spike anything like some of the canned horrors Xander had fed himself on in Africa were to him, the stuff would never again grace his refrigerator. Unlike orange juice. Ah, sunny orange juice. How I missed you on the Dark Continent. Xander traded milk for a carton of orange juice and bumped the door closed with a hip, scribbling it onto his shopping list beneath Spike's B.

Xander was stretching up into a cabinet for a glass and Spike idly studied him.

Whittled down from his former Sunnydale heaviness by hard work and Africa - he'd gotten
dysentery too many times to count, he'd said - he had the long, sinewy muscles of someone who'd spent a lot of time walking, running, and lifting. A set of parallel scars showed on his right shoulder-blade where he'd gotten caught in some razor-wire in a refugee camp in Senegal.

Another scar, long, twisty and slightly raised, ran from the outside of his left thigh to the back of his knee, courtesy of a rampaging wildebeest.

And, when he turned around, grinning, purple-starred glass in one hand, Spike's blood in the other, Spike could see the ugly, puckered wound of a gun-shot right below his rib-cage. Gift of a soldier, somewhere in Mozambique.

*Been around, he has. And look at him - grin like Christmas morning.* Spike couldn't help but grin back.

Xander laughed, looking into the silverware drawer and plucking out a blue straw. "Matches your eyes," he said, dropping it into Spike's warmed blood and
pushing it across the counter. Leaving his cereal on the countertop, Xander circled around and bent to retrieve the towel that'd slithered off its intended stool, draping two layers of it carefully over the cheap pine because there were places where a wise man just didn't risk getting splinters. "So," he said, settling in. "LA. Blood. Contacts. Got any? Because I've called every place from here to Oxnard, and I've got jack."

"Got a couple people - well, not people people..." Spike sucked up some blood, thinking. "Might even be able to find us a contact up here, you know?" He cradled his warm mug in his hands. *Still hasn't noticed his bollocks to the wind. Because...* Spike took a sharp breath, realization dawning. *He trusts me. Trusts me enough to...do that. God.* Then something Xander had said finally registered and he turned an incredulous grin on Xander. "Matches my eyes, pet? Think you're takin' your duties as a harem boy too seriously."

Xander grinned around a mouthful of cereal, washing it down with orange juice and a grimace.
Okay. One of these days I will remember not to wash the milky chocolate down with the orange juice. I've gotta get a coffee maker. "It's your eyes or your toga, and I'm running out of red straws for that one." He felt a small knot of tension ease as Spike didn't seem to be bothered by Xander's after swim habits, and dug into his cereal anew. Jesus. I'm either going to have to put that load in the dryer today or buy a new wardrobe.

Spike grinned around his straw and slurped up some blood. "Can't be anything worse then pig's blood, mate. S'like...like..." Spike couldn't think of any human food that he'd ever eaten that compared to pigs blood when you were used to the hot vitality of human blood from the jugular of a squirming, terrified victim.

Good times... he thought, sighing, and then perked up.

"How about cuttin' us a slice of that cake then?"

"Which one? The chocolate cake with white frosting
from Mariel, or the...pink cake from Deb?" Which had turned out to be surprisingly good once a guy got past the pinkness. They still hadn't been able to agree on a flavor for it.

He pushed his bowl aside, leaning across the counter to snag a couple of plates and forks, grabbing a knife on the way. "Oh, and don't forget the sheet coffee cake Angela's grandmother made for us." It was getting hard not to laugh, because some time after mid-day on Saturday, the wives had started to come over more often than the husbands. He was starting to think it had something to do with Spike's stylin' toga.

"There's coffee cake?" Spike perked even more, because coffee cake when done by a deft hand - and somebody's grandmother had to be deft - was sheer heaven.

"Coffee cake it is," Xander said, peeling back a layer of cling film. Spike watched him, admiring the bunch and play of muscles in Xander's abdomen as he leaned over the counter again, going for a paper
towel. Thank god he's not some beer-gut breeder. At least I've got something nice to look at while I recuperate. Speaking of recuperating... Spike slurped up some more blood, wondering how to broach the subject. He'd come to a conclusion some time in the night about his 'cure', or lack thereof. He was pretty sure, unless a sodding miracle happened in the next few days that he'd have to do something drastic. He was at a plateau, but he could feel it eroding underneath him. He slept more, felt weaker, and was taking eight of the little white pills now.

He wasn't getting better, and he was pretty sure the only person who could help him was in L.A. He was pretty sure he needed to call Wes.

"Xan...need to talk to you for a minute..." he said slowly, and saw a brief flash of uncertainty in that bright, laughing brown eye.

Not even got the patch on, and I didn't even notice. And neither did he. Maybe this'll be okay.
Xander cut and retrieved the cake slowly, trying not to feel the punch-in-the-gut feeling those words still brought out in him, fiddling with the paper towels and forks before setting it at Spike's elbow.

"Pet?"

Xander flashed Spike an apologetic grimace, rubbing at the hollow feeling just below his ribs. "Historically speaking, those words are not the prelude to a happy conversation, Spike." He lifted another slice of the cake onto his own plate and stuffed a bite into his mouth. A chewing mouth gathered no feet.

"Not like I'm given' you back your pin, Harris. You git," Spike teased, and smirked when Xander blushed. "I was just - thinkin' that maybe... Maybe I'm gonna have to call Wes on this." He braced himself, although for what, precisely, he wasn't sure. Just...something. Know he's not too keen on the L.A. crew, but...I'm out of ideas.

"What about Angel?"
"No Angel. Just Wes."

Tension left Xander with a whoosh of breath. "Spike." He reached out, fingers stopping just short of brushing Spike's thigh, catching the silk instead. "If Wes can find a cure for you, I will personally drive to his door and camp out there until he agrees to do it."

"Probably won't have to do that." Spike felt the hairs along his thigh raise up, reacting to the heat of Xander's hand, hovering so close. "Me and Wes...we kind of... Well, we got along there at the end, you know? He was... He'd lost...someone and..." Spike wasn't sure what to say - wasn't sure Xander wanted to hear the whole sorry mess of Fred and Wes and Illyria. Wasn't sure he wanted to tell it.

"Sides, Wes knows when to keep his mouth shut. Angel's gotten an even bigger stick up his arse since the big 'blaze of glory' that wasn't. He'd probably just stake me to put me out of my misery."

"How 'bout staking Angel to put him out of our
misery?" Xander muttered, giving his cake a poke before glancing over at Spike, looking just a little guilty and nodding again. "Okay. We call Wes. But..." He trailed off, frowning.

"But what?"

"Why'd you wait all weekend to suggest him? I mean, if things are good between the two of you." The question came out, to Xander's relief, honestly confused without a whiff of whine.

"Oh, I just..." Spike hesitated, pulling his straw out of the cup and using it to dribble blood over the last couple bites of coffee cake. Didn't want to admit to being that sick. Didn't want to admit to being at my wit's end... He glanced over at Xander who looked expectant, and not pissed off, or upset. Do I lie? Or do I...spook him? Well, that's assuming he'll be spooked. His gaze wandered down for just a moment, to the bullet-scar and the top of a naked thigh, and he made up his mind.

"He's kind of my last resort, Xander," he said
quietly.

Xander could almost feel Spike's gaze, tracking from one scar to another, and when he spoke, hearing it was almost a relief. God, he was sick of pretending things were all right when they weren't. He nodded. "I kinda figured." When Spike looked up at him, he went on. "You...really don't look good."

"Thought I was pretty enough to be in your harem." Spike spoke with a small smile but he knew Xander was right. He knew...from the shocked looks on Xander's friends' faces when they first caught sight of him, and no amount of flourish with a red silk sheet or 150 years of experience charming the willing and unwilling into his bed could hide the fact that he looked... A right mess. They probably think I'm one of those sorry bastards with the AIDS... Fuckin' hell. Sorry, Xan...didn't mean to get you into this mess...

Spike's small smile where a smirk should be hurt to watch, so Xander shrugged, waving what he hoped was a regal enough looking hand. "I'm a carpenter,
Spike. My belief in fixer-uppers extends to my harem." He debated silently with himself for a moment whether or not to say the rest, then gave in, because pleasant or not, it was pretty true. "And if there's one thing I learned in my years as a Scooby, it's that it's pretty hard to kill a vampire with anything but decapitation or a stake."

*And even then, it's not gonna be easy.*

"First I'm the girl, now I'm some...some neglected Victorian that just needs some goateed carpenter's TLC?"

"As if even Bob Vila could resist you, you sexy fool."

Spike stared in astonishment at Xander for one long moment and then they both lost it, laughing hysterically until Spike was clutching at the countertop to keep himself from falling off his stool and Xander was wheezing like an asthmatic.

"Bloody...buggering...fuck!" Spike gasped, wincing a little at the sizzle of pain up his chest. "You're the
living end, mate."

"The fine quality of my humor has only improved with age," Xander intoned solemnly, gathering up empty plate, bowl, and glass and circling the counter to put them in the dish washer, rinsing out Spike's empty mug as well before leaning his elbows on the counter, and his chin on one hand. "So we call Wes, heal you up, and then come back here to resume this crazy fun filled thing called life."

And after that, if Spike was planning to leave, Xander really didn't want to know.

_Come back here. Come back here. Was that...an invitation? Huh. Why does he want to come back here? Got the whole world to wander... "If we're lucky. If Wes can help. If - if... Too many bloody 'if's! Vampire's don't _get_ sick! It's bloody impossible."

Spike sighed, looking at Xander who was looking back solemnly. "Or, I _thought_ it was impossible."

Xander tipped his head. "Angel never told you about being poisoned by Faith, did he?" The look of
surprise on Spike's face was all the confirmation Xander needed. "When Faith was still in Sunnydale working for the mayor, she shot Angel with a poisoned arrow, this stuff called Killer of the Dead. Made him weak. Made him feverish, with all this weird," Xander indicated the red crazing on Angel's chest over the same place on his own, "veining or something. Looked like a gunshot scar gone nuts. He was worse off than you are now."

Spike stared at Xander, feeling a bubble of hope rise in his chest. "Yeah? Knew I liked that chit... So - how'd they cure him? Hair-shirt and a rosary?"

"Blood of a slayer." Xander flicked a glance at Spike through his hair. "He drained Buffy."

Spike was literally speechless, a whole gamut of remarks rising up and then being discarded. He settled for a disgusted snort. "Bet that added ten years penance and a whole slew of Hail Mary's. Miserable bastard. Oh!" He grinned and Xander lifted both eyebrows in anticipation, the lid of his missing eye moving slightly. "Does that mean I get
to drain Kennedy?"

"God, please. Even if it's not the same poison, drain her with my blessings." Xander dropped his head into his arms, smiling. "It's probably not, though. He had this weird red stuff. Not black. And it moved fast. A day after he was hit, he was worse off than you were in the church. And he'd been feeding."

"Wouldn't mind a trip to Brazil," Spike said vaguely, remembering being there with Dru, and how Dru had wanted to climb up to the top of the big Jesus statue - look into his eyes, she said, and see if there was a soul in there. A twitchy, unpleasantly hot feeling was coming over him, and suddenly every nerve ending seemed to wake up and scream - to burn.

"Fuckin' pills're wearin' off -" he said, pushing himself clumsily off the stool. The next thing he knew he was on his arse on the floor, the silk puddled over one thigh and his whole body feeling very much like it did when he had started to burn under - Under here. Right under here, under this
fucking town that should have gone straight to hell.

Xander saw the twitch first, made it to Spike's side as he collapsed, swearing under his breath. "Come on. Back to The Nest. More pills. More booze. I call Wesley." Because talking was always so much easier than thinking. The silk tickled his legs as he carried Spike back to the living room, walking awkwardly with the effort to avoid too much contact on Spike's over-sensitive skin.

Bloody hell. This is getting - "Ridiculous, mate, it's..." Spike felt the first warning cramps in his back and legs as the fever - never far away - decided to kick back in. "Fuck. Aspirin too," he gritted, jaw clenched tight, and Xander nodded, his hair brushing Spike's face as he carefully lowered him back into The Nest.

"Didn't even g-get to enjoy bein' carried by my naked ha-harem boy," Spike joked, but his voice trembled and Xander lightly touched his cheek, eye dark and stormy.

"Shh." Because if there was one thing Xander
recognized, it was babble to distract someone from seeing how bad off you really were. Which was about the worst time to stop and talk. He left Spike in the pillows on top of his silk, stoked the fire, and snatched up the pills, pouring the last handful into Spike's palm, cupping his hand from beneath until he took them, if shakily.

Gotta get more of those in LA too. Fuck, I don't want to need them. Xander thought, walking to the bathroom for the aspirin, and maybe a cool wash cloth.

And he didn't need to think about the funny tingle Spike's words started in his belly, because naked? He had no secrets and now was not the time to be thinking about naked harem boy games with Spike.

Not that any time was -

Xander stilled, one hand raised to the bathroom cabinet. Okay. So not the time to be going there.

On the way back, he considered stopping to pull on
a pair of sweatpants, but resisted the urge. Because about the last thing he wanted to do just then was start hiding from Spike.

Spike resisted the urge to curl into a ball, knowing that it would hurt more if he did but hating the way his legs jerked and trembled as the fever ramped up faster than should be possible. He watched Xander stride back from the bathroom, the aspirin bottle in one hand and a washcloth in the other. He looked - off, somehow, but he knelt down and opened the aspirin up - dumped out six and reached for the half-empty bottle of Jack sitting near the edge of The Nest. Spike managed to get the aspirin into his mouth and then took a couple of big swallows of the whiskey.

Xander took the bottle back and seemed about to say something, and Spike reached out and touched his knee, trying for a smile.

"Thanks, Xander."

Xander let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd
been holding, and focused on capping the bottle instead. "Just wait until I have a cold or something, and you can pay me back with interest. Me in piles of soaked Kleenex? Not pretty." He settled himself cross-legged at the edge of The Nest, cradling the phone. "Do you remember Wesley's number? Or do I get started pissing off Directory Assistance asking for every Wyndam-Pryce in the Greater Los Angeles area?"

"Got his number in my c-coat," Spike said, and sighed gratefully as Xander tugged a blanket up higher around his shoulders before getting up and going to the coat tree by the door. He carried it back over and laid it gently over his knees and then looked at Spike. Spike looked back - blinked - then realized what Xander was doing.

"Inside right breast pocket, pet. You don't need to a-ask."

The coat lay heavy across Xander's knees; felt like the weight of everything it'd seen was stitched into the seams, and it felt alive as only well-worn leather
could. Xander realized that this weekend...was the first time he'd ever actually touched the coat. When it wasn't on Spike.

"W-what's so funny?"

"I think your pet coat likes me," Xander said, then laughed at himself for how inane that sounded coming out, slipping his hand into the right breast pocket and coming up with a small leather address book. He blinked. "Nice."

"Fred gave me that," Spike said without thinking, and then bit his lip. He really did not want to talk about Fred right now. He hoped Xander wouldn't ask. "My coat likes those that treat it with the respect it deserves. S'why it's been with me all this time."

A hard spasm of shivers wracked him and he closed his eyes. Only thing he could do, until the pills kicked in. Wait it out - suffer it, like some sort of martyr. Fuck that. Not even Catholic. Don't wanna be a saint, for fuck's sake. "Think I put Wes under
'E'. Ex-Watcher.

Xander grinned even as he flipped through the little book, leaving the coat across his legs, one hand unconsciously smoothing the leather. *I didn't expect it to be this soft.* "You file like Cordy."

"Find what I'm looking for, don't I?"

"Right there, under E. I guess you do." When he started to dial though, he hesitated. "Do you want to talk to him? I mean...the last time I saw him, we were both pretty...different."

*At least he was as much of an asshole to me as I was to him.*

One shaky finger stroked the skin between Xander's brows. "What's got you thinking, pet?"

"Just changes." Xander caught Spike's wrist as it tremored, eased it down to rest on the coat over his lap. "I'd probably like him better now."
"You probably would." Spike thought for a moment and then nodded, making up his mind. "You dial it for me, yeah? And I'll talk. Might go easier." Xander nodded, concentrating on the phone and dialing for a moment, and then handing the slim instrument over when it began to ring.

"Wyndam-Pryce, good morning," Wes said, and Spike took a huge breath and almost choked.

"Wes? Wes, mate it's -"

"Good - god, Ss- No! Uh - Seven is incorrect. Angel, let me just take this call and I'll be right with you."

There was a murmured reply, and then the sounds of a door - another door - opening and closing, and then Wes's voice again, slightly breathless.

"Spike? Is that - is that really you?"

"Yeah, s'me. Listen Wes, I need -"

"Where are you? Where in hell have you been?"
You've managed to annoy Angel without even being here. Quite a feat."

Spike could hear the dry humor in the other man's voice and he chuckled softly. "Always do my best when it comes to annoying the poof, Wes... Listen, I really - really need your help."

There was a long moment of silence, and then a sigh. "Do I actually get any sort of explanation? Or am I expected to fly blind?"

"I... Damn-it, Percy..." Spike sighed, watching Xander make 'what's going on?' faces. He reached over and whapped him on the knee, making his own face back.

"I'm...sick."

Another long silence, and Spike squirmed uncomfortably, the phone actually heavy, his arm shaking from the position he was holding it in. *Christ. Can't even do this...*
"Sick? Vampire's don't get sick, Spike."

"Angel did. Xander said that -"

"Xander said? You mean - Alexander Harris? Are you with him? Where are you? Spike -"

"Look, Wes, I can't - I can't hold up the phone, okay? I'm - I'm gonna let you talk to Xander for a minute 'til I can... 'Til I get my second wind, yeah? Hang on."

Spike passed the phone to Xander with relief, ignoring the panicked look that crossed the man's face.

'Talk to him!' he mouthed, and Xander mouthed back 'No!'

"Xan, please? Just - tell him where we are an' stuff until I can - until the pills kick in, yeah?"

Xander slumped, looking defeated, and eyed the phone with trepidation.
"You so owe me, blondie," Xander said, but Spike looked so exhausted in the pillows, he couldn't feel anything but the worry. "Hey, Wes...ley," Xander added, wincing. How formal was he supposed to be with Ex-Watcher British Guy anyway? He found Spike's hand where it lay on the leather of the duster and wrapped his fingers around it, thumb sweeping a gentle arc across the palm. "Shit, let me start again. Spike's still here. He's sick."

"Ale-...Xander, where is 'here'?"

At Wesley's irritated tone, one part of Xander winced, another snapped, and he took a deep calming breath, feeling the comforting slide of the leather pouch around his neck with the motion. I am mature, grown up Xander version 3.0. "Couple of hours from LA," And then, because he might have been mature but he wasn't a saint, he added: "And this is about Spike. I'm almost out of blood for him. Human. Not the shit Angel made him drink."

"Why is he with you? Xander, please, humor me."
Feeling the knot of tension building in his shoulders, Xander let go of Spike's hand to rest his fingers back on the duster, clenching and un-clenching them on the coat until he felt Spike's light touch on the back, and turned his hand over again to let Spike's lay against his palm. "Because I found him in really bad shape, and I'm-" He looked up at Spike, unsure if Spike wouldn't want Wesley to know he's being taken care of.

"Go on, pet. He'll have to know if he's to help."

"I'm taking care of him," Xander finished. "But I don't know what's wrong with him. And neither does he."

"You found him... Xander, I really am going to need the full story if I'm to help at all." Xander closed his eyes for a moment and Spike curled his fingers around Xander's hand, silently urging him on.

"Okay...I'm - we're in Sunnydale. I've been living here, helping to rebuild...it's this whole...thing,"
okay? And - Spike - was here, just... Well, what he was doing here is his own business..."

Xander looked at Spike for confirmation and Spike raised a faint grin, nodding. Xander felt vaguely queasy telling Wesley where they were, irrational as it might have been. "Some of the buildings here went down whole in the collapse last year. I found him delirious in a church and pulled him out, took him home. And look, we really don't want to involve Angel, or the Council, or -"

"Xander."

Xander stopped.

"I promise you that what you tell me will be held in complete confidence. And this will be easier on both of us, and on Spike, if you simply describe to me Spike's condition when you found him." He sighed. "I assure you I'm no more comfortable speaking to you at this moment than you are speaking to me. Go on."
Xander blinked. *Okay. Wesley has changed.* "Feverish. And you *know* how weird that is on a vampire. Delirious, like I said. He's got these three black slashes across his upper body that hurt him like a bastard. *All* of him hurts. When I found him, he couldn't handle the weight of his boots or coat."

"Did he get a look at the demon?"

"Uh. Spidery?" Xander looked to Spike for confirmation, receiving a nod, and nodded himself. "Spidery."

"Chitinous," Spike supplied helpfully.

"Chitinous, Spike says. Which is not a word that means anything to me, so I hope it means something to you."

Wesley laughed, and Xander found that the laugh made him sound like a different person completely. "Yes, it means something to me. And...how long has he been sick?"
"Ummm...a while. I mean, He's only been here a few days but..." Spike's wrist twitched under Xander's unconsciously stroking fingers, so he stilled. "And he's weak, Wes. Really weak."

"When - was he hurt?" Wesley asked slowly, and Xander heard the sudden tension in his voice.

"It happened in L.A. When all that - stuff - happened."

"But those were healed - Wesley stopped abruptly, and Xander heard a knock in the background. "Angel, if it cannot wait... Excuse me a moment." Xander listened to the click of the 'hold' button, gut tightening.

"What?" Spike asked.

"How sensitive is Angel's hearing?"

Spike snorted. "Trust Wesley to know. You're in no danger of being overheard with him, pet."
"He's that paranoid?"

Spike shrugged. "He knows Angel."

"And now you make me doubt his sanity."

Spike considered that, grinning a little. "Well, he did kinda lose it there for a while. Stabbed Gunn, shot some poor sod of an intern in the leg -" Xander's eye was getting wider and wider and Spike had to laugh. Fuckin' pills finally kickin' in. Thank Christ.

"Here - lemme have the phone, I can do it now," he added, holding out a hand that still shook like an old man's. At least it doesn't hurt so much now, though. Thank god for chemicals.

"Isn't Gunn a good guy?" Xander managed to ask in the whirl of mental-conflict between the Wesley he knew and the Wesley on the other end of the phone.

Spike smirked, taking the phone from him and bringing it to his ear. "He got better."
"Oh. Great."

"Yes, I'm back now, Xan- Spike? What are the two of you snickering about?"

"Your imitation of Billy the Kidd, Wes. Listen, you've got the basics, yeah? Think you can help me or not?"

"Billy the -? Spike, it's hardly necessary to tell Xander about that, and yes, I think I can help. But I would ideally need to see you in person."

A 'no' rose automatically to Spike's lips but he checked it, lying there watching at Xander's hand flex slowly around his. "Are you...sure, Wes? I mean, you've got that great big brain, why do you need to see me?"

'See you?' Xander mouthed, with what looked like alarm, and Spike nodded slowly.

"I want to be sure I get my diagnosis right, Spike. I
would feel very uncomfortable doing this strictly over the phone. Listen, I have to get back to - to things, why don't you...two...think about it and call me back around...three? I'll be in my office then."

Spike thought that over for a minute - felt himself drifting off almost, the pills making everything sharp-edged and too bright and he'd closed his eyes.

"Yeah, that's - that's a good idea. Ta, Wes."

"Goodbye."

Wes disconnected and Spike let the phone slip from his hand - felt Xander take it and heard him turn it off.

"So what's the plan, Stan?" Xander asked.

"Call him back at three, and - he wants us to go down there. Meet him." Spike forced his eyes open and looked up at Xander. "Might be the only way, pet."
Xander nodded, laying his hand over Spike's again, then turning the phone on, dialing before he could change his mind and give in to the protective instinct to...shut everyone who wasn't Sunnydale out. And how weird was it that the Scoobs weren't Sunnydale anymore? Not to him.

"Who're you calling now?"

Xander's lips twisted into something like a rueful smile. "Carl. I'm going to call in my vacation days. See if Julio's coming up in time to take over my crew for a week."

"Mmmm... Holiday. Should go to the beach. Dru loved the beach..." Spike murmured, closing his eyes again and just drifting. "She was always tryin' to find a mermaid or a - selkie."

The pills really were working now, and Spike felt like he was floating up to the ceiling, tethered to the earth only by Xander's light grip on his hand.
It felt...nice.

"Did she ever find one?"

"Nah. Found some pretty shells. Had a headdress made of 'em for her once. Looked like a selkie herself." Spike's words trailed off vaguely, and Xander bent his head over Spike's arm, running his fingers from shoulder to wrist. It'd felt...nice having it done to him when he was in the midst of one of the five million bouts of dysentery he'd gone through in Africa. Cooled down the fever. Soothed the aches. Sort of hypnotic.

But nice.

With his other hand, he brought up Carl's number on the speed dial and waited.

~~*~~*~~*~~

Spike was aware, in a peripheral sort of way, of voices. Rather hushed ones, talking back and forth
nearby. Like church, sort of, and he twisted a little, wondering why he was on his back.

"Angelus, leave off the chatter for god's sake and come on, the girls are waiting!" he called, impatient as always of Angelus' annoying habit of chatting up, then shocking every priest he came across. And then draining dry, of course.

"Just have your dinner and be done," he added, and groped for his coat. Where was it? He was so cold. Damn drafty churches - it's a wonder we all didn't catch pneumonia and die.

Xander returned to find Spike shivering, groping blindly for the edges of the sheet that had drifted away as he slept. "Hey."

"'Gelus?"

"Wow, even out of it, you really know how to insult a guy, Spike." Xander rested his hand on Spike's forehead, feeling the heat pouring off of him. He smoothed the skin between Spike's eyebrows with
a thumb until Spike opened his eyes and squinted.

"Xan?"

"Yeah. It's me. Time to go. Carl helped me load everything into the truck for the trip to LA."

Spike struggled to sit up until Xander slid an arm under his shoulders, helping him, letting him rest bonelessly against his chest, smelling more of spice and wood smoke now than cigarettes and leather. He held pills, and water - with a green straw this time.

"What 'everything'?' Spike asked, still too sleep-muddled and groggy to do more than obediently take pills and water as Xander held them to his lips.

"Pillows. Lots of them. And some soft traveling clothes. You've got a nest in the back of the truck now and he couldn't find any soft shirts, but if you don't mind going used, this one's pretty soft, and still warm." Xander undraped the ancient flannel shirt from his arm. It'd seen him half way across
Africa until it got too hot to wear it anymore.

Spike blinked a couple of times, forcing his vision to focus until he could see the faded, once-red shirt that Xander was holding out. He gathered it up and in an unconscious movement lifted it to his face and took a deep sniff. *Xander, smells like...sweet-salt-spice, like apple dumplings and...that peppery scent...Africa, that's Africa...* He nodded, shifting a little and struggling with the shirt.

"Don't mind, pet. Nice and soft," he said, trying to find the collar so he could slip it on.

"Here." Xander took the edges of the shirt, unbuttoning it and holding it for Spike to slip his arms into, drawing it up to his shoulders. "You should probably wear it open, keep it off the slashes. Carl picked up sweat pants for you too. The really new, soft -" Xander realized that Spike was looking at him with an utterly blank expression. "Uh. Have you ever worn sweat pants before?"

The arch of Spike's eyebrows was especially
eloquent.

Xander groaned. "Right. Stupid me forgetting about vampires who have no circulation and go walking around in skin tight jeans all the time."

*William the Bloody in...athletic gear. Sodding lovely.* Spike took pity on Xander's crestfallen expression and did *not* say what he was thinking aloud.

"If they're as soft as this shirt, mate, they'll be lovely. Don't think I could stand the jeans now, anyway." He patted lightly at Xander's arm and smiled at him, and then smiled more when Xander immediately perked up. *What makes him care what I think, anyway? Strange...sweet boy...*

"And I don't wanna explain to the California Highway Patrol why there's a guy in my back seat naked from the waist down and stoned out of his mind." Xander unfolded the sweatpants - black, in deference to Spike's tastes - and about four sizes too large.
It was getting both easier and harder to slide an arm around Spike's ribs to steady him. Easier as Xander learned where not to touch, but harder, much harder, to feel how little Spike was able to help, how quickly Spike's strength was draining away from him. "Never thought I'd miss having you strong enough to toss me out of your way like a sack of rags." He propped Spike up with pillows, scooting down to his feet to help him dress.

"Rags, rags...rags and jags and one in a velvet gown..." Spike watched as Xander carefully threaded his feet through the bottoms of the sweatpants and then just as carefully pulled the loose, fleecy-soft material up his legs.

"What's that, blondie?" Xander asked, pulling the drawstring tight enough to keep the sweats on his hips, but not so tight that they cut into his skin.

"The beggars, love - but then, you never minded beggars, did you? Had some home for a lovely supper some nights, and then..."
Spike stopped when Xander looked up at him and the single, wary eye and dark, patched socket jolted his memory. "Sorry, pet. Got...confused for a minute."

"Got crazy for a minute, you mean," Xander answered, and shifted forward until he could slip his arms under Spike, testing the softness of the material. "Okay?"

"Okay." Spike's laid his hand against Xander's chest, patting lightly through the shirt. "Just, make it quick, yeah?"

"It's getting worse?"

"'S not getting better," Spike said after a moment. "Do you -" Xander's eye fell on the empty bottle of Jack and he gave Spike a rueful smile. "I'll pick up another bottle on the way out of town."

"Ta ever so," Spike murmured, teeth gritted. Xander stood smoothly and started walking, carrying him as
carefully as he could, but his weight pressed flesh to bone and Xander's jean-button kept scraping his hip. The air felt frigid once they'd moved away from the fireplace and Spike started to shiver. Xander stepped slowly down into the garage and over to his truck, which stood with the doors open and the front seat folded down.

Just like he'd said, there was another Nest in the back and Xander stood there for a moment, obviously wondering how he was going to get Spike in.

"Just - just get me close, Xander and I can - climb up, yeah?"

"We'll try," Xander said, sounding uncertain of the plan, but he maneuvered them both until Spike could reach out and get his elbows onto the edge and start a slow, painful craw into the padded space. He kept his mouth clamped shut but a tiny whimper of pain escaped him nonetheless.

"Oh, fuck. Sorry, damn-it - let me -"
"No, it's - I'm... I'm fine," Spike gasped and flopped down, pulling his legs slowly inside. "Did - did you call Wes? Is it past three yet?" he asked, that memory suddenly surfacing and making him panic, a little, because for the first time in a long time, he had no idea whatsoever what time of day it was.

Xander saw the first flickers of panic in Spike's eyes and leaned into the back seat until he could tangle his fingers with Spike's, just holding them. "Yeah. I called back a few hours ago. It's almost eight now. Said he's got a couple of leads but needs to see you. He thinks he knows what kind of demon it was. A... Jesus, it was something that sounded like 'constant rat abuse'," Xander admitted, tucking the pillows and blankets up around Spike so that he couldn't roll into anything hard or painful and setting the front seats upright again.

Spike chuckled, if weakly. "Pet, if I knew what the demon's name was, I would've told Wes, yeah?"

"Yeah, well, the point is that he thinks he knows
what it was, and if it was, he said he'll know after he checks you out." Xander finally risked a look at Spike only to be met with wide, uncertain eyes. "I gave him the motel address, but he said it could take him a couple of days to get to us. Angel's suspicious."

"Meddling git. Wes'll figure a way - he's sneaky, really. Found out about the mind-wipe, didn't he? Got his memories back. Got Connor's." Spike watched Xander pat at his pockets, mumbling a mental checklist, and then reach for the keys and start the truck. The rumble seemed louder than before, echoing in the confined space of the garage and Spike resisted the urge to cover his ears.

"That's about what he said only he was more English about it."

"I'm English!"

"Spike, you're in a category all your own."

Spike snorted, and Xander thought he heard him
mutter something that sounded like "Even called the wanker a 'meddling git'. You don't get much more fucking English than 'git'."

"Spike?" Xander asked, waiting for the garage door to open, then backing out onto the blunt driveway of his house, just like the blunt driveway of every other house in site.

"Yeah, pet."

"What do you mean mind wipe?"

"Oh...that." Spike paused for a moment to try and clear his head. The rumble of the truck was like the deep turbine groan of the ship he and Dru had crossed to America on, and he kept getting little flashes of that trip, and Dru at the bow, leaning into the stiff breeze, watching with fascination the curling wave of white-capped water that surged and hung just under the iron prow.

Intent on seeing a mermaid, and being childishly pleased to see a leaping, gleaming porpoise.
"See, Angel had a son with Darla -"

"Uh. Huh." Xander flipped the headlights on, keeping the truck at a crawl through the subdivision's twists and turns. "Dead Darla? Sire Darla?"

"That'd be the one."

"Neat trick. Even for Angel. So what happened. Did some god decide Angel was a special little vamp or something?"

Spike snorted a sour laugh. "Wolfram and bloody Hart, again. Brought the Bitch back from the dead, got my Dru to turn her, and then she and Peaches ended up shaggin' and that was that. Had a boy - Connor. He got all -" Spike waved his hand, trying to think about what, exactly, had happened to Connor, but Wes had told him over a few pints and he hadn't really been paying that much attention, anyway.
"Dunno what happened to him, really, 'cept he's in college now, 'stead of bein' three like he should be. Grew up in a demon dimension. Came back. Have to ask Wes, yeah?" The pills had him on the edge of collapse - floating in a strange, jumpy void of sensation and dim light. Flickers of Dru - of Sunnydale past - of his time in L.A. kept intruding over the image of Xander's head and shoulder, and his arm stretching down to the gear shift.

"Gimme a smoke pet, please?" he mumbled, feeling like he wanted one, but utterly clueless as to where they might be.

"How about some blood instead?" Xander leaned over, keeping his eye on the road and fished out one of the mugs in his cup holder, the one with the black straw sticking out. He passed it back to Spike, glancing reflexively in the rear view mirror at him before remembering with a jolt. Jesus, that shouldn't still get me every time. "So what does that have to do with a mind wipe?"

He took the turn out of the complex carefully, and
the land opened up around them. A few streets of new green. First year's unrolled lawn sod, scraggly trees, and then...desert. The street was named Oasis Boulevard. *Oasis, my ass. It looks more like a bad hallucination.*

Spike braced the cup against the back of the seat and sucked up a mouthful of blood. It tasted...slightly off. Or odd. Something. He grimaced and stopped drinking. "Oh, it... I dunno, somethin' about Connor havin' a real life and..." The beam of an on-coming car dazzled across the roof of the truck and Spike squinted, flinching. *God* his head hurt. And the rumble-roar of the engine was numbing - deafening - making his teeth ache.

"Let's just get some sleep, yeah? C'mon, poppet, you lay down with me and sing me that song, the one 'bout the crows you like so much and we'll just rest a bit..." He felt his hand slipping off the cup, and the cup tipping, but he didn't have the strength to catch it, and barely noticed the warm blood dripping onto his hand.
Listening to Spike was becoming more and more like flipping through stations on the radio, and Xander tightened his grip on the steering wheel, taking the turn onto Shady Green, *Hah! Maybe in thirty years.* and into the darkest part of the brightly lit supermarket lot.

Shutting off the engine, he leaned back against the seat. *Still possible to drive anywhere in Sunnydale in under five minutes.* Even if this area had been outside city limits once. Maybe once the new construction was finished it'd be a real small city, not a sinister postage stamp. Then again, maybe it'd just become a sinister commemorative stamp.

"Spike?" Xander unbuckled his seatbelt, twisting against the leather to look back at his passenger and swore, snatching up the car mug, and dropping it into the holder. He grabbed the last of his napkins from some anonymous fast food meal and sopped up the dribbles over Spike's hand and the pillows with them. "Shit, I'm sorry."

A vague mumble was his only answer, and Xander
gently eased Spike's hand out of the wet spot, cleaning the blood from his fingers and settling his hand closer to him. "Guess this'll be easier if you sleep through it, huh?" He smoothed a hand over Spike's hair, combing it away from his face, and wondering if he should offer to buy gel. Or a haircut. Or something.

Spike felt something rough dragging over and over his hand and he tried to pull away but it was as if all the muscles in his arm had simply been turned off. "Stop it, Dru," he said, but it was only a mumble even to his ears, and he doubted she'd heard. It stopped after a moment though, and then he felt something touching his hair - something stroking back through it and it felt good, felt nice, like his mother's hand when he'd been... Still sick? Sick. Still sick? God, never going to be better, never going to... "Never bloody ends, never, ever ends, god..."

"You sound like me when I had chicken pox. I was fourteen, so it was pretty bad. I couldn't touch anything without it hurting and itching, and it felt like it'd never end. But it did." Xander's hand stilled
when Spike spoke, then started again as he answered with a small smile, stroking his hair the way he'd had nobody to do when he was sick. It would have felt...good. "And I cannot wait until you're well enough to call me a sentimental tosser and tell me that vamps don't get chicken pox, so sod off and get you your booze. Which I am going to do," Xander said, but without moving anything other than his hand in Spike's hair, rhythmic and gentle until Spike's twitching and mumbling quieted and he went utterly still. "Yeah. Any minute now, I am going to leave this car, get you your booze and get on the road to L.A..."

Any minute now. God, he looks so frail asleep.

Square Five
"You're gonna like the hotel, Spike. Uh. At least I think you are. When you're alert enough to see it." Xander kept his eye on the freeway signs, watching their exit come closer and thanking whatever god or gods might be listening that he wasn't driving a Neon coupe like the poor bastard he'd seen cut off twice already since Burbank. "Mariel comes here to meet her grandmother, the one who comes up from Baja a couple of times a year."

There was no response. Not even a briefly mumbled comment about the stars, but for the past hour or so, Xander hadn't expected one. He was hoping it was a good sign, and not proof that Spike was in too much pain to even moan. "You know, you're gonna laugh at this if you remember it after you're better, but Jesus, my throat is killing me from all this talking." He eyed his drink speculatively, but winced at the immediate and intense veto from his bladder. He'd considered pulling in at a fast food place, cause god knew there were enough of them, but this close, he just wanted to get to the hotel. Get The Nest made, Spike settled. More blood and booze in him. Keep his eye on him.
Xander stole a glance into the back seat as soon as he pulled the truck off the freeway and onto their exit, relieved to find that Spike looked, not better, but at least not in conscious pain, either. He twitched a fold of the shirt away from Spike's stomach, and tucked it behind his back before the light turned green. "Okay. So the hotel is pretty nice. It's beach front. Venice Beach. Do vampires do beaches? I mean, is it like Lost Boys where you'll go to the boardwalk and the amusement parks looking for prey? Well, maybe not you obviously, these days, but before?" Xander squinted at the street signs as they passed, checking the directions. "Our room doesn't have an ocean view or anything, but they all look pretty nice, and it's not like it'll kill us to wa- I mean, it's not like the walking will be difficult once Wesley comes up with your cure."

Xander slowed for traffic, leaning on the steering wheel. "I hate Los Angeles, by the way. I dunno why a big brooding loner like Angel chooses to stay here. It's all an act if you ask me. He just wants to be the center of attention. Which, okay, I guess you know
more than I do. So anyway, the hotel's beach front, not too close to LAX, so the planes shouldn't be too loud, and you'll probably be able to hear the ocean from the room. Which, by the way, is a single room that I fully plan to transform into a Vampire Love Nest. Okay, only maybe without the sexual connotations, but a man takes his lines where he finds them. We've got quick check in, so I'm just gonna jump in the lobby here. Which means, y'know, that this would be a really bad time for you to wake up, while I'm in the lobby."

He swung off the main street and into the hotel parking lot, its white bulk glowing under its lamps and what moonlight shone through the Los Angeles smog. "Last chance to wake up without freaking. Going...going..." Xander pulled to a stop before the lobby and twisted to look down at Spike, still sleeping with the appearance of utter, if exhausted, peace. "And gone. Right."

"Let's see how express the check in is for a working schlub in the cheap rooms." Xander pushed his door open as quietly as he could, wincing at the kinks in
his legs, and feeling a bit like a cowboy jangling through the saloon doors fresh off his horse the way he was limping. "Hello?"

"May I help you, sir?"

Xander turned quickly to his left, eye falling on the man who spoke. Young, tan, blond, and right out of the Venice Beach mold. Nice smile too. "Yeah. Reservation for Harris."

"Deluxe room with a queen sized bed for two weeks?"

"That's it," Xander said, rubbing absently at his hip and hoping the circulation would come back some time soon. "Why do they call the cheapest rooms deluxe anyway? Is that supposed to make me feel better about them or something?"

The clerk offered an apologetic shrug, passing over two keys and a slip of paper for Xander to sign. "Have you ever tried to convince someone that they want to stay in a room called 'the cheap suite'?"
"No. But I've tried to sell medium french fries that were actually smalls," Xander said, glancing at the room number on the keys before pocketing them. "Where...?"

"Drive around to your right and park near the corner of the building. The first door on the far end. You're on the second floor. All of our contact information is by the telephone in your room, so if you need anything-"

"Yeah, I'll call. Thanks." Heading back out to the truck, Xander allowed himself a moment to slow down. To just breathe in the breeze coming off the ocean and let it ruffle the sweat from his hair after two hours driving in a truck with the heat cranked up in August. By the end of Spike's illness, he was pretty sure he'd either become a devotee of that kind of yoga done in hundred and five degree heat or melt like a cheap wax dummy.

Probably the first. The heat wasn't so bad except when it made his clothes feel like they were trying
to fuse with his skin. Unfortunately, California wasn't quite progressive enough to approve of naked freeway driving. "Okay, pal. We're at the hotel, and the not so fun part's coming up, but once we get up there, you can sleep and let your faithful harem boy do all the dirty work. Which, by the way, includes calling up one of the contacts Wesley gave me who'll do door to door blood delivery. You never told me there was home blood delivery."

Easing the truck around the building, Xander felt safe enough to reach back, brush his fingers against Spike's. "There's a refrigerator and microwave in the room. They call it a suite, but trust me, it's a room. So I'm gonna order as much as you can drink until Wesley can get to us." He pulled into a parking space just in front of their door and shut off the truck with a sigh, letting his eye close and leaning his head back against the seat. "But first the hard part."

Leaning across the seat, Xander rummaged through the two duffel bags he'd stuffed full of clothing at home, wrestling out a ridiculously fluffy fleece
sweater, then trying not to wince as he pulled it on and hoped it'd be enough padding to carry Spike as comfortably as possible. With the door open, the ocean breeze taunted him with coolness on overheated skin. He eased open both doors and pushed the seat forward, laying his torso across the pillows to brush Spike's hair from his face. "Hey, sleeping beauty. We're here."

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Spike felt like he was struggling upward through layers of wet air - through water - through treacle, and he gasped in a breath that made his throat sting. Gasped again and struck out with his hand because something was touching him and nothing was supposed to be touching him, he was alone, always alone and anything that touched him right now was enemy, other, get away, get OUT

"Fuck off, you bloody bastards," he growled, and his hand connected with something - something hard - and Jesus Christ, that hurt. Hurt everywhere and
that wasn't supposed to happen, either, he was supposed to be free of that thing, they'd gotten it out, she'd said, she'd promised.

Can't do that again, can't, can't - "Said you took it out! Said it was out - why are you doing this to me?"
He could feel something - on him - pressing around him, binding his legs and touching his back and his feet and he hit out wildly, not caring how much it hurt because he had to get free, had to get out. Fucking hurts, it hurts!

Someone - a voice - couldn't make it out and he scabbled weakly at the enveloping mass around him, getting more and more tangled - more and more panicked. He could only see in flashes - halogen-white, flaring across his vision and then blackness again. A shadow - someone... Said he'd be there, said he'd be there - not supposed to leave me - "Xander! Xander - please - where are you? Where the fuck are you?" He hated that his voice was breaking and that he was probably crying but it hurt and he was supposed to be there. "Promised - you promised -"
At the sound of Spike's wrist hitting the window, hard, Xander swore, still trying to kick off his sneakers before climbing into the truck to calm Spike. Finally giving up on the laces, he yanked the shoes off, crawling up onto the pillows and over Spike, catching his arms against his chest where they couldn't flail, and stroking a hand over his hair, Spike's body cradled beneath the warmth of his own. "Spike. Spike, shh. I'm here. Right here. Not gonna let anybody hurt you, sweetheart. Promised you." His heart hurt with every whimper of Spike's, with that "promised". "Promised."

He wanted to grab Spike up, gather him to his chest and hold him until he calmed, but all he could do was hover, hope Spike could somehow feel, smell, sense that he was there. Still speaking, not quite babbling, those low soothing words, he worked the sheet free of Spike's tangled nest, using a soft corner to dab at the tears streaking his face before they could dry, and itch on sensitive skin. "Come on, Spike. Please. We're so close."
Fuck, something was on him, something was holding him, holding him down, smothering him, and Spike could barely lift his arms, he was so fucking tired, so tired. "Stop it, stop it!" He jerked his head back wildly, gasping in air - and froze. Spice, mint, lemon...salt-sweat, touch of earth...

"Xander?" Spike raised his hand, feeling the wobble in it and fierce ache in his wrist tied? was it tied? and wiped at his face - wiped his eyes. His vision cleared slowly, and in the black-and-white striping of harsh shadow and industrial-strength street-lights he could make out a shadow - a face...

"Xander, fuck - that - that you? Xan?"

Xander let his breath out slowly, feeling a knot of tension going with it as Spike recognized him. "Yeah, it's me. We're at the hotel. You slept all the way down." Spike still looked dazed, not entirely there yet, so Xander kept smoothing his hand through his hair, at least as much to calm himself as to anchor Spike. "It's not even midnight yet, but I wanna get indoors. Crank up the heat, get you warm. God, get both of us fed." He gave Spike a
rueful smile. "And get the mortal who drank too much soda to the john."

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Xanderbabble, something about food and warm and john, who the hell is John? doubly confusing in the time-slip-vertigo of the pills and the fever. But Citrus-earth-spice and a warm hand brushing through and through his hair - warm body radiating heat and comfort, and Spike took another, smaller breath - shaky breath - and started to relax.

"Thought I was...back there, thought... Why's my wrist hurt, pet?" He was aware, in a rush of shame, that his voice was weak, choked with tears - petulant as Dru on a bad day and he clamped his jaws shut and just tried to calm down. Xander's here, and we're - here, that's the ocean, I can hear the ocean and... "We're here, yeah? I mean...a - a hotel, like you said..."

Said that already, fucking hell, gonna think you're
Xander swallowed thickly against the rush of tender affection that tightened his throat and chest, giving in to the urge to press his lips against Spike's forehead. "Yeah, we're at the hotel. It's a nice one too. Mariel made a good choice." I wonder if this is what it was like for Spike. What it felt like for Spike taking care of Drusilla all those years.

He bowed his head, letting go of Spike reluctantly to untangle him from the mass of clothing and bedding, trying to make as little friction against his skin as he could. "You whacked your wrist pretty hard on the window when you woke up. Thinking you were back there." Xander stared at Spike's untangled legs for a long moment before looking up at him. "You're never going back there again. Promised to protect you, remember?"

"Yeah, I..." Spike closed his eyes for a moment, just want to rest and then opened them again - looked up at Xander's steady gaze - at the look of reassurance and the fierceness there. That's the
look the boy turned on Angelus - drove him right out of the damn hospital. "Sorry, Xan. Didn't - mean to..." Huge breath, shaky sigh, and he caught Xander's gently petting hand and curled his fingers around it - around calluses and rough cuticles and badly bitten, badly chipped nails.

"Thanks, pet."

"Spike." Xander waited until Spike was silent, looking back at him, and smiled, rubbing his thumb over one prominent knuckle, finding himself suddenly at a complete loss for words. Instead, he opened Spike's hand, gently nuzzling against his palm, feeling his breath reflected back to him off of warm skin.

"Xan..."

"Put your arm around me," Xander said softly, letting go of Spike's hand, and helping him move. He hated how Spike trembled and flinched when he was lifted, biting his lip and feeling the intense ache of muscles taxed to their fullest. Because lifting a
hundred and twenty-ish pounds of something was one thing, but lifting it carefully was completely different, fleece padding or no fleece padding.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike deliberately did not sigh in relief when Xander eased him down onto the hard edge of the hotel bed, but the 'ride' up had hurt more than anything else so far - had hurt too fucking much and Spike contemplated with resignation and more than a touch of fear the idea that he was getting worse faster.

Pills don't last as long, fever keeps coming back... Can't ever get ahead. He contemplated the blades of his forearms, pushing against the shirt-sleeves - the jut of rib and hip-bone and the ache where his bones were pressing too hard against too little padding.

Gotta find me a cure, Wes. Fuck, anything... He watched, dazed, as Xander assembled a new Nest
and wondered how long it would take the ex-Watcher to find a fix. *Never let us down before*... His hands were shaking - fuck, his whole body was - and he clasped them together, and then pressed them between his knees. His wrist ached fiercely and a bruise was already showing, dark and wide.

Gonna look like the Slayer's boyfriend again, time we're through... He couldn't help the ugly little laugh that escaped him at the thought.

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At Spike's laugh, Xander twisted from his work between the couch and the heater where he was building The Nest. He abandoned three different things to say before choosing one. "He'll find it, Spike." Wes had to. Xander hadn't expected it to hurt this much, watching Spike get weaker and weaker; hadn't expected the helplessness that'd sent him running from Africa to come back so quickly.
At least this time, I can do something about it.

He cranked the heater on full, relieved to find it keeping to a low hum, and shook out the silk sheets, crossing to the bed to kneel in front of Spike, easing the flannel shirt off his shoulders. "You'll feel better once you get out of these. I think this Nest is softer than the old one. Carl really knows how to lounge."

On the bottom of the nest beneath the mounds of pillows, brought along on an impulse, he'd put Spike's duster. Xander didn't know if he'd put it there as a good luck charm or scent-memory for Spike, but it'd felt wrong to separate Spike from it, even for this.

"Think you're right," Spike said, glad to have the shirt a damn flannel shirt washed so thin it's practically not there off his body. He put his hand on Xander's shoulder and carefully lifted himself the inch or two necessary to get the sweatpants off his hips and then sank back down, watching Xander work them down his legs and off, lip between his teeth in concentration.
He'd seen, amidst the tangle of sheets and blankets and pillows, his duster, carried reverently and added to the Nest, and he smiled down at the man who simply kept surprising him. Thought of everything. I hope...I can make this up, someday. Return the favor except... not. Spike didn't like the thought of ever having to take care of a Xander as ill as he himself was. Gonna keep you safe, pet. When I'm the Big Bad again. Make sure nothing ever touches you again... He couldn't stop himself from letting his fingers lightly, lightly brush the edge of the patch, and when Xander glanced quizzically up at him, he was sure his regret showed in his expression.

Xander leaned his face into Spike's touch, catching his hand with his own when it trembled. The sadness on Spike's face made his stomach twist. "You don't have to apologize for being weak, Spike. Or sick."

"Oh, I..." Spike bit his lip, head a little to one side. He didn't know what Xander would do, but he
wanted - *needed* - to see him as he was. A reminder. That he'd failed, and that Xander was strong. Stronger than he was, maybe. Strong enough. He carefully slipped the tips of his fingers under the elastic band of the patch and lifted it up - lifted the patch off and let it drop to the floor. Touched again, even more gently, the paler, tissue-fine and wrinkled skin at the edges of the socket, and the strong curve of the dark eyebrow.

"I wish..." he started, but he didn't finish that, because everyone knew the folly of wishes anywhere near the Hellmouth. *Or near its children.*

As Spike's fingers traced the wrinkled, empty skin, Xander *got* it, feeling the funny quiver in his stomach ease up into his chest, and he smiled when Spike stopped himself before he could finish that thought. "I don't," he said finally, but had to look away from Spike's skeptical expression with a sigh. "Okay, maybe sometimes I do," he admitted quietly.

"'Course you do, pet. Wouldn't be human if you didn't... I just...could have been quicker, that's all.
Could have been...a lot of things."

"You could have not been there at all." Xander risked a glance back at Spike, then turned his face to press his lips to Spike's palm. "I don't miss being the guy who walked into that vineyard." *It's all fun and games until somebody loses an eye. Needed to stop thinking life was all games maybe.* "And I remember who saved the other eye."

Spike took a deep breath and swayed suddenly, vertigo coming over him in a wave. The trip - the hard bed - was taking it's toll, and he was pretty sure he couldn't sit upright for one more minute. Xander's lips on his hand felt...so good.

"Think I better - lay down, pet," he mumbled, and felt his whole body sagging *down*, bed or floor, at this point he didn't care.

"It's okay. Come on...." Xander guided Spike down against his chest - bare again, better than harsh buttons and seams to scrape Spike's skin - and guided the sheet around him, circling emaciated
hips and draping it along his spine so that Xander could stand with Spike in his arms, cradled against his chest.

He settled Spike into the softness of The Nest before picking up the line of conversation again, crouching at his feet to fuss the sheet into place, letting his hands come to rest, at last, on Spike's lower legs through the silk. "You really could've not been there at all, Spike. You could've taken off like almost every other being in Sunnydale. Or you could've frozen up the way Buffy did, but you didn't. Fuck, I didn't even think to struggle, to try to get away. It's not the kinda thing you ever think's gonna happen."

"Forgiving heart, Xander...heart of a lion... Did you see any lions in Africa?" The new Nest was wonderful and enfolding - the silk sheet a blessing and a relief. His head was swimming from the move across the room and he could smell the leather of his coat and the spicy scent of Xander all over the Nest. He felt safe, and the light pressure of Xander's hands on him was like an anchor, keeping him from
slipping away. At least for the moment.

"God, yeah." Xander had to laugh at the memory, quickly shedding his jeans and easing himself carefully down onto the edge of The Nest next to Spike, resting their hands together, fingers loosely knotted. "One jumped onto the 'Rover while I was driving. I felt like a can of tuna at cat feeding time."

He shifted, rearranging himself until he could settle an arm above Spike's head, smooth his hand over Spike's brow and hair when his eyes drifted closed.

"Mmmm...kitty-treat. Bet you taste good, pet..." Spike twisted a tiny bit, easing infinitesimally closer to the heat Xander put out. God, it was so good to lie here and rest again, finally...

"S'good, Xan..." he mumbled, knowing he was going out again. "S'good..."

"Yeah," Xander breathed, wrapping himself as closely as he could around Spike without actually touching, with a protective ache in his chest he
hadn't felt in so long. "Feels good," he added, very quietly once Spike was still, not sure if he was awake or asleep.

He let himself drift then, laying his head on his arm, watching Spike sleep through half-closed eye and soothing the occasional twitch of Spike's hand in his. He couldn't remember the last time he'd simply laid and...watched over someone like this, and not wanted to move away. He had to, though. He needed food, and Spike needed blood from delivery places that may or may not deliver during daylight hours.

And Xander was willing to admit to himself that it was more the second that made him ease his way out of The Nest with an apologetic murmur to Spike when that pale hand groped for his, and a gentle touch until it stilled.

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Spike woke to the sounds of Xander brushing his
teeth. Woke again when Xander muttered in his sleep. The room was nearly perfectly dark except for the low light coming around the almost-closed bathroom door, and each time Spike woke he lifted his head a fraction, checking. Just have to see... The ache in his body had become a dull, background grind, and he knew the fever was rising again. But he was too tired and too sore to do anything about it, and he knew Xander was exhausted. Waited out worse things...just go back to sleep...

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When actual daylight lit the room - reflection off the ceiling where it had got in at the top of the window - he turned his aching head to see Xander squashed up on the couch, long limbs folded in what had to be an uncomfortable position. Right arm dangling down, just touching the edge of the Nest. There - right there - so Spike...wouldn't be alone.

Gonna have to work hard to make this up to you, pet. Don't know how...but I will...
Xander mumbled under his breath, pushing at the arm of the couch with his foot with all the stubbornness of a man still deeply enough asleep to think that it's only a blanket or pillows keeping him from stretching his legs.

In a moment, he gave up again, rolling onto his stomach, one leg bent over the couch arm, the other dropping into the Nest like a cat on a limb, boneless.

Spike tensed as the footsteps came closer - approached their door and stopped. A moment later there was a soft 'tap tap' and Spike just lay there in an agony of indecision. Should he try to answer the door himself? Or wake up Xander? Could he wake up Xander?

Finally he wriggled over in the Nest, reaching for Xander's ankle. He got his fingers around the bone and muscles there and tugged.

"Xan? Oi - Xander!" His voice was hoarse - barely a
whisper - and he coughed weakly and swallowed, and tried again.

"Xander - hey, Xan, wake up..." He tugged again, gripping as hard as he could, his arm trembling with effort and his ribs starting to burn - his stomach, as the muscles contracted in spasms.

Xander felt the grip on his ankle first, lost somewhere between the old instinct to deny wakefulness and to wake up because this could be important. No. Bed comfy. Nice be- Xander frowned, prying his eye open, and groaned. "Okay. So not nice bed." The words came out slurred and mumbled and he winced, stretching and flopping onto his back, looking at Spike with a little smile. "Hey. Need some bedside service?"

Spike dropped back into the Nest, looking more exhausted than a man should after a weekend of sleeping, but he stopped Xander before he could crawl into the Nest with concern, pointing. "Door."

Then, Xander heard it, the quiet 'tap tap' at the
door and he dragged a hand through his hair. "Shit. Coming!" He tried for a manly voice of assurance, but what came out was a croak as he scrambled off the couch and to the door, fitting his eye to the view hole before easing it open. "It's Wes," he added for Spike's benefit before addressing Wesley, rubbing his palm groggily over his eye socket and squinting at him. "What is it with people in LA waking up at the ass-crack of dawn?"

"By my watch it's half-past ten. Hardly the 'ass-crack' of anything," Wesley said, peering into the gloom of the hotel suite, feeling uncomfortably as if he were entering an old fashioned sickroom. Which, he supposed, was quite fair enough. It was the feeling of wrongness however, that a vampire should have need of a sickroom that unnerved him the most.

"Yeah, whatever," Xander said, muffled by a yawn and he pulled the door open wider, already retreating. Wesley smiled at the unspoken offer - come in if you can - and went inside. The room, besides being dark, was stiflingly hot, and Wes
clicked the lock over and was grateful to be wearing just a thin, summer shirt, his jacket left behind in the car.

"Xander? Will I trip over anything?"

"Huh? Oh - sorry. Spike - close your eyes." There was click and then a lamp came on next to the bed and Wesley felt his mouth go dry. Xander was leaning against the back of a couch, rubbing his face with his palms - totally naked.

Well, it is warm in here, and...and that bed hasn't been slept in, and... Wesley brought his mental gibbering to a sharp halt and stepped forward, determined to focus on the - the - large television that was on the dresser a the foot of the bed. He hitched the strap of his laptop bag a little higher on his shoulder.

Spike heard Wesley's familiar voice and felt a twist of painful gladness in his chest. "Xan? Could - could I get a drink?" he whispered, watching Xander rub his face and push impatiently at his hair. And he's
"Yeah, sure. Hot and cold running..." Xander smiled at Spike over his shoulder, letting his hands drop and crossing the room. He crouched by the refrigerator, blearily peering in at the contents. "Blood and Pepsi. Yum." He grabbed a blood bag, emptying it into a mug and setting it in the microwave before he became conscious of Wesley looking Anywhere But At Xander. He ran a hand over his face again, hoping it'd wake him up. "Sorry, Wes. I work nights. And Spike, well, vampire. Want anything?"

"What? No - nothing." Wesley moved slowly around the end of the couch, trying to see into the deep shadow there. He felt faintly uneasy. "Spike? Is that - are you there?"

"M'here, Wes." The voice that answered him was hoarse, cracked - the merest shell of Spike's voice, and Wesley winced in empathy. It sounded as if his throat were absolutely raw.
"May I - turn on another lamp? I really need to be able to see you."

"Yeah. One by the TV, there. That -" a gasping wheeze, a cough. "That should do."

"Yes, all right." Wesley moved back to the dresser, reaching for the lamp, conscious of Xander moving purposefully around in the kitchenette area. *Still not getting dressed, though. Good heavens.* He found the button and switched the lamp on and then turned around. He *wanted* to see Spike - he'd missed the vampire, really. Missed their silent drinks, and the easy way they worked together, out in the field. Spike - was always at his back. He was prepared for - something bad. He *thought* he was. He wasn't.

The expression on Wesley's face was one Xander had seen before. First, ironically, on Wesley when he realized just how badly things were going in Sunnydale. The expression, even under the stubble, and without the wire-rimmed glasses, hadn't changed. He'd also seen the expression in Africa, on
the faces of plenty of newly arrived aid workers discovering just what they'd signed on for.

Xander walked over to the ex-Watcher and nudged Wesley with his shoulder since his hands were occupied with blood and soda. "He usually doesn't look this bad. But it's getting worse pretty quick."

Wesley unslung his satchel from his shoulder, studiously *not* watching Xander kneel on the pillows alongside Spike and ease an arm under his shoulders, helping Spike to hold the mug with blood...and a bendy straw?

"Purple, pet?"

Xander flashed Spike a grin, easing in behind him until the vampire could lean against him, one hand supporting the heavy mug. "Yeah. Color changing, too. Or it would be if I put it in a cold drink, I guess. It's the thought that counts."

The vampire was... *No - not 'the vampire'. That's Spike - that's the...person who helped to save the*
world not four months ago. William the Bloody. Spike looked...like the classic comic-book vampire. The comic books Wesley had only seen on the sly when he'd gone away to the Watcher's Academy. Gaunt to the point of emaciation, skin not the deeply ivory-white of a healthy vampire but a dead, grayish, *ashy* color, with blue veins prominent over every limb. There was a large, ugly bruise on his left wrist and hand, plum-black. But the worst... Wesley took a deep breath and looked elsewhere for a moment - realized 'elsewhere' had become the naked curve of Xander's flank and hastily looked back at Spike's torso.

The wound, that had bleed so freely and healed so quickly back in L.A. was, instead of faint scars or smooth skin, three black, swollen lines, from left pectoral to right hip. A muddy grayish-red fanned out from them - infection or irritation, Wesley couldn't be sure. But they were horrific, and sobering, and Wes looked up at Spike's face and saw the look of exhausted resignation in those deeply-socketed eyes, and knew he hadn't kept the shock and horror from his own face.
"Spike..." he said, and then didn't know what to say.

Spike watched Wesley look him over - saw the flinch and the dismay. Hated it, and hated lying there like some kind of...invalid. Like the fucking wheelchair all over again and he pushed that thought away with a shudder. Pushed the blood away, because -

"Pet, I think they gave you some blood that's gone off. It - doesn't taste right," he said, and Xander frowned.

"Spike," he said quietly, setting the blood on top of the heater, "that's the new batch. That I ordered last night."

Spike's eyes flicked to the mug, then to Xander's in disbelief. "Xan...no...gotta be something off in it..."

"But we know there's something off in you, Spike." Wesley knelt at the edge of the nest at Spike's feet unbuckling his satchel and sliding out a slender laptop, setting it to boot on the couch cushions.
"That...that mean something then?"

Wesley glanced back at Spike with a small smile, feeling the relief at having a tangible place to begin at last. "It very well may. As you might imagine, there's little concrete information on poisons that affect vampires. For one thing, vampires are notoriously difficult to poison. And for another -"

"Most of the vampires who get poisoned die," Xander finished quietly, combing a shaky hand through Spike's hair.

"Yes."

"Not this one."

Wesley looked from one to the other, Xander's overlong hair all but obscuring the stubbornly gentle expression on his face. "No. Not this one. He's far too pig-headed, for one thing."

"Oi! That's called 'goal oriented', mate." Spike
winced and looked at the cup of blood with distaste. "Give us a sip of that sugar-water then, pet, yeah?" he asked, and Xander grinned and tipped the Pepsi to his lips. The icy-cold, bubbling liquid nearly choked him and he waved it away, gasping. "Fuck. Me."

"On your back like a girl, huh? Always knew there was something about you." Xander grinned, though he took back the soda before it could spill.

Spike laughed, then coughed, fixing him with wickedly sparkling eyes. "Think you're man enough to take me, Harris?"

"In your dreams, bleach boy." Xander resumed stroking Spike's hair though, taking the sting out of the banter as Spike looked back to Wesley.

"So, Wes - what's it look like? Got anything at all so far?"

Wesley moved his hand over the laptop, finger moving the cursor and thumb tap-tapping. "I'll need
you to look at some pictures - find the actual demon. I've narrowed the field to about...ermmm...27."

"Christ," Spike muttered, but he nodded and then watched, amused, as Wesley tried to figure out how Spike was going to hold and look at the heavy laptop when he couldn't even hold a cup of blood. And...wait for it...ding! He's just noticed I'm in the all-together as well...

"God. I'd think the two of you planned this simply for the joy of embarrassing me."

"Huh?" Xander looked up at Wesley, nothing but confusion on his face, causing Spike to snicker.

*Oh, pet. Been around me too long. There it is. Now he's noticed he's stark bollocks naked in front of the Watcher, too.*

Xander looked down at himself, shrugged. "Sorry. It's hot in here..." His words faded off as he realized that Wesley was...*staring* at him.
"My god. Your eye..."

Xander's hand flew to his forehead where the band of the patch would usually lie, and it shook as he let it fall back into his lap.

"Oh..." Xander said, and looked down - hunched, just a little, and Spike wanted to slap that expression of pitying horror off Wes' face.

"The things we do to save the world, eh Watcher?" Spike snapped, doing his best to glare at Wes - doing his best to remind the ex-Watcher that he was ex-human, as well, and didn't have any call to be staring. Or pitying. Dammit, Wes, now is not the time! Get your shite together and be the Watcher, 'cause that's what we need.

The whole time, Spike had a grip on Xander's forearm - was rubbing soft circles on the flesh there and trying to convey with that so-inadequate touch that it was all right, that Wes was an idiot but he got better, that Xander was...was... Fuckin' beautiful,
and brave - heart of a fuckin' lion, Wes, and don't you dare make him feel...small. Spike had never felt quite so helpless.

Wesley blinked - looked hard at Spike and then at Xander again, and then back to the laptop.

"Yes, well... I'm clearly not in the 'Circle of the Chosen', as Andrew so...eloquently puts it. I wonder what other information he's been withholding... Buffy's credit-card balance, certainly..."

He ran his hand nervously back through his hair and took a deep breath, and sighed.

"And...ummm... I can overlook the nudity. Boy's school, after all..." He schooled his face to a perfectly Wesley mask, and was relieved to see a tiny grin turn up the corner of Xander's mouth.

"Was that some weird English kind of apology?" Xander looked from Wesley to Spike, feeling the knot of tension in his shoulders loosen, and laid his hand over Spike's where it drew gentle circles on his
forearm.

"Believe it was, pet."

Wesley coughed, looking away in embarrassment, back to his computer. "Now, how shall we do this?"

"Start with the pictures? I'm a big fan of more pictures, fewer words." Xander looked up from his intense scrutiny of Spike's fingers to meet Wesley's eyes again. This time Wesley didn't flinch, only gave Xander a small look of amusement - not even the expressive eye-roll his suggestion would have gotten him from Giles. Xander let his breath out with relief, feeling the smile coming more easily.

"Be aware that not all of the demons are pictured, and it is entirely possible that Wolfram and Hart summoned this particular species specially to deal with you and Angel, Spike. They may not exist in our dimension." Wesley cautioned as he held out the laptop, nodding a small 'thank you' to Xander when he took the other side, propping it between them so that Spike could see without having to hold or
bearing its weight.

Xander glanced at the laptop, and then away with a grimace. "Now that's one guy who'd stand out in a police line-up."

"That's the female of the species, I believe."

Xander looked at it again in horror. "Okay, and that one is so not making Miss December any time soon."

"Do you recognize any of them, Spike?"

Spike relaxed when Xander did - gave Wesley a small look of approval. Then he studied the row of pictures on the screen.

"None of these, mate. It was more...articulated, yeah? Sharp."

"Hrmm... Just click that button there, Xander - yes, the red one. That will scroll us to the next page."
After a moment's fumbling, Xander clicked, and a new row of pictures came up.

"Nope. None of these," Spike said, squinting. His eyesight was a little...fuzzy.

Xander clicked, he stared. His back was beginning to ache, and his shoulders, and everywhere he was pressed to Xander was prickling, prickling, prickling, like a thousand needles. But he was going to do this, no matter what. On the fifth page he stared extra-hard. "There! That one - third from the top!"

"Are you sure?" Wesley asked, and Spike rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"Can you make it bigger?"

"Yes, of course, just..." Wes took the computer back for a moment and then turned it to face him again, and the picture filled the screen. Spike shuddered.

"Yup. That's our man. Or woman. Or...whatever."
"Woman. As is usual, the female of the species is more deadly than the male. The T!ky!k -"

"Say that again, mate?"


"Yeah Spike, T!ky!k," Xander said, reeling the name off perfectly, and visibly trying not to grin. Spike stared.

"It's a lot like the !Kung language. That the San speak. In Botswana. I picked up a couple of languages, when I was in Africa. Parts of some, at least." Xander said something else, clicks and explosive little sounds from the back of his throat interspersed with more normal sounds and Spike could only laugh weakly. Wesley looked impressed.

Spike felt a warm little burst of pride; pride at Xander for being right up there with Wes, and pride for the teasing glint in his eye - the confident set of his shoulders. Never had that before. Not the
"Yes, well, well done, Xander. Now...let me see..." Wes put the computer back on the couch and bent over it, and Spike and Xander just grinned at each other.

"Think that means he doesn't speak the language?" Xander asked in a stage whisper, earning a raised eyebrow and look of exasperated amusement from Wesley.

"Might be, pet. Might be."

"For your information," Wesley said as he typed, not looking at them, "I am only vaguely familiar with the conventions of Khosian languages. They were not considered...important for a young Watcher to become proficient in."

"Did you just admit I know a language better than you do?" Despite the teasing, Xander couldn't help but feel a little spark of accomplishment.
Wesley glanced at Xander. "One out of several dozen, I assure you." He closed the laptop with a sigh.

"Spike, I'm going to need to take samples with me for study. It will be painful, but without them, it's entirely trial and error trying to find a cure for you."

Xander felt an unpleasant jolt in his chest at Wesley's words, and he fought the urge to tighten his arms around Spike. "What do you mean 'samples'?"

"Blood," Wesley said regretfully. "And fluid from the damaged tissue."

Xander felt Spike tense in his arms. "Gotta do what you've gotta do, mate."

Wesley nodded, pulling his satchel into his lap and rummaging. "I've brought something stronger for you. Something made for demons, not humans. Perhaps...Xander could administer your first dose, and give it time to take effect while I determine
what samples I'll be needing."

Xander nodded and looked down at Spike. "I'm thinkin' bath. What d'you think?"

Spike sighed a little, because it was going to hurt no matter what. "Yeah, bath sounds good, pet. Nice and hot."

"Yeah." Xander echoed. They watched as Wesley pulled a pill-bottle out of his satchel and opened it - held it out to Xander, who caught three largish capsules in his palm. An odd whitish-green, and Spike cold smell them already - a yeasty, spoiled kind of smell. *Well fuck. Nobody said it'd be nice.*

"Hey, how 'bout my whiskey, Xander?" Spike asked, and Xander nodded and gently let Spike down, until he was lying on the pillows again.

"Sure thing. Drugs and booze - the Keith Moon cocktail."

"Can't go out in better company than that, pet,"
Spike called after him.

"I'd ask you if you were sure that's wise, Spike, but I realize the sheer fallacy of even considering it." Wesley's tone was teasingly fond as he glanced away from the computer screen to offer up a small smile.

Spike looked up at Wesley with a tired chuckle. "Been everywhere, tried it all, mate."

"I would imagine that you have, in nearly one hundred and fifty years of living." Wesley shifted aside to make way for Xander who crouched between the two of them, sliding an arm once more behind Spike's shoulders and setting the three pills into his hand. "And you can take those whenever you've need of them. I don't imagine they'll do more than make you rather pleasantly numb."

"You'd know, would you?" Spike arched an eyebrow, almost able to ignore that he needed Xander's help to lift the whiskey bottle to his lips and drink without spilling the stuff all over him.
"Intimately," Wesley said with a rueful smile.

"Oh?" Spike took a mouthful of whiskey and tossed the pills into his mouth - swallowed and almost gagged as the scent/flavor went thick and sour into his sinuses. He desperately gulped another mouthful of whiskey and coughed. And that fuckin' hurt and bloody hell he was sick of hurting. Xander put the bottle somewhere at the edge of the Nest and stroked his hair back, gentle touch that was becoming...something else. Fuck. I'm a fuckin' walking cliche, aren't I? Love's bitch 'til the end of time. Not supposed to like the man...so much. Not like this, not this fast, not...him. And where in fuck's demon-girl? Spike was pretty sure he wasn't make much sense, so he clenched his teeth together and tried to listen to Wesley.

"...got hurt, of course. And the visions, while not as debilitating for me as they were for...Cordelia are still rather painful from time to time, so I've experimented with various...things. These seem to work best on my altered physiology." Spike noticed
the tiny hesitation over the name, and felt a wave of sympathy for Wesley. *Two in one year. Hard on him...*

"So what *are* you, now?" Xander asked, and Spike tried to look interested but the pills seemed to be working *fast* - seemed to be sending out lovely little waves of floaty painlessness, that alternated with the overall ache of his body like a damper switch; on, off, on, off. *Off'll be bloody marvelous.* Wesley was talking - telling Xander something - but really, his voice was just a background buzz to the slow, singing sort of hum that was starting down in the bottom of his spine.

"I'm gonna go start the bath up, Spike. Be right back," Xander said, and Spike blinked, riding the next wave of *off*. Spike realized that Wesley was talking again and struggled to focus. "Huh?"

Wesley offered up a small smile. "The pills *do* tend to make you somewhat groggy as you're getting used to them, don't they? I asked you if you knew anything of Metathanas demons."
"Of which?"

Wesley chuckled. "That gives me my answer well enough. It's all right. Those particular pills work best on the family of demons with human origins, which includes both the vampire and the Metathanas. Are they working, by the way?"

"Haven't felt this good since fuckin'...Woodstock." Spike said, and laughed.

"They are rather nice, aren't they?" Wesley shared a grin with Spike as Xander returned from the bathroom on a cloud of steam, the muted rush of the tub filling audible through the open door.

"Aw, who's a stoned widdle vampire, then?" Xander asked, crouching next to Spike with a grin, feeling the relief pumping through him like adrenaline at the rapid change in Spike's tension.

"Sod off." Spike batted ineffectually at Xander with a weak hand, letting it drop into The Nest when it
failed to connect. "Wanker."

"Time to borrow the vamp, Wes. How long do you need?"

"Hm? Ah. The pills will reach their plateau in perhaps an hour, I should think. I'm not certain quite how much hot water this hotel has..."

"What do you think, blondie? An hour immersed in hot water?"

"You gonna join me, pet? Oh!" Spike wiggled into a more comfortable position in Xander's arms as the man lifted him and Xander gave him a startled look.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Nah, m'fine, pet... I jus' realized - I'm the sultan still so you, as my harem boy, had better...had better..." The 'off' was damn good - good enough to make him lose his train of thought. He caught a flash of astonished laughter on Wesley's face and snuggled down into the crook of Xander's neck, breathing his
"Smell good, Xan," he mumbled, and giggled a little when Xander tripped on the edge of the silk sheet and squeezed him.

Xander eased his grip on Spike, breathing out in relief. "I didn't hurt you?"

His only answer was a warm nuzzle into his neck and a lick along the jugular. "Er. You do remember that you're a good vampire now, don't you?"

"'M evil. You just taste good, pet."

"Don't worry, Xander. He won't do anything he wouldn't otherwise. The pills simply make him feel...comfortable." Wesley nodded toward the bathroom. "You'd best go. I don't fancy a flood in the hotel room."

"Huh?" It took Xander a moment to remember the small size of the hotel tub, and he swore, carrying Spike into the bathroom and setting him down on
the closed toilet seat to shut off the water and drain a bit just before it could overflow. "Okay, and the record for near disasters in a single hour still goes to Xander Harris." He turned back to Spike with a smile only to find the vampire's eyes fixed intently on him.

"What?" Xander asked, doing that unconscious body-check thing and Spike had to laugh again. *Nooo, that's a giggle 'cause these fuckin' pills are fuckin' brilliant...*

"What, what? No. I mean - Xan...derrrr... C'mere" Spike rode a particularly lovely 'off' wave and this one seemed to just keep *going*, up and up, and he let his eyes flutter shut in bliss.

"Uh huh." Xander tried *not* to feel the little excited flutter in his stomach when Spike used *that* tone of voice, and knelt in front of Spike. He waited for Spike's eyes to open again, and leveled a finger at him, laughing when Spike swayed back and forth like a snake to keep his focus on it. "Them's the pills talking, pal. You? Are stoned out of your mind." He
ducked his head, setting to untangling the sheet from Spike's body, then wrapping his hands around too-thin ribs. "Okay?"

"M'not that stoned... Xanderrrr...you ever... I mean -" Spike just couldn't get his tongue to work right - or maybe it was his brain. *Maybe I am that stoned... Still smells...good...* "Tasted good, too," he muttered, putting his arms around Xander's neck and locking his hands together. He inadvertently grabbed the bruised wrist, and the sizzle of pain shuddered up his arms and morphed into a shudder of delight, and he looked up at Xander through his eyelashes, smirking.

"Wanna taste you again. 'K? Xan? Or you can...no - you're not... You ever go *hunting*, with those lions, Xander?"

Xander caught his breath when Spike looked at him through his lashes, and held it when he spoke again, feeling the weight of Spike's arms intensely. "Who's hunting who here?" *And god, what was in those pills?*
"Whom."

God, Spike's voice was almost a purr, and Xander felt himself pulled down, felt his heart skip, and then drew a quick breath, ducking his head and scooping Spike up again to carry him to the bath. It's just the pills. But Jesus...

Xander shivered at Spike's tongue tracing designs on his neck again.

"Y'don't like it, pet?"

Each word was hot-cold on his throat, and Xander licked his lips, lowering Spike into the bath before he could like it too much. It has been way too long. He looked up to find Spike frowning, though his lashes were still lowered in that smoky look, and Xander couldn't resist pushing his hair out of his face again for a better view. "It'd take a stronger man than me not to like it, Spike. But again: you? Very, very stoned."
"Mmmm..." Spike arched his back, sliding down into the hot, hot water. *Ohhh, yeah, fuckin' YEAH, Wes, love you, Jesus...* The 'off' was now on - no more up and down and it was almost like he'd forgotten what it was like to not have any pain. And bloody hell, the water felt so good.

"Oooh, so fuckin'... Like when me and Dru one time, we found this...stuff, only it was... Well, thought it was, but - " Spike looked over at Xander, who had a puzzled, amused smile on his face. "You *listening*, pet? 'Cause I... Hey! You're the harem boy so you have to...be nice to me. Don't you wanna be nice to me?" Spike reached out and ran his finger down Xander's neck - skipped over the cord of the leather pouch and drew a line down the gold-brown skin over Xander's sternum.

"I can...I know how to be nice...back.."  

"Hey, I'm kneeling on a hard tile floor while you're in a nice comfy tub, mister. That's pretty nice." Xander grabbed a folded towel, putting it under his hip, and shivered as he leaned against the porcelain
of the tub, draping his hand in the hot water and watching it turn pink, clashing with the grayish tinge of Spike's skin where their fingers met. "I'm also not recording your stoned ramblings for posterity, and that's really nice. Above and beyond the call of duty nice."

Despite the teasing, Xander remained acutely aware of the prickles along his skin where Spike's fingers brushed.

"No, not nice. If you were really nice, you'd..." Spike tugged on Xander's hand, frowning. He wanted...*something*... Something different...something *more*, or maybe just something else, but... *Oh, just like that, just like...* "Dru was always nice to me... No, *not* always nice. Had to fuck off with the Bastard, di'n't, she? Had to...always choose... Everybody always choosin' somebody else an'... M'not..." Spike curled his hand around Xander's - looked up at him finally, and reached with his other hand to coil a lock of Xander's hair around his finger.
"You wouldn't do that, would you pet? Wouldn't do that to me..."

This time, Xander let Spike tug his face down, leaning over the rim of the tub, and reached up to curl a hand behind his neck. "No. I've done a lot of dumb things, but a hook-up with Angel's never been one of them." And why doesn't this feel like a dumb thing at all?

Oh, he's...lovely, he is... Spike let the strands fall away from his finger and then slowly slid his hand up into the damp, heavy fall off hair that covered the back of Xander's neck. Felt, with astonishing clarity the smooth curve of Xander's skull, and the rasp of stubble as he stroked his thumb over Xander's jaw. He tugged, ever so slightly, and tilted his head a fraction, and sighed when Xander's mouth touched his own. Slow, easy press of lip to lip - flick of his tongue to the underside of Xander's lip.

After a long moment Xander pulled back a fraction and Spike wanted him back. "S'lovely, pet..."
that's...just lovely..." he murmured.

Xander had thought he was long past the days where a kiss could take his breath away, but he was wrong. He could still feel the warm tingling press of Spike's kiss, the rapidly cooling skin beneath his mouth where Spike's tongue had tasted and reflexively licked his lips. *Bitter, salt, something smoky...*

He swallowed, and closed his eye, flexing his fingers in Spike's hair and resting their foreheads together. "I think I like those pills in you."

"Fuck, Xan, I like these pills in me. Do that again, love, yeah?" Because...god...that had been...Something, something so very... And Spike didn't know if it was the pills *can't be the fuckin' pills, no bloody way*, or if it was just... But he wanted to do it again.

"God, Spike..." Xander breathed, feeling the reflection of his words off of Spike's skin, lips and tongue softly copying Spike's kiss, but this time, he
didn't pull away, and finally identified the last flavor with a smile. "You taste like whiskey." And his lips were so warm, so unnaturally soft.

He opened his eye, unaware he'd even let it close. This near, Spike's eyes were wide, black with the barest ring of crystal blue.

"You taste like sugar, pet...like candy...'come on-a my house, my house...gonna give you candy...'" Spike sang softly, momentary flash of Dru singing that song - wicked grin and lips red with the candied cherries she adored.

"Xan...what...? Don't go, k? Don't let go..." The floating feeling was more of a rushing, now - flying and falling and Spike wondered, if he let go of Xander's hand, if he'd just float away - spin away into the spangled, dancing blackness that was creeping in from all sides. "Slipping..." he murmured, and let his head sag slowly down, until it was on the rim of the tub. "Slipping away..."

Xander followed Spike's head with his hand,
cradling the back of his neck gently as the pounding in his chest eased away into radiant warmth, and the kind of tenderness he remembered feeling watching over Anya through her first flu. "Not leaving, Spike. Won't let you fall." Spike's skin beneath his hairline was so smooth, the unbleached hair so soft where his thumb swept through it. "Let go. It's okay." He felt so fragile.

And Xander's lips tasted of whiskey.

Wesley took his samples quickly, aware of Xander's watchful eye. He promised he'd call soon - took one last look at the gaunt figure in the tub and left, feeling a sharp urgency to fix it - fix it now.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike stretched - long and hard, his muscles tremoring with weakness but it felt so. Bloody. *Good. Gonna have to do something nice for Wes, when this is all over. Really nice.* He relaxed on his back, arms above his head, only gradually becoming
aware of warmth pressed against his legs and hip. He turned his head and there was Xander, curled up in the Nest, his legs pressed against Spike's and his body angled slightly away, his arm curled under his head. Skein of mink-brown hair across his wrist and Spike remembered.

Oh...bloody hell. Kissed him. Kissed him... Fuckin' brilliant kiss. But - Jesus! Spike contemplated the dart of eye beneath eyelid - the slight, upward curve of Xander's lips. Well, but he didn't have to. And he...liked it... Yeah, he did. Spike had to grin, but then the grin faded as he continued to watch Xander sleep. He's exhausted. Isn't eating like he should... Wearin' himself out, watching over me and he shouldn't be doin' that but he is... Spike sighed, enjoying the pleasantly drowsy, pain-free lassitude that was weighing him down. Something special, him. Bloody lucky he found me...not gonna waste one minute of those pills. Spike turned over and scooted back until Xander was pressed against him, shoulders to heels.

He groped for Xander's right arm, and pulled it over
his ribs, twining their fingers loosely together against his sternum. Xander shifted - murmured something - and then settled again, pulling Spike close. Yeah. Not one minute.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander dreamed of Africa. Sweltering nights when the tent kept mosquitoes off and heat in. Too hot for blankets. Too hot for clothes. Too hot to care about blankets or clothes. But still unwilling to let go of an equally hot body, skin slip-sliding against skin, mouth to mouth, breath to breath. Sleek golden hair sticking to Xander's cheek, catching on the band of his patch as hard mouths met and clashed, hungry and wet as the jungle outside and rough with several days' stubble.

Hungry as the sex got - surrounded by a different kind of groan and the smell of antiseptic and sickness outside of Andrej's tent - it was always slow, as if the heat had leached into their veins, leaving them sluggish as they slid and ground
against each other. Most nights, it'd been too hot to fuck, too exhausting to hunt down lube and thrust into a willing hole when their sweat left their skin slick enough to glisten in the half light reflected from outdoors; smooth enough to slide and grind against each other for what felt like hours on sleepless nights, finally passing out in the cooler pre-dawn, tangled together.

But this time, the sickbed moans were close, burning in his ears, and the sweat-slick body against his writhed, clawing at their bed to get away.

Shifting in confusion, Xander's forearm came in contact with *hothothot!* *toohotskin!* and he woke to a scream.

Xander jerked his arm up and away from the slashes across Spike's stomach. "Shit. Spike! Spike!!"

Spike's scream stuttered off into a pained choking as his lungs emptied themselves of air, and he writhed in the nest, the tendons of his throat corded with his head thrown back.
"Sweetheart...sweetheart, come on." Xander rolled over, fumbling across the couch cushions for the bottle of pills, shaking one out into his palm and trying to pry Spike's jaws apart with his fingers. "Jesus Spike, open your goddamn mouth!"

Only a whimper answered him and in desperation, Xander peeled back Spike's lips, breaking the capsule letting the grit and goop ooze over his gums and between his teeth. "Come on, baby. Swallow. Swallow and it'll be better."

_Burning, burning - again, always - no, no, please no, can't do it again, won't - I saved the bloody world, did it twice, what do you want from me, what do you want?_ Spike was aware - just barely - of movement and sound over him - of something clawing at his mouth and pushing something - stink and sulphur-rot taste - into his mouth. Something...someone... Xander? Xander - no, shouldn't be here, can't have him, can't! He roared - managed, somehow, on limbs that felt full of shattered glass - to struggle to his knees. He hung there, panting - spitting - glaring into the red-shot
blackness.

"Not right!" He coughed - gagged on the foulness that coated his lips. "Not him! Can't - have him!"

He clawed at the yielding surface beneath his hands, trying to push himself back and up and to his feet, but his bones ground together, sand and broken clock-work, and every muscle seemed to be stretched past the breaking point and screaming in agony. *On fire, on fire...* "Fire -" he gasped, and something - was touching him again.

Xander pulled Spike back against his chest, rubbing his cheek against Spike's hair, stroking at his throat, whispering to him. "No fire. I'm still here, sweetheart." Xander's nonsense words were becoming less nonsensical every time he held Spike, but he felt the first easing of painful tension once Spike swallowed, shifted his grasp to rub Spike's gums through his cheek, working every last drop of the medicine into him, catching the drops that frothed and bubbled between Spike's lips, trying to urge them back into his mouth, whispering
reassurances, rocking them both carefully back and forth in the nest to the rhythm of his heartbeat that he could hear pounding in his ears.

Hurt, hurt, fucking hurt everywhere, but it was...easing off. Dialing down in increments, little shivery blanks and... '...No fire...here...sweetheart...'

Xander's voice - Xander's hands, touching and soothing and... Little shocks of electricity that were easing to static-buzz and Spike took a deep, deep breath - let it out in a shuddering, half-choked sound that might have been a laugh but...wasn't. He face felt wet.

"Xan?" he asked, hoping - begging - and his throat was scraped and raw - tasted of rotting iron and long-turned milk, sour and cloying.

"Yeah, it's me." Xander let out a shuddering breath of relief and kissed Spike's temple, groping through the pillows for the water bottle he'd stashed between Nest and couch, popping the cap. "Here. Drink. Jesus, I'm so sorry. I should have set an alarm. Had a wakeup call. Something." He tipped
the bottle to Spike's lips, returning to the slow stroking of his throat and feeling Spike swallowing against his fingertips.

Oh god, oh god, oh buggering fuck... Spike let himself slump backwards into Xander - into the heat and solidity of him - the comfort - even though it hurt, still. Let his words wash over him - 'yeah...sorry...drink...should have...' Cold and wet and chemical-nothingness at his mouth and he swallowed and swallowed again - coughed hard enough to make himself gag and then hung there in Xander's arms, shuddering and panting. Wishing it was fucking over.

"S'okay...Xan...s'okay..." he mumbled. God - he needed the rest of the pills.

"It will be." Xander nuzzled into Spike's hair, breathing his scent as much to calm himself as Spike as the spasms of Spike's coughing rattled them both. It might have been imagination, or wishful thinking, but he thought that Spike's scent changed when he was hurting. And when he wasn't. He
groped for Spike's hand, uncurling his fingers and pressing two pills from the still open bottle into his palm so that he could uncap the whiskey for Spike to take them with. "Just two more."

Spike's hand was shaking and he clutched at the pills in his palm, trying to get them up to his fucking mouth without dropping them. He could smell Xander's fear - sharp and sour and wrong - and he could smell the whiskey Xander was holding. He fumbled the pills into his mouth, grimacing, and then felt the cold press of glass to his lips and opened them. Swallowed the whiskey and the pills in a long, burning gulp and then just went limp. Waiting. Because he didn't have the strength to do anything else and Xander's heartbeat was in his ears - was something to concentrate on until the pills kicked back in.

He groped blindly, fingers slipping over the sweat-damp silk, and then Xander's hand was on his, curving around it and squeezing gently, and he knew he was crying but fuck. Didn't matter. Xander didn't care.
Xander could taste salt on his lips - salt from the wet trails on Spike's cheek and Xander realized the vampire was crying. Picking up a corner of the silk, he carefully wiped them away. "I'm so sorry, Spike." God, it'd taken him how long to forget to set an alarm clock for medication times after leaving Africa? Spike's hair was damp under his hand, the curls and waves sticking together with rapidly cooling sweat. "Just ride it out. Wes said they'll work in a few minutes if the first is broken like that since you're so..." thin

So fucking thin, he means. So damn fucked up. Spike thought. "'K. Okay...bloody - hell, pet... Just talk, yeah? Don't..." Another flare of pain, and a surge of nauseating nothingness, and Spike figured that going off the damn pills was not gonna be a walk in the park. "Don't stop, Xan, don't...need you to...keep me..."

"What if I want to keep you?" Xander heard his voice come out low, soothing despite the catch in it, and he cleared his throat.
'...want to keep you...' Spike felt himself twitch, just a bit, as the words finally got through. "That...so, pet? Want to keep me?"

"Not keep like," Xander hesitated, "own, but keep you around, yeah. I've missed..." He let his breath out with a frustrated huff and a soft laugh at himself. "Who would have thought Xander Harris would run out of words, huh?"

"Never happen, pet," Spike murmured, smiling - turning his face just enough so that his cheek rested against Xander's.

Xander licked his lips, ducking his head into the touch of Spike's cheek. "It might. It has." He closed his eye, settling his fingers between Spike's, and remembered. "I didn't talk much in Africa. I mean, what was the point when nobody understood my language in half the places I went? And high school French? Let me tell you, it is not useful in that part of the world." He felt a self-deprecating smile come over him. "Especially when you don't remember
much of it in the first place."

Xander felt a bare puff of not-breath from Spike across the back of his hand, and lifted the other stroke his arm. "It was like that when I met Andrej."

Spike made a 'huh?' noise and started to lift his head, but Xander stopped him, gently pressing Spike's head back down to his shoulder and petting his hair.

"Andrej was- Okay, I guess Andrej is a doctor from Doctors Without Borders. He's probably still with them. They're this...group that provides medical aid to people who can't get it wherever they are. I traveled around with them for a while cause whenever a new Slayer went on a rampage, they'd be the first to hear about it. Or at least the first to hear about it who spoke any language I could understand."

"Or sort of understand." Xander smiled against Spike's cheek. "I spoke a little French. He spoke a lot of French and a little English. But we got by. Um."
Body language goes a long way too." Xander could feel his cheek warming against Spike's in a blush. Not an all-consuming blush of shame, just - a blush.

Spike just closed his eyes - rode the up-and-down of Xander's breathing. Listened to him babble about some doctor in Africa and - *Since when is my boy...with boys?* He felt the warmth of a blush suffuse Xander's skin and it was delicious - as was the wave of warm, spicy scent that followed.

"Xan...what about...demon-girl? I thought...you and the girl..." The pain was receding again - swallowed up by that lovely, floating calm, and Spike sighed in utter bliss, and - well - *snuggled* into Xander's neck a little. *Take what I can get...* 

"We might've in time," Xander heard himself say, resting his cheek in the warmth of Spike's hair, relieved to be able to hold him closer as the drugs kicked in. "But Ahn didn't make it out of the school. She died saving Andrew." The words still hurt, but at least now, he could recognize them as words. The actual hurt had - distance now. "We haven't found
her body though. I think - I don't think we will."

Not in the Hellmouth.

*Hope you *don't* *find her, love*, Spike thought, but didn't say. Because he thought that might cause some sort of obscure hurt, where all he meant was... Comfort. Solace. He felt a tug of distant sorrow for the brash young woman who'd struggled to hard to become *human* again, only to lose her life in the same gods-forsaken hole she'd struggled to escape.

"Sorry, pet," he said finally, when the silence seemed to go on too long. Xander's cheek felt good against his skull - his arms felt good, loosely cradling him. Spike didn't want him to move as the drug began to creep in warm waves up and up his spine, and the good, floating, pain-free zone was settling right back over him.

"Didn't mean to...dredge all that up, yeah? Your doctor, sounds like...interestin' bloke..."
Xander couldn't help the smile at that. "Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?"

"Don't apologize for Anya. She hated that." He tried not to shake Spike too badly with the laughter he couldn't keep down. But he wanted...wished Spike to know it was okay. Didn't want to hold back information from Spike the way the Council had. "And he wasn't 'my' doctor. Not really. Or not for long." He let his mind wind back down pathways of muggy nights, and how good it felt to see a familiar face, any familiar face there. "Africa's a funny place."

"Mmmm... Yeah? Wasn't so funny when I was there..." Spike pushed aside the details of his sojourn there - pushed aside the nightmare transit across that vast continent when all he wanted to do was go home - home - and he couldn't remember where it was, or how to get there. Just that 'home' was a green-eyed girl and a long-legged brunette with a voice that could shatter glass and he wanted it, oh, he wanted it. He shifted a little, and thought
guiltily that Xander might not be comfortable.

"You all right back there, pet?"

Xander tightened his arms a little. "Don't you dare move." He wiggled his back into the cushions, keeping Spike against him. "How does a vampire travel in Africa?"

Spike smiled to himself and let his weight rest more firmly against Xander - stretched his legs out and almost laughed at the sheer bliss of pain-free movement. *Could do anything right now. Fight. Well, maybe not fight... Shag. Oh, yeah, fuck yeah...*

He put his hands on Xander's thighs where they bracketed his own and stroked absently, the dark, straight hairs pleasantly tickly under his fingers.

"I mostly hid out in the day - dug down into the ground or found an abandoned building... Got halfway up the Gold Coast down in the bilges of some fuckin' boat... shippin' opium or guns or some such - dodgy business..." He shifted again, rubbing
his cheek slowly against Xander's, his fingers' light caress becoming something more like rubbing, fingertips digging in, just a little. God, feels good, so warm...like how he's just there...solid...

"Ate bloody rats. Not my finest hour."

Xander shivered under the rubbing, lowering his head until it rested against Spike's shoulder, feeling the movement of Spike's jaw against his temple. "I ate canned stuff. Like canned beans and chicken. And stuff I wouldn't have eaten even when I was a starving sixteen year old." Spike's skin was so smooth under his lips, and he smiled against it, feeling Spike rub against his hair like a cat. "Do you feel the heat there the way we do? Or does it feel good to you? The way it gets into your bones?"

"It felt good there. Felt...mmm..." Spike couldn't help it - he had to rub his cheek slowly, so slowly, back and forth against Xander's hair. Silken-soft, lingering scent of mint and salt. He breathed it in, opening his mouth just a little so he could taste it - let it really soak into him.
Xander let his eye close under the hypnotic rhythm of Spike's fingers brushing back and forth across his legs. The heat wasn't all that was getting into his bones. *I kissed him this morning,* he remembered, with enough clarity to make him draw a deep, steadying breath.

"Felt like that tub'a hot water... Just - all around..." His pushed a little harder with his fingers, almost kneading now, but the sleek, heavy muscles felt good under his hands, and the way Xander's hand was slowly, slowly petting his collarbone - his chest... *God, yeah, just keep the pills comin' an' I'll stay here for days...*

He could feel himself going out; lazily sliding down a warm slope of buzzing, painless sparks. *Wish he'd...kiss me...* Spike thought, and sighed his lungs empty, and didn't bother to refill them.

In the quiet of Spike's not breathing, Xander became more aware of his own; brushing his lips across Spike's throat where a pulse would be
fluttering in a human, tasting the utter stillness there against his tongue. Copper and musk, and something like smoke. "It was hard to think. Hard to move," Xander said, aware that the memories weren't all that were hard, but that was okay too. Young, healthy American male, there. "But nice sometimes. Lazy sometimes. Like everything flowed into everything else. Like time didn't matter."

No feeling of urgency, no rush against the Apocalypse or against death, which was always so close he couldn't bring himself to waste time worrying about it. He breathed in the scent beneath Spike's jaw, lips parted to feel again the sleepy warmth he remembered, skin to skin. So hard not to stroke as he wanted to, all too aware of the ribs prominent beneath his palm as he lifted his face against Spike's, speaking against the corner of his lips. "Does this hurt?"

*Have to know. Have to be sure. Feels so nice.*

"Feels good, pet..." Spike murmured, the delicate press of Xander's lips to his skin an exquisite tease,
a delicious flirt. "Xan..." He felt like he'd drift away and never come back to earth if Xander let him go, and that was...good, that was... "You can...f'you want, it's..." Light, and warm and... "Please, yeah? S'nice..."

Xander might have said once that he felt as if he were under a spell, but he knew better. No spell felt like this. No spell came with this kind of honest need to taste Spike again, make the kisses real again in his mind. "You stop me the second it hurts." He breathed the words against Spike's lips, tasting each one against the whiskey, woodsmoke, bitter taste within, unable to quite stifle the soft sigh of appreciation.

_Warm, soft, good_. Xander edged forward, pressing up against Spike's back with a quiet groan. "God. Taking advantage of the patient..." He couldn't help but smile.

"You're no Nightingale," Spike murmured, and the hot, insistent press of hard flesh at his back was... _ Fucking lovely, Jesus, he..._ Xander's mouth moved
slowly over his, lightly pressing and tasting and Spike couldn't, for the life of him, make his arms move. But he wanted Xander to press in, to taste and explore and really kiss him and he was so damn loopy he couldn't even fist his hand through that hair, thick and heavy and bloody wonderful. Spike knew what he looked like - Wes' horror and his own covert inspections had filled him in quite nicely. And still...this...god.

"Sweet..." he said, and it was - sweet as clover-honey, and Spike wanted more.

"Hot," Xander answered with a grin, nipping Spike's bottom lip, feeling the flesh give pleasantly beneath his teeth, then darting in with his tongue; tasting, really tasting Spike for the first time. He groaned, feeling that invisible band around his chest tighten, make him want to pull Spike hard against himself until that heat leeched inside, merged together.

Because for the first time in years, Xander wanted, moving restlessly against Spike's spine. The memories of Spike writhing - twisted with pain -
was still fresh in his mind though, close enough to make him shudder. "Don't want to hurt you."

"Can't, fuckin' can't, pet, m'a demon, not candy floss..." Spike turned his head restlessly, aware that he was starting to not actually feel his legs, and even though that gave him a moment's shivery memory of the wheelchair, he knew it was the pills. Just wanted a little more of that mouth on mouth, that most intimate of touches. Because the truth was there, in what Xander was doing. In that soft, careful press of lips and hesitent tongue. Care, he cares, he's...considering...me... Won't hurt me...

"Kiss me, love, please? Kiss me..."

"Jesus, yes. Sweetheart," Xander whispered the endearment into Spike's lips, tangling his fingers in blond curls, kissing, kissing? Possessing Spike's lips, mouth, until his neck ached with the position, and he shifted his hold, breathing hard against Spike's cheek as he tried to reclaim his voice. "Spike, gotta-"
"No, pet, no -" Spike's fingers curled weakly on Xander's legs and he caught them, tangling them with his and bringing them to his mouth, kissing each one in turn.

"Not stopping." He eased himself from behind Spike, laying him back into the Nest, keeping their fingers woven together between them before settling in against Spike's side, one leg draped over his. Xander rested on one elbow, hovering over Spike's gaunt face. He traced the line of one sharp cheekbone with his finger, then trailed it over pale lips. "Just getting started."

**Bloody hell, that was - "Xan, yeah - do that again, do that -"** Xander's mouth stopped his - *took* his, slow, deep kiss that tasted of sugar and sleep and salt, tasted of *Xander* and Spike wanted to taste that more, and deeper. But the tide of drugs in him was rising, rising - was making his head swim and he knew he was going down - out - under. *Lovely way to die, pet, oh... "Don't...don't stop..."* he murmured, even as his fingers went limp in Xander's hold and his eyes fluttered shut. The pills
rolled him over and then pulled him away, and he went down into the deeps smiling.

Xander felt Spike go utterly still, utterly relaxed, and bowed his head over him, making himself feel every inch where their skin touched, every breath he took that Spike didn't. "God, if this is what you do to me when you're hurt, you're going to make me sixteen and horny all over again when you're well, aren't you?"

Spike's hand moved easily with Xander's as he brushed their twined fingers over Spike's cheeks, lips, across his throat, all too aware of the pounding of his own blood in his ears and the aching hardness still pressed to Spike's hip bone.

Spike's lips moved vaguely, with an inarticulate mumble, and Xander leaned down for one last taste, drawing on the fullness of Spike's lower lip. "Gonna keep you," he said again, and meant it.

"But you're gonna kill me." He lay his head down on the Nest, next to one bony shoulder, the movement
shifting him against Spike's side. The contact of warm skin - no, the contact of *Spike's* warm skin still enough to make him want to wrap himself around Spike and -

Xander caught his breath, and let it out slowly, pushing up and away from Spike's body regretfully. "Sorry, sweetheart, but *Wesley* is gonna kill me if I follow up on that thought." With a groan, he rolled onto his back, head lolling to the side to watch Spike as he ghosted his hand down over chest and belly, feeling a shivery trail behind the heat as if to say *'Spike's fingers were here'*.

Looking down, Xander caught Spike's hand with his left, weaving their fingers together again and drawing in a shaky breath, his free hand flexing and uncurling against his belly. "God, I feel like such a pervert, Spike. Whacking off while you're fucking passed out and holding my hand." He paused, glancing down at himself and sighing. "Okay, I know I'm a pervert, because saying that only made it worse."
"Better. Worse...oh, god, fuck it," Xander groaned, giving in, and sliding his hand around himself, biting his lip where Spike had kissed, feeling the imprint of Spike's unnaturally hot flesh along his thighs as he stroked. "Much better." The words came out in a whisper and he tightened his hand on Spike's, rocking his hips into the grasp of his fist to the slow rhythm he and Spike had kissed to. Good, good, but not good enough; that slow stroke and burn was only enough to build the raw need coiling in Xander's belly until he was trembling with it, with the intensity of fresh memory of Spike's skin just barely sliding against his, that rough accent begging more...

Wanting more.

Xander dropped his head back into the pillows, hearing Spike's voice again, "Xan, yeah - do that again, do that - Don't...don't stop..."

"Not gonna stop, baby. Just watch this. Watch me, all for you, all - god." Xander's throat closed down on the words, and he let go of himself in frustration,
thumping his hand down into the pillows as he helplessly thrust his hips against the air, trying desperately not to disturb the Nest, or Spike. Not enough!

His hand shook as he drew Spike's fingers to his lips, kissing them, hissing as he rolled over to press a kiss to Spike's lips as well. "Sorry sweetheart. Sleep. I swear, I'll be right back."

Because if he could not whack off, and do it now, his head was going to fucking explode.

And unfortunately, they both needed his head intact.

With one last touch to Spike's cheek, Xander eased himself out of the Nest, and stumbled the first few steps forward, turning and letting his back thump against the dividing wall for support until his knees worked right. He let the fantasy unfurl again, this time, letting Spike join him. Nothing fancy, just Spike's lips under his, lemonade and woodsmoke tastes, his hand around Spike's dick, stripping it
hard and fast while Spike jacked him slow and evil. "Want this hard pet. Beautiful - fuckin' beautiful. Gonna shove you down on that bed and ride you till you -

The shrill and sudden ring of the phone drowned out whatever fantasy! Spike was planning to ride Xander until. Xander dropped his head back at the wall with a thud and a half hysterical laugh. "The fucking world is out to give me blue balls." He snatched up the phone, snapping into it, "What?"

"Oh - ah...Xander? I'm - sorry, is - is something wrong? Is Spike - should I call back?" Wesley heard the note of frustration in Xander's voice and hoped that Spike hadn't gotten worse.

Xander almost bit his tongue, the impulse to say something - sarcastic was so strong. But fuck - wasn't Wes' fault, he was just...doing what he'd promised.

Xander sighed and closed his eye - leaned his head back against the wall again, this time without the
"No, everything's fine, I was just - coming out of the shower, I - tripped. It's okay. Spike's asleep," Xander said, walking into the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

"Oh - good. Have you given him more of the pills? It's been - nearly eight hours." Wes heard a sigh.

"Yeah, I did. He - woke up when...the others wore off. Wes..." Xander hesitated. "He was - screaming, Wes."

The exhaustion - the horror in Xander's voice made Wesley go cold. If Xander admitted to that much, it had been bad. "Damn it. I'm - I'm sorry, Xander. Bloody hell. I should have told you...the after-effects are quite...severe, if you don't... Really, it's my fault."

Xander shook his head, then groaned with frustration and dragged a hand through his hair when he realized that Wesley couldn't see it. "It's
okay, Wes. I should have set the alarm or something. I didn't even think -"

"You have quite a lot on your mind." Wesley's voice was - gentle - and Xander found himself sinking down on the edge of the bath tub, face resting in his hand. "It's understandable that some things should slip through the cracks."

"Some things, Wes. But not big things. Not things that have Spike waking up screaming in my -" Xander took a deep breath, steadying breath. "Sorry."

"It's perfectly all right."

"Do they teach you to sound this understanding at Watcher school?"

Wesley chuckled. "No. That, I've had to learn on my own. But I find it's fairly effective in convincing Angel that I'm the reasonable one and he should listen to me because of it."
"I'll bet." Xander sighed. "Okay, Wes. What've you got for us?"

"What I have is this. The T!ky!k are similar to spiders in that they inject a neurotoxin into their...prey, in order to paralyze them. In this case, the toxin is secreted by tiny hairs that cover the fore-limbs." Wesley cleared his throat, realizing belatedly how - clinical - he sounded. But clinical might actually be better.

"In the normal course of events, the victim is paralyzed within five to fifteen minutes. Vampire physiology, however, makes that impossible. The neurotoxin effects the system instead in a way similar to snake venom - it causes intense pain."

"This, I know, Wes. What's new?" Xander sounded impatient, and Wesley cleared his throat again.

"I'm sorry, Xander. The healing ability that would normally neutralize this poison is affected by the constant assault on the system. The fever is the body trying to - get rid of the poison. But this makes
the metabolism speed up, and the poison act faster - and with more intensity. It's - a vicious cycle, I'm afraid."

"Catch 22," Xander said softly, and Wesley sighed.

"Yes, it is. Too much expenditure of energy with diminishing returns. Spike's body is breaking down because of the fever - it's making him too weak to heal..." Wes heard a small sound of distress from Xander and hurried to finish.

"There is a combination of herbs that will neutralize the poison. I'm researching it now. And...the dark lines on Spike's body? That is - those are the hairs. They shed from the T!ky!k, to insure enough poison is injected. We have to - clean the hairs out. Then the antidote and then..."

"The next words out of your mouth had better be 'Spike gets better'," Xander said, though he was too tired to inject any kind of sinister warning into the words.
"Spike gets better," Wesley confirmed gently. "But he gets better slowly. It won't happen over night, Xander. The extent of the damage to his system is incredible. He's been ravaged by this poison, and-

"Wes. I know." Xander ground the heel of his palm against his eye. "I've seen what it's done to him. Fuck. He can't even drink his blood!"

"He will. The poison is systemic, Xander. It's saturated his tissues, his glands, and his saliva."

Xander remembered, with sudden vivid clarity, the taste of lemon in Spike's mouth. "Shit."

"Xander?"

"Um. The poison...in his saliva wouldn't happen to be a danger to humans, would it?"

"I assure you, Xander. You're quite safe to...demonstrate your affections in any way Spike is capable of comfortably bearing at this time."
"They teach you that smug tone of voice in Watcher school too, don't they?"

"Trade secret, I'm afraid."

Xander had to laugh at that, even though he was tired, and scared, damnit, and hurting for Spike in ways he hadn't hurt for anyone in a long time.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, Wes. I...just... Thanks."

"You're welcome, Xander. Spike and I..." Wesley paused for a moment, wondering how much Xander knew. Wondering if it mattered. "We've...both lost people... He - helped me, a great deal. I'd do anything..."

"So will I," Xander said, when the silence stretched. "Wes?"

"Yes, Xander?"

"I - it's safe to hope now, right?"
"Yes. Yes, I believe it is. The treatment won't be pleasant, Xander."

"Will it work?"

"Yes." This time, Wesley's voice was absolutely firm.

"That's all I need to hear. When can we do it?"

"I need another day of research, then two, I believe, to brew the antidote."

"Wes."

Wesley heard the frustration in Xander's voice, the exhaustion stretching him thinner with each passing moment. "Tomorrow, I will return with the necessary supplies to clean the hairs from his body and to bind his wounds until the antidote is repaired. You must understand that in its weakened state, his body will be unable to heal the wounds left behind when we remove the source of the poison. You will have to keep them clean, bound-"
"Done," Xander said.

"There's more than -"

Xander interrupted him. "I don't care. I mean, I do. I care. Just come here tomorrow, and tell me what I've got to do, and that's what I'll do. There's nothing more to it than that."

Wesley know an immovable object when he saw one, and Xander was one, right now. But - he'd heard, through Andrew, about Xander's travels in Africa. Xander - could probably handle this better than Wesley could.

"All right, Xander. I do trust you. I just - wanted to warn you. I should be able to get away sometime rather early - I'll be there before noon, is that all right?"

"Wes, I'm ready to do it now."

"Before noon will have to suffice. Listen to me carefully now. You're to give him two doses in the
morning. The first at the regular time, and the second at Eleven A.M. but alcohol, perhaps, may be a poor idea. I'm not entirely certain if it thins the blood of a vampire, but we'd best not risk it at this time."

"Right. Second dose. Eleven. Got it." Xander leaned back, resting a hand on the tap, just wanting to fill the tub as hot as it would go and soak until the tension went away. "And Wes?"

"Yes, Xander?"

And how did the guy sound so patient all the time? Probably all those years with Angel.

"Thanks."

"As I said, Xander. He's my friend, too."
Waking up *this* time wasn't nearly as awful. Spike twitched hard, shivering away from a needle-prickle touch at his shoulder and blinked up into Xander's anxious face.

"Does it hurt already? Have to go a half-hour less..." Xander hovered as Spike pushed himself up on his elbow and rubbed a shaking hand over his face.

"Hurts a bit, not so bad. Had worse. Fuck, Xan...need something to drink..." Spike grimaced at the taste in his mouth - the coating that seemed to have covered every tooth and surface. "God -" Xander was pawing through the edges of the Nest, looking for something.

"Maybe you wanna brush your teeth?" he asked, and Spike thought about that.

"Yeah, maybe I do. Anything'd be better than this
bloody...aftertaste...oh. You - broke one of those pills in my mouth." Spike remembered it, suddenly and vividly, and he shuddered in revulsion.

"Yeah, I did. Sorry. Won't happen again." Xander's voice was low and unhappy and Spike reached out and caught one of his aimlessly searching hands, tugging him closer.

"Don't go all hangdog on me, pet. You did what you had to do. It's all right, yeah? And...I remember you makin' up for in a bloody nice way..." Spike grinned, even though his arm was starting to tremor hard under his weight, and Xander reluctantly grinned back.

"Let's get you in the bathroom, then, and get those fangs nice and shiny."

"An' then some more of that bein' nice, maybe," Spike murmured, and was rewarded by a more genuine smile and a slow flush all over Xander's Still naked! Boy's comin' along nicely... body.
"Should've been nice to you years ago if that's what it would've got me," Xander muttered, feeling the blush in every pore, and smiling. He knelt in the Nest, sliding an arm under Spike's shoulders to lift him, and bit his lip. "I'm still sorry about the pill's taste. I talked to Wesley last night and he told me that coming down off them is harder than going without them. I'm not going to miss a dose again."

Spike's fingers pressed against Xander's right cheek until he turned his head to look down at him. "We're not gonna miss a dose again. 'S not your fault, pet. Just...get this taste out of my mouth, and I'll take another dose. Not late this time, yeah?"

"Yeah." Xander lifted Spike, easing them both out of the Nest and then to the bathroom where he'd spent some extra time spreading the hotel bed spread and blankets over the cold tile floor.

Standing at the sink was hard, and that was bloody humiliating, and Spike wanted to put his fist right through the empty mirror that he blankly stared at as he slowly brushed his teeth and tried not to fall
right down on his ass. Xander hovered, and Spike could tell that he'd have an arm around him if the man didn't think it would hurt too much. And it would hurt, which was another reason Spike wished he could put his fist through the mirror, but even the thought took too much energy and he doggedly spit and rinsed and drank several palmfuls of water, grateful for the taste of sweet mint and the chlorine-spiked tap-water.

Xander guided him carefully back to the Nest and they both looked at it in dismay.

"Needs a bit of fluff and fold, yeah?" Spike said weakly, inwardly dreading the wait, but knowing it had to be done.

"Yeah..." Xander grimaced at the couch, knowing from experience how rough its covering was against the skin. "Do you feel up to another bath while I make the Nest again?"

"I can - can," Spike let go of Xander briefly, and swayed on his feet. "A bath sounds lovely, pet."
"You're gonna be the cleanest vampire in California." Xander turned them carefully, walking Spike back into the bathroom and helping him down onto the closed toilet seat while he adjusted the taps.

Spike watched Xander fiddle with the taps - watched him fold a towel for Spike to lean on and generally act...as if he'd done this before. And not just...since he found me.. "You - help those doctors down in Africa, then? You're so...comfortable with this. With...me."

Xander shrugged. "I helped where I could. Usually, that wasn't much more than making somebody comfortable and getting them to take their pills." He held his fingers beneath the faucet, letting the force of the water push them down. "But that's not why I'm comfortable with you. You're not a patient. You're -" Xander stopped. He didn't know quite what Spike was. Yet. "Spike."

"Yeah, I'm Spike." Spike had to smile at that - at the
funny little look on Xander's face that said he wanted, maybe, to say something else, or something more, but...wouldn't. Smart, this one. What am I, indeed? He shivered suddenly, the steam getting to him and Xander shot him a look of concern.

"You okay? Is the fever coming back?"

"M'fine, pet. I remember...fighting, when I was there. Always gunfire 'round the corner, it seemed... Or a fire, something... Always people goin' here and there with their household stacked up on their heads and...all these skinny little kids..." The scenes had, in fact, been a great deal more gory from time to time - something his soul had had no trouble incorporating into the general chaos in his head. It hadn't been...nice.

"It was bad," Xander agreed, leaving the tub to fill and sliding his arms under Spike again. "But I didn't know them." He bit his lip, feeling obscurely guilty for something he'd worn out his guilt on during the first few months. "Like, I knew there was nothing I
could do that would save them. I couldn't afford to let myself care. God, that was - I want to say that was hard, but it scares me how easy it was to keep myself from getting involved in any patient's future." He lowered Spike carefully into the water, feeling it lapping at his fingers as he arranged him in the tub. "I can't not care about what happens to you."

"That so, pet? Was a time you'd have been happy to see me dust... And me happy to see you drained." Spike let his head roll a little on the towel, watching Xander crouching there by the tub, his eye on the rippling water.

"Yeah, well...I was young and stupid once."

"Things do change, don't they. Change so much..." Another shiver came over him - heat of the water and the dragging weakness, and he thought unhappily that he really should eat.

"I'll be right back." He considered, for just a moment, asking Spike if he thought he could get
some blood down, then remembered Wesley's voice, telling him how *difficult* the process would be. And decided that Spike was going to drink the blood if Xander had to prop his jaw open and pour it in.

Nicely, of course. "I'll be right back. And then, I'll tell you what else Wesley said."

Spike closed his eyes and tracked Xander through sound as pills were gathered and - yes - blood was heated. Even from the bathroom the smell was unpleasant and Spike shifted uneasily. *Hope Wes has something...anything... Can't do this much longer...worse than the wheelchair, worse than being a ghost...worse then that bloody chip, almost... Least I can bite but bloody hell! I don't want to. Sad state for a vampire, this.*

When Xander returned, it was with the travel mug full of blood in one hand and three pills in the other, and he sat down on the rim of the tub. "Can you take these with blood?"
"Can try, pet."

Xander felt his chest constrict with the exhaustion in Spike's voice, and ran his hand through Spike's curls after the vampire relieved him of the pills. As Spike drank, he began to talk. "Wesley has a cure," he said first, because dammit, he wasn't going to string Spike along. Not on something this important.

"Knew Wes'd come through!" Spike grinned, and then took a long drink of the blood and grimaced.

"It's in a few stages. The first one, we're gonna do today. It's - it's why I didn't bring the whiskey in. That demon that slashed you secretes its poison in little hairs. That's what the black stripes are. And it's making you weak enough that your body can't push them out, and can't heal from it."

"Hairs? They are?" Spike looked down at the stripes on his body - raised and throbbing and so fucking sore. Fucking demons.

Spike's hair tickled the back and sides of Xander's
hand as he petted, feeling the smooth contour of Spike's skull beneath his touch. "So that's the first part of the procedure. We have to...get the hairs out."

Xander's hand felt good, and Spike let it distract him from the foul taste of the blood. It was bitter - rotten - and it took everything he had to swallow it down and keep it down. But he almost spit out his mouthful when Xander's words came clear in his head.

"Get them out? How in bloody hell do we do that? No - wait. Fuck." Spike knew exactly how, and from the look on Xander's face, so did Xander.

Xander grimaced. "Do I really have to say?"

"What is this, a condemned man's last meal?"

"No, but Wes said you're gonna need all the strength you can get. I mean it won't dust you," Jesus, I hope not. "but the way you are right now? The healing is...not gonna happen so fast." Xander's
hand stilled, cupping the back of Spike's head, and 
he swept his thumb back and forth over a low ridge 
in the bone. "You'll be wrapped up a few days, so I'll 
have to change the bandages when you take your 
pills, but...I know how to do that." 'To keep your 
insides on the inside,' he didn't add, though it was 
impossible to keep the thought out of his head. 
"And then when he's got the antidote ready, you'll 
be ready to take it."

"Never been more ready for anything, pet," Spike 
murmured, relaxing into Xander's hand - into his 
touch - into the warm caress of his voice. He heard 
the words, but he heard the worry behind them, 
too - the empathy and the caring and that...was 
better than the rest put together. Better than the 
Nest, and the blood, and the unthinking invitation 
he'd gotten into Xander's home.

Pathetic, me. I'd offer up my heart and 
my...immortal soul if he asked. 'Cause he gives a 
bloody damn, I'd offer up...everything...anything. 
Haven't loved anybody since the soul. Not 
really...Niblet, maybe. And now... Fucking love.
Never my friend but I let her in every time, don't I? The first surge of 'off' from the pills washed over him and he shut his inner voice down. Because that...did not need airing, now or ever. The empty mug drooped in his hands and Xander took it and set it aside.

"And I am so ready to have you well again." Xander ducked his head against a flash memory of Spike's hands flexing on his thighs, weak, but there. He let his breath out. "And contrary to any messages my body might be sending, it's not just because of the too weak to - Jesus and I sound like an ass even trying to say that's not what all of this is about." He hoped the apology showed in his smile when he tipped Spike's head back with gentle touch. "Want you strong again."

"I want that, too," Spike whispered, and he knew that the intensity of his want - of his new and puzzling desire for this man was in his eyes, hot and bright. He turned his face into Xander's palm and kissed it, letting his tongue-tip brush the callused skin, feeling that tingle of pain-to-pleasure that the
drug gave him and wishing, god, that he could stay awake long enough to do something.

Xander shivered at the flicker of Spike's tongue across his palm and leaned back, letting his head rest against the wall. "What are you thinking" The words came from him unbidden, but he didn't take them back, *feeling* the intensity of Spike's gaze.

"That I'd like to shag you for three days straight," Spike said, giving Xander his best 'come hither' smile. Because what he was *thinking* was...was a muddle of emotion and hopeless longing and helpless desire and even if he *could* get it all into words it would be words that would probably make no sense. Or make too *much* sense, and Spike...just didn't know. He couldn't tell what Xander was thinking, deep in his heart. And he was afraid to ask.

For the second time in less than a day, the back of Xander's head made hard contact with a wall. "Jesus. Unfair advantage over the naked man here, Spike. Not that you're not naked yourself. Or a man. At least by definition. And not that I'm
complaining..." Xander sighed. "Okay, and apparently, I can either be the strong, silent type or have a functioning libido, which makes me eternally seventeen." Xander absently traced Spike's lower lip, mentally running back over what he'd said before adding: "Which, by the way, was in no way a suggestion that I have any objection whatsoever to that plan."

Spike laughed, and playfully caught Xander's fingertips between his teeth, letting his tongue flutter over them as his teeth held them lightly. The drug swirled in him, making things so bright, and making the edges vibrate like the picture on a badly tuned TV. Something swam up out of his memory and abruptly he took Xander's hand in his, letting his fingers go with a last, teasing caress.

"When'd you eat last, mate? You look like you've lost a couple pounds. And I know you're not sleepin' the whole time I am." Spike tried to frown, but even though he couldn't he made his voice as stern as possible.
"Gotta stay strong, pet, or I'll be nursin' you, when this is all done."

Xander chuckled. Quietly, and let his fingers sift between Spike's to clasp their hands together. "Only one patient at a time. That's my rule. I'm...good. Okay, I'm fucking exhausted if you want the truth, but I'm good at running on adrenaline and stubbornness these days. At the site - Jesus - the second week I was there, Carl's daughter got sick with the chicken pox, and Mariel's boss wouldn't let her off, so Matt and I split his shift for a week. By the end of it, Russ was grabbing me before I could walk straight into walls."

He ran his thumb along Spike's, feeling Spike's smoothness against his calluses. "I'm a light sleeper when I have somebody to take care of."

"This isn't work...I'm not work, am I?" Spike blinked - long blink that made the room spin a little, and tugged on Xander's hand. "Don't do that, love. Don't - make excuses. Won't make me worse if you stop and eat, Xander. Won't make me worse if you
sleep. Need you, pet, all right?"

The 'off' buzzed up his spine, shivery delight and he closed his eyes - arched back against the towel behind him and ran their joined hands slowly down his side, stopping short of the wounds that ran over his hip. "Need you, love..."

Xander felt the words. In his chest - in his stomach where they fluttered, and he uncurled his fingers against Spike's side, stroking the hollow beneath his ribs. "You're not work," he said finally, firmly. "God, you're not anything like work." He curled down until he could nuzzle his cheek against Spike's hair, all but wrapped around his body in the bath. "It...scares me. Waking up and having to see you to know you're..." Not dust. There. "...okay. How badly I have to wake up and see you."

Spike looked searchingly at the face that was so close to his own - at the scarred, scared, familiar face. The face he'd once hated enough to wish dead and gone forever. Everything, everything, everything you touch, and you know it, god dammit,
you know it... Please...just this once... He couldn't talk - god and maybe Dru alone knew what would come spilling out. So he reached up, his fingers shaking and his arms like lead, and tugged Xander closer yet, and kissed him. And tried, with his lips and tongue and fingers, to say, what his brain wouldn't allow. To say that his need was just as great, and that his desperation wasn't for the sex, but for the man. The Heart of them all, and god, he needed that.

Shaking, Xander slid into the warm bath water, his knees to either side of Spike's hips, catching Spike's hand to his chest, and cradling Spike's face with his fingers. He tried to find the words against Spike's lips, but they stuck in his throat, caught there above the painful swell of his heart for Spike. "Can't leave me now." The words came out unsteadily, though he tried for a smile in them. "Didn't stop being a complete jerk just to let you go again." The words barely made sense, wrapped up in a time that felt like another life now, when the strength of this feeling for Spike had been just as strong, but bitter, rotten, jealous. Nothing like this.
Spike could not look away - could not draw breath to speak and the urge to throw his head back and howl his frustration out was intense. He couldn't do anything, trapped as he was - drugged, and ill, and too weak to get out of the damn bath, probably. Leave me again...leave me again...no, you'll not be doing that ever, love, ever... He pulled Xander down again, urgent and clumsy and desperate, god, just so very, very desperate. Part of what had driven him from Los Angeles had been the loneliness, despite Wesley's sometime company, and he couldn't face that again - couldn't and wouldn't and would cling to that shakily-spoken promise for all he was worth. Xander tasted like caramel, and like salt, and Spike kissed him until they were both shaking too hard to go on.

Xander rested his forehead against Spike's, clutching the pale fingertips to his chest where he could feel the thundering of his heart beneath their shivering. "Keeping you...keeping you." The words verged on nonsense, on pure feeling as he felt his breath reflected back at him from Spike's skin, from
his lips until he realized that the trembling was from more than need. "Jesus. You're freezing." The words came out in a whisper, because he knew they'd end the moment though they had to be said as the water's temperature dropped past warm on its way to cold.

"Don't care," Spike muttered, trying to pull Xander closer. "You're warm, love, come and keep me warm -"

"Sweetheart..." Xander closed his eye, gathering massive effort to straighten up, bringing Spike's fingers to his lips to kiss, to breathe warm air over before pressing them to his chest. "You have no idea how badly I'd rather do that."

"Think I know," Spike said softly, letting his free hand drop to Xander's lap - to his cock that was rigid and so warm, thrumming with blood and desire. He stroked once, lightly, aware his own body was incapable of that at the moment - not caring. "God, want to feel this in me, love...so warm...warm me up from the inside, yeah? Xan..."
"God, Spike!" It was all Xander could do not to thrust hard into Spike's grasp, sliding restlessly against his hand. "Thought - thought you were supposed to be all virtuous now." And that would so be more effective without the orgasmic groan on the end, Harris.

"Virtue is for virgins and the clergy, love. Please, Xan, want you to...want it so much..." Spike knew the drug was floating him right out of his head, but he was tolerating it better now - he was sure he could stay awake, if he needed to, and god, he needed to. He tugged his other hand free of Xander's hold and ran it lightly down the heaving chest in front of him - rubbed a soothing circle on the corded belly, all the while stroking slowly over the silken skin of Xander's cock. "Can't hurt me, god, can't, love -"

"Fuck." Seldom was an expletive so heartfelt as the band of need tightened again around Xander's chest. He leaned back, grasping the sides of the bath with shaking fingers and thrust up into Spike's
hold, feeling as if every muscle in his body was cording tighter and tighter with that rough silk voice and so-light, trembling touch. "Feel like - such a complete - pervert - getting off..." Xander half laughed, half groaned, letting his head fall back for a moment to just feel. "Good...good."

"Fuckin' beautiful," Spike murmured, tightening his grip, slipping his thumb over the head and watching in satisfaction as Xander shuddered, his eye fluttering shut. "No idea, love, what you look like - what you do to me -"

Know what you do to me.

"Tell me." Xander heard the roughness in his own voice, the unsteadiness beneath the words. The slide of Spike's thumb was sending shocks skittering across his nerves like tweaking the tightened wires of a wind-up toy, making his arms begin to shake, barely holding him up. So close. God. So fucking on edge.

"Burn for you, Xander. Want to feel you - over me,
in me." Spike ran his hand up Xander's chest, to curl behind the back of his neck - to tug him forward. "Your weight, your heat - want you to...have me...cover me...want you all over me..." He stretched up, just enough, to trace the edge of one nipple with his tongue and tightened his grip; stroke and twist and glide, Xander's heartbeat drumming in his ears, his panting gasps hot across Spike's face. "Smell like you, taste like you, feel you in me all day..." His own voice was a whisper now and he wanted Xander's mouth on his. "Kiss me, Xan, kiss me -"

The images Spike painted flashed across Xander's mind like live things, and he groaned into the kiss, body bucking with the force of the orgasm that tore through him, only barely catching his weight on his arms. The pulse and ebb of feeling through his body gentled the kiss, shaping words into Spike's mouth that he wasn't ready yet to say out loud, shivering. So close he could feel the brush of Spike's chest with every one of the vampire's unnecessary breaths, and he unlocked the fingers of one hand from the rim of the tub, burying them in Spike's
damp hair and cradling him into the kiss that tasted of bitter herbs, salt, smoke, lemonade, *Spike*.

The tidal scent of Xander's come was thick and welcome and *clean* - was unbearably good and Spike gave in to the urge finally and lifted his hand to his mouth - let his tongue glide over his knuckles while Xander panted into his neck and slowly came back down. Spike felt like *he* had come, almost - the singing fire of pleasure through his body - from *watching* Xander, from tasting and feeling him - was like a low-wattage shock. It was *good*, it was...different and, in the sudden dizzying *drop* as the pills kicked in once and for all, it was *enough*. His lids were too heavy to stay open and he let them droop down, into star-shot blackness that revolved slowly, slowly.

"Can't wait...do that for real, Xan..." Xander's kiss had been - telling. Encouraging - bloody brilliant. "Could kiss you all day."

Xander shivered as much from the words as Spike's touch, the band tightening around his chest again,
but this time, it was warm. Unlike the water. Still half-dazed, Xander ran a shaking hand over Spike's lips one last time, bending to taste them before shuffling backwards to pull the drain plug and turn the water back on, full blast and hot, soaking an extra towel under the tap and wrapping it warmly around Spike's upper body.

The Nest...the Nest sounded like heaven just then, and Xander unbent his cramping legs, folding Spike's hands comfortably in his own lap. Stepping out of the tub, Xander snatched up the last towel as goose bumps rose across his skin, scrubbing briskly at the last of the cold water while waiting for the tub to fill. He had a Nest to rebuild, and a vampire to hold.

*Please. God. Just a little nap. Let me have time for just one little nap.*

Before cutting Spike open.

He shivered more violently, stopping the water and
filling his head with the pictures Spike had painted in his mind instead as he went to rebuild the Nest.


An insistent and obnoxious noise wormed it's way into the pleasant dream Spike was having, and he fought his way to a mostly-awake state, snarling. The alarm shrilled at him from it's position on the couch and Spike reached over and slapped at it, finally hitting a button that turned it off. *Bloody thing. Should put it through the wall.* But he didn't, because he remembered with a small start that it was for the pills. *And Xander...* Who wasn't awake at all. Who was, in fact, lying behind Spike, one arm up on his hip and resting lightly down his thigh, the other, until moments ago, tucked under Spike's head. *That's gonna hurt when he wakes up. If he wakes up.* Spike watched Xander sleep for a moment, considering.

Xander was exhausted or he'd have never slept through the alarm. *Let him sleep, then. I can get the*
pills. Spike stretched, feeling the smallest twinge along his chest where the skin pulled over the wounds, but nothing else. He was still pleasantly floating, but definitely coming down. But not for a bit. So...kitchen. Blood, god. Pills. Right. He pushed Xander's arm gently off his hip and slowly, slowly pushed himself to his knees. Which was a lot harder to do than he thought. His legs were like rubber - his arms were - and he was panting before he was halfway up, hanging on the edge of the couch. Fuck. Just..go slow... The weakness scared him, and he was NOT going to give in to it. Right. Just lean on the couch...

Dizziness gripped him as he stood and he swayed for a moment, eyes shut and fingers sinking into the couch arm. Then he slowly, slowly made his way into the kitchen area.

Xander woke to a crash and clatter. That kept clattering. And cursing.

But only made sense when Xander heard that faint, but distinct crunching of shifting bone and threw
himself upright in the Nest, scrambling out of the pillows. "Spike? Shit. Ow!" He tripped over the blanket and sprawled beneath the television, but it was far enough to see the disaster in the kitchen. Spike on the floor, cans and tubes and little plastic cups scattered around him. Game faced, which should have frightened Xander. Should have.

Might have, on any other vampire but Spike. Because even that face was becoming easier and easier to read.

Xander scrambled to his feet, crossing the small room to crouch next to Spike, hesitated, then laid his hand against one sharply ridged cheek, stroking beneath his eye. "...I'm up."

Fuck. Of course he is. Spike wanted to growl, but that seemed like...a silly thing to do. But he was pissed, so he did anyway. Xander's fingers, lightly caressing, hesitated infinitesimally and then curved around, cupping his cheek. Thumb brushing delicately along his cheekbone and fingertips rubbing slowly in the hair behind his ear. Sorry, pet,
"Sorry, sorry... "Bloody pills... got dizzy, is all," he muttered.

"Yeah..." Xander settled onto one knee, letting Spike rest against his hand. "It was like that for me after I lost my eye. God, those pills didn't do me any favors either." It's okay, sweetheart. Jesus. I remember how embarrassing it was too. "I should've warned you that I sleep like the dead after orgasms. At least Anya said I did. I think I still do." He also remembered the pictures she'd taken as proof, one of which involved her sitting primly on his bare ass while he snored into his pillow, utterly unaware of her presence. Another involved a miniature Santa hat, and that one, Xander was very glad to have lost in the destruction of the Hellmouth.

"Seems like you do, pet." Spike pushed into Xander's hand a little and sighed. He really didn't know if he could get back up again and... Gonna have to carry me. Again. This is... this is... The sudden wash of fury that nearly choked him felt good and he growled again, a little louder. Felt it
rattle in his chest and he wished he could just punch something. Wondered if he tried if he'd just embarrass himself more.

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Xander felt the rattle of Spike's growl, and closed his eyes, feeling it through the palm against Spike's cheek and the hand on his back. Felt the frustration rolling off of Spike in waves, and couldn't think of a damned thing to say that wouldn't just make Spike feel more weak. Instead, he bent and rested his forehead against Spike's, ridges to smooth, and breathed.

"It's not much longer now."

It felt good, Xander's forehead pressed to his. Felt like Dru, so long ago, when they would lean together and dance to the music in her head...music that sometimes Spike was pretty sure he could hear, too. It made him feel less lonely, and it made him realize how hard Xander was trying. To make
him feel...good. To give him some dignity. *Not that I've got much, doing this. Staggering in here. Stupid thing to do...*

"No, not long now..." Spike reached up and on the second try got his hand around Xander's neck, just lightly holding him. "Not long, love..."

Xander's eye burned, and he shut it tightly, though he couldn't say why it chose now to tear up. Maybe because it was almost over, Spike's illness, or maybe because he was so tired, or maybe it was just *Spike*. He let his breath out slowly, smiling when he felt Spike's brow smooth beneath his, and kissed the last of the ridges as they vanished beneath the skin. "That feels so weird."

"Does not," Spike objected, automatic, and then he had to smile a little. "Maybe it does." He looked up at Xander and chose to ignore the glimmer of moisture in his eye. "Guess I should get up off this sodding cold floor and take my pills, yeah?"

"And maybe I should help, huh?" Breathing seemed
a little easier as Xander slipped his arms under Spike, standing with him, and carrying him back to the Nest where he settled him, stuffing a few extra pillows beneath his back so that he could sit up comfortably. "Good?"

"Good, pet." One shaky hand lay against Xander's cheek, and he caught it, nuzzling in briefly and pressing a kiss to Spike's palm before letting go and heading back to the kitchen.

"Is there really any difference in taste between different blood types? I mean, I get that different animals would have different tasting blood, but what about blood types?"

Spike wiggled around, getting comfortable - feeling decadent and lazy *not weak as a kitten* as he watched his human *IS mine, damn-it* heat blood for him. Heat blood naked. *He's beautiful. Bet he doesn't know that. Gonna make him know, when I'm better.*

"A little. Can't tell you the difference to drink it, but
they're all different. Easier to tell if the...donor was sick or on drugs or anything like that." He watched Xander cross to the Nest with a small smirk on his face.

"Uh huh," Xander said slowly, eyeing the look on Spike's face as he knelt in the Nest, letting Spike wrap his hands around mug and pills. "You gonna tell me what you're looking so smug about?"

"Just enjoyin' the view...harem boy. I think I'll need a massage soon. Or...you could feed me grapes." Spike gulped the pills and blood as fast as he could, grimacing - trying not to laugh at the momentary look that crossed Xander's face.

"Yeah, well, I'm not peeling them, O Exalted Master." Xander folded his legs and leaned back against the couch, determined not to blush this time. Much. He nudged Spike with his knee, keeping the contact of skin to skin afterwards instead of pulling back.

"Mmmmm...peeled grapes." Spike tipped his head
back and let his eyes drift shut - but peeked through his lashes at Xander. "Like eyeballs, really. Don't get seeds with eyeballs, though..."

"You know, I have eaten an eye before." Xander also remembered, vaguely, that there had been a lot of alcohol involved leading up to its consumption.

Spike felt his eyes go wide and then narrow again as he stared speculatively at Xander's grin. "You never. Whose, then?"

"Did so! Not too long after I first got to Africa. I was in...god, I don't remember where I was. I was so...drunk." That part was still embarrassing to admit. That he hadn't exactly started off with the white hat bang that might have been expected of him.

But Xander could still feel the grin stretching his face, and an absurd little flutter of pride that he'd (okay, maybe possibly) surprised the Big Bad.
"I was in this little village where the big delicacy was sheep eyes, and they were pretty special. I couldn't turn them down without offending everybody in the place, and by then..." Xander shrugged, vaguely recalling the 'pop' of the membrane and the bitter, foul liquid coating his tongue in between slugs of cheap vodka. "I just thought it was funny. Laughed like hell, but I didn't gag it up." That had been the beginning of his recovery.

"Never would have imagined you would, pet. Made of sterner stuff, you..." Spike let his head fall back on the pillows a bit - let his hand slip off his own thigh and onto Xander's knee. "You were always braver than you let yourself think, Xan...always rushin' in and tryin' to save the day... Backed Angelus up, even, and there's not many alive can say that."

Xander felt good - the muscle under the warm skin solid and pleasing to touch. He unconsciously kneaded, just a little. Just to feel.

"I wasn't trying to save the day so much as I was too
stubborn to let something really stupid kill someone I loved." Because, yeah, he still remembered loving Buffy with all the intensity his teenaged heart could muster. It'd changed into something else, after, but he would have - *Wait a minute.* "Angel *told* you about that?"

"Oh, he *told* us. Told us at *length*. Ranted and raved and stomped in little circles. It was bloody amusing and believe me, pet, I needed amusing being stuck in that damn chair. Thought he'd never leave off." Spike lifted his head and looked at Xander with a sly little grin on his lips. "He even invented a new torture or two, just for you."

Xander tilted his head. "You know? I'm trying to feel scared. I really am. But all I'm feeling is this little glow of satisfaction." He tapped his torso, just beneath the ribs. "Right here."

"Too bloody right, mate. Made my week, that. And that whole business with the ghosts at the school - he 'bout scrubbed his skin off, tryin' to get rid of the 'human taint'. Always was a bit of a drama queen."
Xander reached out absently, combing his fingers through the light snarls Spike's hair had picked up over night. "If we'd known that, it would have made him a *lot* less scary." Which he can admit comfortably now. Because no matter how brave, finding your favorite teacher dead in your librarian's bed is pretty wiggy.

"Oh, the stories I could tell..." Spike relaxed into the gentle combing, but a moment later he was sighing in frustration. "Think you could trade me this cup for one of your sodas, pet? Can't get the taste out of my mouth."

And it was just....*wrong*, for blood to leave a bad aftertaste, and it made Spike remember - well, *acknowledge* - his illness all over again. And he didn't want to.

"Yeah." Xander gave Spike's hair one last stroke, took the mug, and heaved himself onto the couch, and from there to the floor with minimal Nest disturbance. "Mountain Dew, Pepsi, or generic fizzy
orange? There's also some diet stuff I got by accident, but let's say it together - *ew*.

*God. How does he stand it? They're all vile.* "Sure I can't have some whiskey, pet?" Spike called, and sighed again at the *'Ha!'* that came back. "Gimme the generic orange, then - can't abide a drink that glows in the dark or one that has enough sugar in it to wire a whole town."

Xander came back with the orange and the Mountain Dew, uncapping the one for Spike, and the other for himself. "So which one is this? The glow in the dark one or the sugary one?" He watched Spike sniff at the orange soda without hiding his disgust. "And I'll have you know that stuff carries the recommended daily allowance of vitamin C, pal."

Spike eyed the radioactive yellow-green of Xander's drink of choice. "That's both, actually." He took a long drink of the orange, swishing it in his teeth a little. The highly sweetened, very manufactured flavor of it was...disgusting. But it washed away the
even more revolting foulness of the blood, which was... Depressing, really.

"I'll be sure and pack some of this along next time it looks like I'm in danger of gettin' scurvy then, shall I?" he said, and took another drink. And shuddered. Hurry up, Wes, 'cause if I don't get a real drink soon...

Xander considered his drink. "Y'know, that's fair. I can pretend to be grossed out by your blood-"

"And I'll be genuinely revolted by your sodas," Spike finished, screwing the cap back on.

Xander laughed. "I barely drink them anymore, but it's this or hotel water, and - I'm thinking no to the hotel water." He glanced at the clock, and grimaced. "Another half hour before Wes gets here. He wanted the pills to take full effect before we started."

"I'll be comatose if he doesn't get here soon." Spike let Xander take his soda and then shot the man a
hard look. "I ate. Now it's your turn."

"I think comatose is kinda what Wes is hoping for," Xander admitted, then glanced to the kitchen with a sigh. "Y'know, there comes a certain age when cold pizza for breakfast loses its appeal." He shuffled himself out of the Nest again, making his way to the kitchen and peering into the refrigerator in the time honored tradition of believing that if you stare inside the refrigerator long enough, it will somehow mysteriously divulge new contents. He shut it with a grimace. "I'll order something in."

"See if there's Mongolian bar-be-que!" Spike called. "Spicy yak ribs. Or...spring rolls and that sweet corn soup...and something sweet for afters... Hit the spot." Take away wasn't the best food, but it was food, and it would be hot. Get that drawn look off of Xander's face, maybe. Give him a little color.

Xander leaned over the couch, snatching up the menu folder from the bed-side table and flipping it open. "Um. Pizza, pizza, pizza, Mexican, sandwich shops...There's a pan-Asian place. Do you - can you
eat anything?" Xander asked, realizing that despite his time living with Spike, he knew absolutely nothing of the mechanics of vampire consumption of human food.


"What? You defile the time-honored ninety-nine cent burrito special? What kind of Southern Californian vamp are you?" Xander climbed over the end of the couch to the phone. "Ribs, rolls, soup... and okay, what part of Asia is ice cream native to?"

"The part that moved to San Francisco." Spike had to smile at that - at the sweet-tooth that persisted in the man. "Do they deliver ice cream?"

Xander grinned back. "By the pint. As long as they sell it, I'll buy it. Cherry Blossom sound okay?"

"Cherry Blossom?"
Xander shrugged, dialing. "It's sweet. It's kind of skewed the way you keep leering at me - don't stop that, by the way - and kind of tart. Hi. Do you deliver out to Santa Monica?"

Spike watched Xander fold the corners of the phone book - doodle in the margin and generally fidget while he gave their order and recited the address of the hotel. He did his best to project a bit of 'sexual predator', despite the lovely waves of floating oblivion that kept crashing over him. *Wish I could back this up with something more tangible... You're not gonna get out of bed for a week when I'm better, pet.* Xander hopped up and hung up the phone and Spike grinned when he snuggled back down into the Nest.

And around Spike, carefully sliding a leg over Spike's, and getting his arm under Spike's head, pillowing it; tangling the fingers of the other hand with Spike's where they rested on the uninjured side of his chest.

"Food is on its way. Wesley is on his way. And
they're including free tea with the order so you won't have to drink any more of that awful awful soda. Which in no way is a good thing because it leaves more for me."

Spike's skin was soft under Xander's fingers, and he couldn't resist sweeping his thumb along the spare curve of Spike's pectoral. Or what was left of it, and found himself grinning at the over-long riot of Spike's hair.

Spike couldn't resist - he reached over and patted the firm, rippling muscles of Xander's abdomen. "Watching your girlish figure then, pet? You know, you can burn a couple thousand calories having sex..."

"How many can I burn laying here wishing I was having sex?" Xander asked, watching Spike's fingers. Though it sparked something. Memory. "I used to eat. When I wasn't having sex. When I was too stressed to be having sex, I mean. Stressed? I ate. It kinda...stopped." He shrugged. "I haven't thought so much about what I eat since then." Which was an
odd conversation to be having, naked in a nest of pillows with a vampire petting his stomach. Which he had to admit did look a lot more like the stomach he'd had on the swim team than the stomach he'd needed slayer strength to fasten his cummerbund around.

"Had other things to worry about, I imagine," Spike said, letting his hand slip a little lower so it could gently pet and tug the dark, straight hairs that grew in an enticing line down from Xander's navel.

Xander's breath hitched at a definite stir of anticipation from his cock, and he rolled over, pinning it and Spike's hand against Spike's hip with a laugh. He turned Spike's face toward him for a slow, sweet kiss. "I am not gonna answer the door for our food with a raging boner, Spike." He wasn't going to think too hard about the interest his body was showing in that thought, though.

"Might get us our food for free, if you did. 'Sides, they won't be here for ages, Xan..." Spike wiggled his hand until he could feel the thicker hair at the
top of Xander's pubic bone. He started stroking again, tugging gently, and leaned up to kiss Xander back. *Tastes good even after that bloody soda.*

Xander inhaled against Spike's lips, tasting the faint lingering copper tang of blood under the orange sweetness, and *god*, the silk felt nice under his skin when he rocked against Spike's hand. "You - you might as well know sooner or later," he said, laying his head down on Spike's shoulder, mouthing the skin of his throat between words, "I am really - *really* - easy once the naughty touching starts."

"I like that in a harem boy," Spike murmured, and shifted a little, getting Xander's leg up a little higher over his hips. He could feel the rapidly hardening cock pushing at his thigh, and he got his other arm free of the press of their bodies and stroked it lazily down Xander's back. The pills were making everything...*fuzzy*. And there was a kind of glow to the edges of everything. But he was pretty sure he could stave off the inevitable fade-out. The vampiric ability to metabolize almost anything was still intact, if a bit sluggish.
"Spike..." Xander grasped for the slippery thoughts, sighing into his neck as he skated a hand over Spike's uninjured hip, and - Xander stilled, closing his eyes. "This isn't right."

Right? What does that mean? "Explain 'right', pet. Not sure I'm following." Spike knew his voice had gone...flat. Maybe even cold. But that line - at this moment - was far, far too reminiscent of Buffy and her eternal hot-and-cold running...lust, and he really just could not take that again. Wouldn't.

Xander shook his head quickly, rising on his supporting arm to look at Spike, really look at him, as he tenderly stroked the limp flesh laying against Spike's thigh, willing him to get it. "It shouldn't be just about me. Not when you - when I can't give you -" He shook his head again in frustration. "It's not fair that you're not getting anything out of this." You have no idea, no idea how hard it is to stop.

Spike heaved a long sigh of relief. He took Xander's hand and brought it up to his mouth, kissing the
scarred, thickened knuckles. "Love - no. It's not about...fair. This isn't - a game. It's just the pills, yeah? But Xander..." Spike rubbed his cheek against Xander's hand - let his own hand slip around to ghost over Xander's chest and ribs - tease his navel and feather over the gun-shot scar. "Xan, I do get something from this... I make you feel good, love. And...you are so...beautiful. You are so... How you look, when I touch you? The look in your eyes and..." Spike lifted his hips a little, friction of silk and skin on Xander's cock. "How your neck arches, and how your skin is flushed - so hot and soft... How you smell, love, like cloves and mint and salt...like... God, Xander...you make me burn. Make me want to taste you and touch you... Love, there's no 'fair'... Let me do this, yeah? Please?"

Spike's words left Xander shivering, feeling like his skin was two sizes too small and two degrees too hot everywhere Spike touched him. He groaned into their kiss, taking Spike's lips as hungrily as he wished he could take Spike's body. The way Spike said it - he couldn't not believe. "God. So much I want to do to you." But there was agreement in there
somewhere too as he moved against Spike; silk and skin and sweat. "With - for - God -" Xander gave up, helplessly, on finding the right word, mouthing kisses down Spike's throat. "Gonna make you feel so good when you're better."

Spike arched up into the kisses Xander was raining down on him. He let his hand slide lower and grasped the hot, silken flesh of Xander's cock, rubbing his thumb slowly over the head and the slippery drop of fluid there. It felt so good, his heat and his weight - his need - his desire.

"Tell me. What do you want to do to me, love? Tell me, Xan..."

"Right now - wanna taste you," Xander said, feeling the heat of words and breath reflected back at him from Spike's throat; laying his lips over where a pulse would be, flickering the rhythm with his tongue. "Everywhere but here." He gave Spike's limp cock a gentle squeeze, fingertips sliding softly down to cup his balls, only a light touch. "Till you're so fuckin' sensitive. Begging, but if you touch me,
I'm gonna stop, gonna make you wait for it before I go down on you...let you fuck my throat till I can't talk...can't breathe..." Xander realized he was babbling, but Spike's fingers felt so good around him, and his skin was so soft against him.

Oh...god... Xander was pressing - unintentionally - on the scars and it was sending little shock-waves of a twisting kind of pleasure-pain that was making Spike shudder all over. He fisted a handful of Xander's hair and yanked him down for a hard kiss, sliding his hand faster up and down the length of Xander's cock.

"Want to...want to feel you around me like that - hot and wet...willing... What else, what else...

Breathing was getting hard to coordinate around the kiss. Thinking was all but a complete loss, the words fractured and disjointed by Spike's lips and hand as Xander moved restlessly against him.

"Want - want to fuck you -" No finesse this time, the urge so strong it made Xander shake. "Want to - to watch you ride, h-hard like you need me- Ah - fuck,
Spike!" Xander shuddered with orgasm against Spike, feeling the slipperiness over Spike's hand; his flesh, his hip, the silk, tongues and flickers of pleasure skittering over his nerves as he fought for breath.

Spike writhed against Xander, desperate for whatever sensation he could get. He hadn't lied - his desire was a coal burning down low in his belly and even though he wasn't getting off in the usual way his whole body was singing from the drug, from Xander's words; from the rasp and slide of his body and the wet, sucking kisses from his mouth. Spike got his wet fingers up to his mouth and licked, deliberate and slow, his gaze never leaving Xander's.

"You taste like cream - spiced cream and salt...taste so. Damn. Good. Next time I'm gonna suck you, Xander...next time I want you to come in my mouth."

Xander groaned at the quiver Spike's words produced in his belly, leaning forward to drag his
tongue over Spike's fingers too; sliding his tongue against Spike's tongue between them, tasting himself and oranges and salt and *Spike*, and *feeling* the intense look in Spike's eyes. "Bet you'd be so fuckin' *good*. The way you kiss..."

"Fuck, Xan..." Spike kissed back hungrily, fucking his tongue into Xander's mouth, pulling the man down and getting every inch of contact he could get. "Make you scream, I will...make you beg," he gasped out, between kisses, and sank his fingers into the taut muscles of Xander's ass, rubbing and kneading, loving the feel of him under his hands.

"I'm all ready begging," Xander whispered into Spike's mouth around hungry kisses, pushing away the knowledge that they had both Wesley *and* food coming soon until he *couldn't* ignore it anymore and rested his forehead against Spike's. "*Only* the fact that Wes is coming to make you better could get me to stop kissing you and get out of this Nest right now. Just want you to know that."

"Only reason I'm lettin' you up is so you can let Wes
do his thing. So I can get better. And then I'm going to show you, love, what you do to me...all night..." Spike nipped once at Xander's throat, just hard enough. "Just wanted you to know that."

The bite tingled, then burned with a promise that made Xander shiver. "Getting - out - of bed now," Xander said around kisses, only making it as far as Spike's other side before tangling his hand in Spike's hair with a reluctant sigh. "Any minute now. God."

Spike chuckled, sliding his hand over Xander's arm until he reached his fingers, gripping them. "Go on, pet."

"For Christmas, puppies, and sex. Fuck. Yes. Lots of sex. I used to think about more than sex. I think."

"I don't care if you don't think about anything else ever again." Spike watched Xander lever himself slowly up - watched him stand there, his eye dark and heavy-lidded, his skin a warm and delicious pink under the tan. So fucking sexy...god...when did that happen?
"You are so...fucking...lovely," Spike purred, and he slowly ran his tongue up a finger, watching. Loving the reactions and the want.

Xander sucked in his breath at that look and that tongue. And the words, a little voice in his mind admitted. Spike's words went straight to his belly and still made him blush. "Not gonna get tired of hearing that." He flashed Spike a quick grin before hurrying into the bathroom, still wearing the smile, and stared at himself, startled, in the mirror. I look so, so fucked. And yet, he couldn't bring himself to care, or to do more than splash a quick handful of water over his face, scrubbing at the two-day stubble that he really did need to shave. Soon.

Cleaning himself off, he dampened a towel and returned to Spike, and a long, slow, friendly hello kiss. "You are so lucky vampires aren't susceptible to beard burn."

"Feels good, that. All scratchy over my skin. And then...you can use your tongue, smooth me down
again..." Spike smirked at the momentary glaze that came over Xander's eye and then sighed, because Xander really did have to dress for the delivery guy - and probably for Wes this time, too.

Xander sighed, swiping the cloth one last time, gently over Spike's skin before balling it up and throwing it across the room, out of the way. "Hang onto that thought, okay?" He bent, pressing his lips chastely to Spike's before standing, rummaging through the packed duffel he'd barely looked at since coming into the hotel room. "It feels wrong, saying you make me feel so good. When you're this sick, I mean. But you do." The jeans were soft as he tugged them on, buttoning them, and pulling on a white wife-beater over them.

Spike stretched a little, listening to Xander poke around in the kitchen, doing a desultory sort of clean-up of the mess Spike had made earlier. He plucked the silk sheet up a little higher, shivering at the whisper of it across sensitized skin and jerked, startled, at a knock on the door. Wes or food... He almost hoped it would be food, because he wasn't
sure he'd be able to eat if Wes...happened...first.
The pills were making the room reel around him, and he was so damn *tired*, now, from fighting the effect. *Just a bit longer, either way. And then...fuck...hope I start feeling better soon...so tired of this...*

When Xander returned, he returned balancing a big brown paper bag, and a cardboard cup holder that smelled of tea, and sauces, and frying oil. "I think the room is smelling a little musky," he admitted, remembering how *quickly* the delivery boy had gone. Or maybe he was just looking disreputable enough to start making people nervous.

Spike thought it might be that Xander had forgotten all about the patch - hadn't had it on in two days - but he wasn't going to mention it. Instead he took a deep breath, savoring the food-smells and the Xander smells, all mingled and salt-savory-sweet.

"Smells delicious to *me*, pet. No accounting for taste, yeah?"
Xander laughed, unfolding the bag and giving Spike a look through his hair. "Well, I wasn't planning to let him in, anyway. But if Wesley runs away, we're gonna have a small problem on our hands." Though privately, he didn't think running away was what Wesley would be inclined to do.

"Watcher's seen scarier things than you with a two-day beard, love." Spike hesitated, but then sighed and gave in. "Help me with these pillows, yeah? Need to sit up."

"Two day beard and not much sleep," Xander corrected, scooting forward to bolster Spike with several pillows, covertly folding the silk to hide the tell-tale stains on it between the seams of two pillows.

"After Wes comes by you're gonna lay down and sleep if I have to get him to slip you a micky, pet. I won't have you wearin' yourself down like this." Spike pulled a pair of chopsticks out of their paper wrapper and snapped them apart - idly rubbed them together to smooth off any splinters. "And
you're gonna eat, too. Need you all healthy, love," Spike added, shooting Xander a look to take the edge off his scolding tone. Never had anybody fret themselves this much over me. It's...nice. But I won't let him keep on.

"You don't have to drug me," Xander promised, watching Spike preparing his chopsticks. "I'll sleep after it's done, until it's time for your next dose." He wondered for a moment when the vampire had first learned to use them. Because Xander was pretty sure the Victorian English hadn't caught on to chopsticks yet, and he couldn't imagine the wild child William the Bloody having the patience to sit down and learn. He was still clumsy with his own, fumbling with the larger pieces of meat. "Eating now," he added, pointing to the food with his chopsticks before taking a bite.

"Here, pet, easier like this," Spike said, taking Xander's fingers in his and gently rearranging his hold on the chopsticks. Then he picked up his own again and happily plucked out a chunk of rib, biting deep.
Xander frowned, relaxing his fingers around the chopsticks. It *was* easier like that. "Where did you learn to use these?"

"China," Spike said, watching Xander. Wondering if he'd make the connection and get all...skittish.

A jolt of recognition ran through Xander as he added *Spike + China* and came up with the inevitable, and grinned. "You mean you had time to around your busy Slayer killing schedule?"

*That* was unexpected, and Spike downed a mouthful of tea, considering.

"You don't mind, then, me talking about that? I usually get a quick 'Shut up, Spike' when it comes to...everything I ever did."

Xander's grin faded immediately at that, and he poked at his food. "I *want* to hear about everything you've done. Well, okay, maybe nothing involving incredibly graphic torture, but..." He frowned.
"It doesn't bother you?"

Xander lifted his head, looking at Spike. His Spike. And he wasn't gonna bother thinking too hard about when Spike had become his. He just was. "Of course not. Jesus, Spike. You wouldn't be alive now - or, well, whatever - if you hadn't done all of that. I get that. I get 'kill or be killed'."

"You don't look so happy about it, pet."

Xander stabbed his chopsticks into the barbecue beef, imagining it was Angel and feeling a little better. "What I'm not happy about is you expecting me to tell you to shut up," he admitted.

"I didn't..." Spike started, but the fast, almost angry look that darted his way made Spike reconsider. "All right, I suppose I did, a bit. You Scoobies were always awfully touchy about the blood and bones of things, even though you were out killing stuff most nights." Spike put his ribs down and picked up a carton of rice - absently scooped some into his
mouth. "All right, yeah. Learned how to use 'em in China when we were there enjoying the mess being made by - well, everybody, really. Bloody revolution in the streets and you know we just reveled in it." Spike paused and watched Xander for a moment, but he seemed all right. "Dru was fascinated - hadn't ever seen anybody eat with sticks and she wanted to learn. Turned this pretty little monk and made him show us how until we could do it like we were born to it. And then she staked him with some very nice chopsticks with mother-of-pearl inlay." Spike was not going to tell Xander that Dru had also liked using those chopsticks to pluck out her victims eyes. Even he knew when enough was enough.

"I must be crazy. It's like..." Xander looked up at the ceiling, trying to get his words in order to explain his reaction to the story. "It's like history. People died one way or another. And it was bound to happen. Like that monk. If Dru hadn't killed him, maybe he would have been shot in the street." Xander shrugged. "Did you ever do that? Want to learn something so you turned somebody and made them teach you?" Xander popped another piece of
beef into his mouth, hoping that Spike would get it. That he did want to know.

"Yeah..." Spike felt a little jolt of shock at that - at the obvious interest, and the utter lack of disgust. "Turned a man in France. Wanted to know how to work on my car - fix it if I had to. No fun getting stuck out in the middle of no-where, half an hour before dawn because of a set of dodgy plugs." Spike sipped some more tea, remembering, and smiled at the memory. "Had a Duesenberg Coupe. Lovely thing. Could go a hundred miles an hour in that thing. If you could find a road good enough."

"Which, of course, you stole," Xander added with a grin, closing his eyes to just savor the image of Spike and Drusilla roaring through the European night on the eve of the War. He shivered, speaking slowly. "It is so weird that you were actually there. You know? I mean, jesus, you look as young as me, but you've seen..." He shook his head, laughing. "History was never this sexy in school."

"History is sexy, love. It's all passion and torment
and guilt and sweat. Love and hate and sex and violence." Spike grinned wolfishly, but he felt a surge of excitement go through him. Because he missed talking about old times. He missed being able to mention Dru without a scowl or a snide comment about her sanity. Dru had slipped a few gears, now and then, but she had always had a keen eye for new things - revolutionary changes. She hadn't been scared of the car, even though a lot of the older vampires - and humans - had been.

"So what poor guy lost his car so you and Dru could drive like crazy people all over France?"

"Claude was the owner. Nearly ran me down one night when his breaks went out. He was drunk as a lord, swearing and stomping around. Apologized to me a dozen times - gave me a bottle of some damn fine brandy and fixed his brakes right there. Just...couldn't pass it up. Him or the car. It was like flying, that car..."

"What happened to it?" Xander fought the urge to just set the food aside, push Spike back into the
pillows and curl up against him. The impulse brought a blush to his cheeks, because dammit he wasn't *that* girly, but it still sounded...nice. And it brought Spike to *life*, irony and all, and he wondered, suddenly, if this was something Spike had *ever* had an interested audience for.

"Oh, some bastard of an SS officer took it. When I got - grabbed by 'em. Wound up on a submarine in the middle of the Atlantic with *Angel*, of all people. By the time I got back, and found Dru, it was long gone." Spike sighed, still regretting the loss, even though he'd loved his DeSoto almost as much.

Xander processed that for a moment, deciding that Spike's tendency to get captured by the military was not something he wanted to bring up or ask about. "*You do* realize how weird that story is, don't you? I mean, running into Angel on a *submarine* in the middle of the Atlantic ocean? And okay, maybe weirder that I don't doubt for a second that it's *true*." Xander set down the carton of meat, picking up a spring roll, thinking. "A guy I stayed with in Africa had a Duesenberg. But it wasn't going to go a
hundred any time soon. Even if the roads had been good enough." Xander laughed. "I don't think it even had tires anymore, and the kids liked to play in it, and imagine. It'd belonged to some European back in the Thirties. God knows how he got it down there in the first place, probably on a boat." Xander dropped the roll back into the box and stretched his legs. "I asked Kalume why he kept it, and he said 'because it's a sexy car'."

"Oh, they were sexy. Got Dru so hot... Well." Spike drank the last of his tea, grinning over at Xander. Bad form, to talk about an ex-lover in front of... A new one. Because he is. And she is... Hurts, to admit that. But it's true. "Your government tapped Angel for some - secret mission. Save the Sub or something like that. That's when...when I first heard about scientists wanting to control demons." That memory came flooding back, as well, and it wasn't nearly as pleasant as the car had been. Bastards.

"And you were all ready on the sub because the German government had kidnapped you?"
"That's it."

Xander uncapped his soda, leaving the tea for Spike. "This'd be why I'm the 'rah-rah Spike!' boy instead of the white-hat these days. It's just - wrong doing that to people, even if they are grr-fangy vampires."

But he wasn't going to let the conversation turn into a minefield that easily. Not if this was his last time with a lucid and pain-free Spike for a few days.

Spike couldn't help the bemused smile that stretched his mouth. "You really think 'rah rah Spike' in your head? Really?"

"Yeah. Sure. Pom-poms and all - red ones - but I draw the line at the flippy little pleated skirt. Which, by the way, is plaid, and has safety pins in it."

"Bet you'd look good in plaid skirt. With safety pins. Think of it as a kilt, if it makes you feel better."

Spike knew his lip was curling in a leer of epic proportions because Xander, bent over a desk with a skirt flipped up over his back and his bare ass, spread and pink from what else a paddle? Made for
a lovely image.

Xander snorted at Spike's leer. "Kilts don't come in mini length unless you're featured in a very very gay calendar."

"Oh, and we'd know about very gay calendars these days, would we?"

"By rumor, of course." Xander didn't try to hide his grin. So he used his internet connection for more than work, after all. Who didn't? "I bet you could bargain me into a kilt though."

"Ooh, pet. I'd give you just about anything you asked for," Spike purred, shifting just enough so that his leg slid along Xander's. "Kilt and a nice pair a'docs." He let his toes curl into Xander's thigh, stroking, and let his eyes fall half-shut. *Maybe I can get him again, 'fore Wes gets here...*

"I'm so easy, you could probably talk me into it with just that *look*, you know." Xander reached down, rubbing his hand along the fine bones of Spike's
ankle. "I could learn to hold out for big stuff. But no, I have to be Mr. Happy Guy with just hot looks and sexy leers from the vampire."

"I've got quite a bit off of a well-placed leer, thank you very much," Spike said, wiggling his foot a little further into Xander's hold. "And don't think I'm immune, pet. That mouth of yours...talk me into anything..."

Xander felt Spike's skin warm under the heat of his hand, and on impulse bit his lip, giving Spike his best look from beneath shaggy hair. "Once you're better, I'll show you what else this mouth of mine can do." He dropped a kiss on Spike's knee, the closest flesh he could reach and stood, checking his cell phone for the time. "Wes is on his way." Better be, at least.

Wes. Spike was dreading and anticipating the man's arrival in equal measures. He wanted it over, wanted the cure started but...fuck. It was going to hurt. He lay back on the pillows, watching the little spangles and flashes of light that the pills painted across the ceiling. Sinking down into nothingness,
warm and pain-free.

Xander watched Spike fading out again with a sick twist in his stomach and gathered the remains of their meal, tucking it away in the refrigerator for later. It didn't get any easier to watch, and he had to keep reminding himself that no matter how bad Spike looked, he'd still wake up again.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley went through his hold-all one more time and then climbed out of his car and made his way slowly into the hotel. He wasn't looking forward to this at all. Has to be done. It'll be over soon and he'll heal... Wesley was still a little shaken by what he'd seen before - by the ashy pallor and pain-wracked gauntness of the vampire who was normally so...alive. He took a deep breath and lifted his hand, and knocked quietly on the door.

Xander opened the door almost immediately, having been pacing back and forth from the kitchen
to the bed, since going out for a walk had not been an option. "He's asleep." Xander stepped back to let Wesley in, scrubbing a hand over his face and hesitating on the realization that he wasn't wearing the patch and wasn't quite sure where it had gotten to.

He gave a little mental shrug and let the door close behind Wesley. Spike was right. He'd seen worse things. "He had some food. Human food, I mean. That's not gonna affect what we have to do, is it?"

Wesley slipped inside, noticing the oily scent of take-away Chinese and...something. Musky and sweet. "No, no, it won't affect the tincture in any way - in fact, he'll have to take it in something because it is quite foul. I just hope..." Wesley paused, looking at Xander, judging his expression. Noticing once again that he wasn't wearing the eye patch and this time, because there were more lamps on, noticing the extent of the damage. He managed to keep his wince internal.

Xander scratched absently at the two-day beard,
then scrubbed his palm over his face one last time, glancing back at Wesley when he trailed off, finding him staring vaguely in Xander's direction. "You just hope what?"

"What? Oh - I beg your pardon. I just hope that he doesn't get...sick. Vampires don't vomit often, but..." Wesley moved to the bed Stripped - why is the bed stripped? and unzipped the carryall. He pulled out the plastic painters overalls he'd bought and the box of latex gloves, the caps and the shoe covers. He was aware of Xander watching him with a bemused expression.

"You really wanna ask, don't you?" Despite what Xander knew they were about to do, he had to tease the Watcher. It'd been so long, and - it felt kinda good.

"I beg your pardon?"

Xander just shrugged, glancing sideways at Wesley and dividing the gear into two piles. "You don't have to be polite. That's all."
Wesley felt the blush climbing his throat to his face and turned away, fiddling with the gear. *Dammit. Didn't mean to... Well, nothing for it, now, but to tough it out.* "Yes, well... I apologize, Xander. I'm being...nosy. I suppose the - the pills are working if you and Spike can...sleep together."

Ah, it felt good to make the watcher stammer. All that was missing was a pair of glasses that Wesley could take off and clean. Xander shrugged. "You've got eyes. It's not nosy. And yeah, it's easier now, as long as he doesn't miss a dose. The - impotence. That wears off when he's off the pills, right?"

Wesley fumbled the little case of scalpels and nearly dropped it. "Does the -" He shot a shocked glance at Xander and then *grinned*, because Xander was doing a poor job of keeping a straight face and his eye was sparkling with suppressed laughter.

"Yes, it wears off. And if memory serves, you'd better lock the doors and take your clothes off, because you won't be leaving your bed for a while."
"If memory -" Xander stared at Wesley, a jolt of something not all together unlike lust mingled with vague embryonic possessiveness shot through him. "You and Spike?!

"You say that as if it's utterly unthinkable," Wesley said, smiling to himself as he stepped into a pair of the coveralls. "Here, you need to wear these." He handed the other pair to Xander and then did the Velcro closures up, waiting. *Will he ask? I'm surprised Spike didn't say...*

"For a Watcher to do a vampire? Pretty surprising. Though there *were* these kinda interesting looks between Giles and Spike during the bathtub bondage fun time hour." Xander watched Wesley as he pulled on the plastic cover-alls. "It's probably rude, even for *me* to ask for the details, but what happened?" He froze, glancing from Wesley to Spike. It didn't seem *likely* but - "You guys weren't..." He made the universal gesture for "together".
"Giles -?" Wesley hopped awkwardly, trying to get a shoe-cover on. Oh, he must be joking. "And no, Spike and I were not..." He gave up and made the gesture back - sat heavily on the bed.

"We... When Spike was returned to a corporeal state, he was..." Wesley sighed and looked up at Xander, not wanting to broach Spike's privacy but wanting, very much, to reassure the young man who stood looking down at him, a half-anxious, half-incredulous look on his face.

"He was desperate for...contact, Xander. It was very hard on him, not being able to touch...for so long. He's very...tactile." Wesley slipped the other shoe cover on and stood. "And I was lonely, and we both...needed someone to hold. It was...solace. Do you understand?"

"Solace". There was a word that had a lot of connotations when it came to Spike, but this time, Xander found himself smiling. He rested a hand on Wesley's plastic-covered shoulder and squeezed. "Yeah. I get that." Xander let go and bent to slip the
shoe covers on over his bare feet, grimacing as the plastic caught between his toes. He looked over at Spike, remembering how much he had needed touch when he first met Andrej. "I'm glad you were there." Somehow, he didn't think Wesley was one of the people who habitually told Spike to shut up.

Wesley sighed, and opened the box of latex gloves. "Yes, I'm glad I was, too. We really...started to depend on each other. Until...everything. I'm glad he found someone out here - or, someone found him. He was - very close to dying, Xander." Wesley stepped closer to the couch and looked over the back, studying Spike. The vampire was lying on his back, one arm curled over his chest, the other moving fitfully in the silk sheet. He looked, if possible, thinner, and the dark circles under his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks gave him an eerie, skeletal look. We need to just do this. He needs to start healing.

Xander watched Wesley watch Spike, and for a moment the expression on his face hurt to see. Xander remembered that Wesley hadn't been so
lucky with the one he'd found.

"How do you propose we do this, then?" Wesley asked, turning back to Xander.

The Watcher mask had slid neatly back into place, so Xander followed. "How about in the bath tub? I'm thinking there might be questions if housekeeping comes in here to something that looks like a murder scene." Despite the fitful movements, Spike looked more at peace asleep than awake, and Xander didn't want to wake him up until he had to. "Maybe I could hold him and you...do the work?" Please, god, don't make me have to cut into Spike.

"Yes, that sounds like the best plan. You'll need to wear gloves as well, and this -" Wesley held out the plastic cap. "We can't risk getting any of the hairs or the poison onto our skin. Even in it's degraded state - it could be fatal." Wesley fished out the plastic visors he'd bought, as well - the kind EMT's and trauma nurses used in the ER to keep blood or fluids from getting on their faces. "I know this seems a bit
Xander accepted the head gear without hesitation, settling it in place. "He needs me healthy, he said. I'll do whatever it takes." Because he hadn't come this far taking care of Spike to give up now. Not so close to a cure. Except. Okay, there was the expected nervousness. Hello, nervousness. What kept you? Xander let out his breath, trying to find calm with it. "I'll carry Spike if you'll get the blankets off the floor in there. I, umm... I didn't want his feet to get cold," Xander finished, realizing it seemed a little silly, lining the bathroom with blankets for the brief time Spike had to stand before the sink, but it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Oh - of course." Wesley smiled at that because... Because Spike would do something like that too. He remembered quite clearly the handful of times he'd gotten too drunk to get home by himself, and how he'd woken up each time comfortably undressed and tucked in, a glass of water and aspirins by the bed. Spike...had a caring streak a mile wide, even if he took great pains to hide it.
Xander gave Wesley a shy smile before shuffling around the couch in the plastic booties, tugging his gloves into place and crouching next to Spike. "Hey, sweetheart. If you open your eyes, I just want you to know I'm not an alien being, no matter what I probably look like in this getup." Spike's hair caught on the latex of Xander's gloves, and he couldn't kiss through the visor, so instead he gathered Spike gently to him and stood, carrying him into the bathroom to watch Wesley throwing the last of the blankets out into the kitchen area. But when he tried to talk, his throat closed over. *Just want this done.*

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*Fire*, fire across his chest, searing line and Spike thrashed, surfacing abruptly from the warm cocoon of nothing that he'd been floating in. White, white, all around him - restraints on his arms, his legs, and - *Doctor - fucking doctor - strapped down - so dizzy* - Dizzy because the blood was *drugged*, and only one
bag, not enough, not enough. He was weak - he was sick - but he wrenched at the restraints, growling - screaming - because it really bothered the scientists, they didn't like their little guinea pigs to make noise.

The burning across his chest was bone-deep and nauseating and he braced his feet and pushed, feeling one arm come loose. He struck out wildly, satisfaction in the concussion of flesh on flesh but cringing - waiting for the acid-ice of the chip to flash through him.

Spike had been twitching, moaning, and even though Xander knew it was coming, the blow when Spike got his feet on the end of the tub and shoved knocked the wind out of him, left him scrambling for Spike's free arm; catching it, dragging it down again, struggling to wrap arms and legs around Spike as he wriggled like a fucking fish! "Spike. Spike, sweetheart, listen. It's Wes. Gonna get this shit out of you -" Then Spike shoved again, leaving Xander breathless once more, and he tucked his head in against Spike's neck and held on.
Wes leaned backwards hastily, but Spike still managed to glance a fist across his shoulder. He winced and waited, tense, while Xander did his best to calm the struggling figure. *Knew this was going to be hard*... The first scar was only open half-way, and the blood that was spilling out was too dark, foul-smelling, and sluggish. *Poisoned*, and it made Wes feel sick to his stomach.

Mumbling voice, and his arm caught and pinned again and Spike was panicking now, gasping in ragged breathes and twisting, lunging - doing his best to get free. *Bastards. Won't let you... Xander's supposed to be here. Xander's supposed to - god - "Xander! Xander - h-help me, please help me -"

Wesley winced at the panic in Spike's voice as Xander subdued him once more, refusing to let his hand shake as he lay it against the quivering muscles of Spike's abdomen and continued the incision upwards, pushing the words forcefully to the back of his mind as he worked.
"I'm here. I'm here, Spike. Spike listen to me. It's Xander, I'm Xander..." The words flowed together around them, and Xander hoped it was his voice Spike would recognize even when he couldn't hear the words, couldn't understand, or comprehend.

No, no, nonono, not supposed to happen, not supposed to happen again, supposed to get some rest, some reward, some -

"Zzz-anderrrr..." His own voice was a rasping groan and he shuddered and tried to twist away from the fire fire fire that was burning across him. But - mellow heat, soft voice, 'I'm here...listen...here, here...' and he opened his eyes wide and really looked.

"Oh god it hurts," he moaned, and hands were on him, holding him...helping him, not...the other.

Xander, that's Xander...thank Christ...oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Spike's moan hurt, and Xander tipped his head back
with his chin, but the headgear prevented the kiss he wanted so badly, so badly. Xander pulled back to speak against his ear instead, thumbs sweeping soothing circles on Spike's inner arms as he held them. "Listen to my heartbeat, sweetheart." *Since you don't have your own* "Count the beats. Try to - to lose yourself in them while Wesley works." Sometimes, that had been all Andrej could offer to his patients in the way of painkillers, the how of leaving your own body when the pain got too bad to stand.

Spike could hear himself gasping for air - could hear the rustle of plastic - and the stink of Latex was thick in his nose. *Heartbeat, heartbeat...* He could hear Wesley, heart pounding a fast panicked beat. And then...then...*there.* Behind him. Almost beating *within* him. Xander's heart. He closed his eyes tightly against the white and red and listened, as hard as he could.

"Listening, I'm...listening, Xan...don't - don't..."

Xander kept his eye averted from Wesley's work,
watching only Spike's face, caressing him with his gaze when he couldn't touch, circling, circling with his thumbs, and slowing his breathing, deep and steady. "That's right, sweetheart. With me. Listen to my heartbeat and breathe with me." This had been all he could offer too. All he could ever offer to the patients and the panicked victims of a frightened and newly-awakened slayer. Even if Spike didn't need to breathe, something inside him, something that remembered breathing, did.

Wesley consciously slowed his own breathing - tried to match Xander and Spike, tired to make the jitter in his hands go away by sheer will alone. He drew the scalpel through the last inch of scar-tissue, right below Spike's collarbone and then put the blade down, on the far end of the tub. The poisoned blood oozed sickly over Spike's pale skin and Wes picked up the gallon plastic jug of the tincture he'd made and opened it.

"Hold him, Xander. Spike? Spike - this is - is going to hurt." Then he grabbed a shop towel from its torn wrapper, and poured the tea-colored liquid slowly
over the wound. And Spike screamed.

Xander felt the subtle vibration as the demon rose in Spike and flashed, for the briefest instant, on The Exorcist; holding a screaming, bloodied demon in his arms, but chanting reassurances, love - Xander sucked in a sharp breath, feeling his heart trip at that thought; trip and stutter before finding its even, meditative rhythm again, so hard with Spike writhing in his arms, game-faced with pain. "Wes.."

"Hold him, Xander." Wesley's voice was tight with stress as he braced a hand on Spike's collarbone, took a deep breath and dipped into the wound, the towel turning a sickly black-red with every sweep. Spike's screams had deepened into a animal growl that vibrated through Wesley's teeth and set his hair on end. "Once more." Murmured, pressing his hand hard against Spike's shoulder as he poured the tincture into the wound, this time, until it ran clean, and set down the bottle with shaking hands, allowing himself a moment, eyes closed, to gather strength. Twice more. Twice more, and then he could stitch and bandage Spike and put him to bed.
Spike was gripping the side of the tub in one hand, the soap holder in the other. Both were creaking under the pressure. The wash - tincture - whatever it was was astringent and alcohol in his nose, and the complicated green of many herbs. It stung even where he wasn't cut open and he felt blood on his lips from his fangs cutting in. The towel rasped across him, burning, and then more wash, and then the little click as Wesley picked up the scalpel again.

Oh fuck, fuck - "Wes - Wes, wait, I n-need - put something in my m-mouth, I can't be quiet -" His throat was raw from his earlier scream, and he was shivering now - shuddering and jittering as if he were being electrocuted, but he couldn't help it.

Xander scrabbled over the side of the tub to come up with one of the hand towels, letting go of Spike long enough to roll it into a cylinder, first dabbing away the blood that ran down Spike's chin, gently, then holding the towel to his lips. "Bite, sweetheart."
Wes watched them - watched Xander so gently wipe at Spike's chin - watched Spike turn to Xander and look at him. Trust and affection in those alien, golden eyes. More than affection. Spike's fangs sank into the towel and Wes leaned forward slowly and began again. Second cut. Halfway there. Steady now, steady... The scream, this time, was muffled.

Xander shook with Spike's scream, but kept his breathing steady, wishing so badly that he could bury his face in Spike's neck, nuzzle, kiss, calm. But he could only hold, only see the trust and agony in golden eyes. "He's half way now, Spike. Half way, and you'll feel so much better, sweetheart. Remember everything I promised I'm gonna do to you when you're better? Everything."

Spike breathed, breathed - flexing his hands around fiberglass and cheap porcelain, pushing against the bottom of the tub so hard it was starting to give. Xander's voice, whispering in his ear. Reminding him, promising him. Cold plastic against his neck, his cheek, and the disgusting feeling of the blood and tincture pooling around his ass - under his thighs.
I remember, I remember, god, yes, yes, yes - oh fuck. His body arched helplessly as the last of the second scar was opened in the thin skin nearly under his armpit. The jug sloshed as Wes picked it up and Spike pushed frantically back against Xander, his body wanting to get away even as he fought for control and hung there, feeling as if he were shaking his very bones out of joint.

Xander felt his ribs creak under the pressure, every breath a fight with Spike pushing back into him, whispering, whispering and feeling Spike's scream as Wesley poured and cleaned the second wound, their hands growing slippery with the bitter black blood and tincture that was beginning to slosh around them on the porcelain floor. "Two done. Two done, sweetheart."

Wesley swabbed with the towel - poured the tincture - swabbed some more. All the while Spike's body shivered under his hands and a low, steady, agonized sound - half growl, half whimper - threaded up out of Spike's chest. Wesley's shirt was
sticking to his back under the coverall - his forehead was dripping sweat into his eyes and god, he felt sick.

Third one, last one, do it fast, do it right, damn-it, don't hurt him anymore than you have to... "Almost done, almost there," he murmured, copying Xander, and sank the bright steel blade for the last time into the muscle just above Spike's pubic bone.

Xander shook with Spike, only partially carried over from the tremors wracking the vampire's body, and he ran his knuckles up and down the corded muscles along Spike's spine, as far as he could reach while holding his arms. He felt so cold. "Gonna hold you when this is over, hold you right, not let you go. You're doing so good." Mindless words of comfort, promises to both of them. Xander heard Wesley set down the scalpel and lifted his eye to see Wesley pick up the jug for the last time. Please, god, last time.

God...god...Xander, couldn't do this if you weren't here...gonna show you...so much fuckin'
The tincture swirled and flamed and drove teeth of acid and steel into him - into the open raw wounds that were one massive blanket of invisible flame. Wes poured and wiped and poked and finally, finally, he heard the jug clunk to the floor - heard the creak of plastic as Wes stood up.

"I'm going to turn on the shower - cool water. We have to get all of the tincture off. Xander - you both need to stand up so it will all - rinse away."

Xander's knees ached when he unfolded them but he didn't care, feeling as if he and Spike weighed roughly either nothing or a couple of million tons. There seemed to be no safe place to hold, other than looping his arms beneath Spike's again, and pushing to his feet, staggering in the slipperiness of the tub, casting a grateful glance Wesley's way when he held out a hand to steady them.

"The worst is over," Wesley promised, his hand cold and shaking through the latex gloves.
"Just do it. I want to take this shit off." Wanted to feel Spike, not plastic.

It took every bit of will - every bit of demon in him - for Spike to stay on his feet. When Wes turned the shower on and carefully, carefully directed the spray over Spike's torso - his hand held out to shield him from the worst of the pounding, needle-like spray - Spike's vision narrowed to a black-edged tunnel, and he simply went limp. He was being flayed with glass - gasoline - barbed wire, and his stomach roiled and almost revolted against his iron control. Finally, the shower was off - his body - the tub - Xander - was free of the deadly taint. He let the towel drop from his mouth, spitting dryly in an effort to get rid of fluff and threads.

"D-drink?" he rasped.

"Of course," Wesley said, his voice shaking as much as his hands, though Xander could see that he was trying to steady himself as well as he unscrewed the cap on a bottled water and held it for Spike to drink.
"Fuckin' water," Spike mumbled, but he drank, and Wesley gave him a dry look while he recapped the bottle.

Xander only closed his eye, bracing his shoulder against the wall.

"Let's save the alcohol for when you can lay down. If - if you'll let me help you, Xander can get those things off," Wesley added, suddenly unsure. Hoping Xander - and Spike - wouldn't mind him holding the vampire. Something he suddenly wanted to do, very much. *Just for a moment.*

Xander licked his bottom lip; it felt so dry. He couldn't *blame* Wesley for wanting to hold Spike. Solid and there and not dust, after all of that. "Take this thing off my head first." He swallowed, wishing his voice had come out more than a whisper. He felt a little as if he'd been screaming too, and drew a deep, achy breath when Wesley pulled the protective visor off of him. "Thank you," he said, and tipped Spike's face, and kissed him, shakily. Just a taste. Just - "Okay?" This last he asked Spike,
fingertips stroking the taut skin of his neck, all he could reach in the awkward pose.

Watching them, Wesley felt something deep in his chest *hurt*, hurt in a way that tempted him to look away from the tender, worn expression on Xander's face, and the way they kissed, though they shook with exhaustion. But he didn't look away, couldn't. *Hoped*, as he quickly stripped out of his own plastic gear, stuffing it into one of the garbage bags and held out his arms for Spike.

Spike did his best to help Xander move him to Wesley's arms, but he could barely stay upright, and control of his limbs was beyond him. Wesley was sitting awkwardly on the rim of the tub and Xander gently lowered him down. Wes' familiar scent - dust and tea and old leather and citrus - filled Spike's nose and he let his head fall back on Wes' shoulder and just lay there. Listening to his heart, watching the man's fingers curl carefully around his knee and his wrist. Doing his best to hold without touching - without *hurting*.
"Doin' bloody fine, pet," Spike murmured, grimacing at the dry stabbing in his throat. "Just bloody lovely, yeah?" Reassuring Wes that it was all right.

Ripping off a glove, Xander threaded his fingers through Spike's hair, tucking it behind his ear and rubbing the corner of his jaw with a thumb. "Had to touch," he explained, just a little embarrassed, before hurriedly stripping off the last of the plastic as Wesley had and straddling the rim of the tub, knee to knee with Wesley. "What's next?" His hand found Spike's, tangling with his fingers though he didn't move to lift Spike from Wesley's lap. Not just yet.

The solidity of Spike was a comforting weight, and the damp curls tickled Wesley's cheek as he nodded his thanks to Xander. "The stitching. I don't believe there will be great blood loss during the process, but it's best that we finish here where any blood is easily washed away." He could feel the shift of tendons and bones in Spike's wrist as Spike grasped Xander's fingers, resisting the urge to...stroke.
Wes was warm behind him; warm and a little damp and so, so careful, and Spike rolled his head enough on Wesley's shoulder to rest his cheek on the man's collarbone, his nose pushing a little into the soft skin under his jaw. "Let's do it then, Wes, yeah? Want it over." He felt Xander's fingers in his, squeezing gently and he looked over at him, dredging up a smile. *Feels like a smile. Probably looks like I'm gonna puke.* "Give me that water bottle again, okay Xander?"

"Yeah." Xander scooted forward, sliding a hand under Spike's head to lift it enough to drink, tipping the water bottle for a sip at a time.

Wesley's fingers tightened on Spike, then loosened with a sigh, looking from one to the other with a tired smile. "Xander, you'll have to carry Spike again, while I - ah, yes, like that." He helped Xander maneuver Spike into his arms, watching the young man stand easily with the vampire cradled against him. "In the kitchen, please. I've spread the blankets there beneath the lights."
He watched the two of them go, scrubbing his hands once over his thighs, erasing the pressure of Spike's body there, and once through his hair, as if to erase the thoughts from his mind. He stood as well, on shaking legs, and leaned on the edge of the bathroom counter until the pins and needles sensation went away, only then daring to look into the mirror. *Well. At least you know you've looked worse,* he thought at his reflection, though the dark circles under his eyes were likely to get him sent home to rest. Yet again.

The beep of the microwave drew Wesley's attention, and he rummaged through his kit on the counter, gathering his stitching kit and more pills, pleased to find Xander already helping Spike to down a mug of blood on the floor of the kitchen. On second thought, he grabbed the whiskey from the kitchen counter as well before kneeling on the blankets.

Xander smoothed Spike's hair back once the mug was drained. "Open your eyes, sweetheart. I'm seeing whiskey and pills."
Wesley couldn't help but smile at that, and at the way Spike's eyes snapped open. "I don't even need to offer, do I? Oh, and..." Wesley stepped briskly over to the bed and rummaged for a moment in his bag, finding the small bottle he was looking for and returning to the kitchen. "You'll need to take this, as well. Ten drops, three times a day, for three days." He unscrewed the lid and sucked some of the liquid up into the dropper, holding it out towards Spike's glass of whiskey.

"That smells like the stuff you poured over me," Spike said, frowning, and Wes nodded.

"It is. This is more concentrated. It will remove any lingering toxin from your system. You can put it in your drink, Spike," he added, coaxing tone, and Spike growled. And then sighed, because there wasn't any way around this.

"Desecrating a fine beverage with that slop," he mumbled, but he nudged Xander's hand and Xander held the glass out. They both watched the oily
brown liquid drip down, swirling heavily in the golden whiskey.

"Toss it back in one go," Wesley advised, and left the whiskey bottle uncapped in expectation of needing to top up Spike's glass immediately after. "You know, some of the herbs in this tincture are involved in the brewing and distilling of highly prized liqueurs."

"Bet they don't smell like the sewers on hot August day," Spike gritted out, and lifted the glass to his lips. His hand was shaking and Xander steadied it, and that seemed to steady Spike inside, where he was still shuddering from the pain, and the flashback. The entire front of his body still felt as if it were on fire, and the effect of the double dose of pills seemed to have vanished with the first cut. But he could deal with this pain, because it was at last *finite*. He could count the days until it would be over and endure. Like he always had. He looked up at Xander, small smile, and Xander smiled shakily back and together they tipped the glass up, and the whiskey into Spike's mouth.
"You've never enjoyed fine European cheeses, I see," Wesley said dryly.

"I have," Xander said. "They're rank."

"Not as rank as this swill." Spike held out the glass again, arm resting on Xander's as Wesley poured him a refill - this time without the tincture - and accepted the pills.

"When will Spike feel a difference?" Xander's left hand unconsciously rubbed back and forth along Spike's bent leg, comforting both of them.

"Probably not until tomorrow, I'm afraid. And...this tincture will... Well, your blood won't taste any better until you're done taking it." Spike groaned and Wes smiled sympathetically. "Now, get comfortable so I can close these wounds up. The faster the better. And then you can sleep."

Sleep. Xander felt himself swaying as if the word had thrown a switch, but he also felt so wired he
knew sleep wasn't going to happen without some serious unwinding first. "Now sew," he intoned in a bad, sinister English accent, "and keep the stitches small."

Spike snorted a laugh that hurt, and let Xander ease him on to his back. He was starting to really feel what had been done, and the shivers that had wracked him in the shower were coming back. Christ. Don't need this now... He watched Wesley don another pair of latex gloves and ready his needle and silk and shuddered.

"Xander?" He was appalled at how weak his voice sounded - weak and wobbling but fuck - the latex smell and the pain and the jittery, shocky feel were too much like past times and things and he really felt like he was losing it, all over again.

Xander bent to kiss Spike's forehead. "I'm here, sweetheart." Here, but useless apart from comfort, and he didn't want to see that needle sliding into Spike's flesh again and again. So instead, he fussed with the blanket, pulling the free edge over Spike's
legs to warm them, then shifted until he could slip one arm under Spike's head, lacing the fingers of his other hand with Spike's. "Squeeze, okay?"

"Don't want to hurt -" Spike flinched, and Xander winced with him, *knowing* that was the needle going in.

"You won't. Well, okay, you might, but nothing that won't get better."

Wesley bent over Spike and sewed, concentrating everything on that task so he could get it done. He'd tried to find a stapler but hadn't been able to, and so simply made stitch after stitch. By the time the first gash was neatly sewn up his legs were cramped, his hands were tingling and his neck had a sharp crick in it. He turned to his kit for more silk and stretched, twisting his head a little on his neck. Xander had Spike half cradled in his arms, and Spike's eyes were closed as Xander's fingers moved slowly, through and through his hair.

When Xander glanced up, Wesley looked away,
feeling inexplicably intrusive at being caught out in watching the two of them. He returned to the stitching, taking care not to pull the strangely delicate skin too tight. There was a rhythm to Xander's murmurs, though Wesley couldn't make out the words, and he let the back of his mind focus on the patterns, on the sounds as he worked. He tied off the last stitch with a relieved sigh, grimacing over the sharp cramps in his hands. "I think it will be best to forego the bandages," he said at last, massaging his right palm with his left thumb and doing his best to smile into Spike's glazed eyes. "We're done."

"Thank Christ." Spike looked down at himself, grimacing. "Look like bloody Frankenstein's monster." His hand fluttered over the stitches for a moment but he couldn't bring himself to touch them. "How 'bout one more drink, Xan? Then I can sleep, yeah?" He hated how weak his voice was - hated the shivers that still shook him and the helplessness that forced him to just lie there. Over soon, healed soon, better soon. It's all right... Xander's mantra whispered in his head and he
smiled up at the man. *All right, yeah. Trust you, love...*

"Yeah," Xander said, feeling the tension ebbing some with each breath as he refilled Spike's glass as far as he dared to, the way Spike's hand - and his, he had to admit - shook. "Gonna let you sleep like the - okay, that phrase loses some of its effect with the technically deceased." He helped Spike tip the glass, and glanced at Wesley who looked as if he could use a glass or three of whiskey himself. "Want some?"

"I -" Wesley eyed the bottle with more longing than good sense, and rubbed his face. "God, yes. Just one."

The whiskey went down like pale fire and Wesley closed his eyes for a moment while the heat of it blossomed in his stomach and loosened the knot that seemed to have made itself a permanent home there. God, he was tired. He ached all over, and his eyes felt as if they had sand in them. He dreaded the drive back, even though it wasn't that far - just
the thought of fighting traffic, squinting in the eternal sunlight. Place needs a good monsoon. Perhaps I'll call Angel - get a room here at the hotel. Take a nap and then dinner later, just...relax. The thought cheered him a little and he handed the glass back to Xander feeling a little better.

"Now - Spike - if you're ready I think we should move you to the...bed."

"Nest," Xander corrected him.

"What?"

"It's The Nest," Xander said. "With capital letters."

"I...see. Well, it's certainly more comfortable than the kitchen floor, whatever it is."

"Too bloody right," Spike muttered, patting weakly at Xander's leg. "Now, pet? Yeah?"

"Oh yeah, sweetheart." Xander couldn't help smiling, rubbing his cheek against Spike's hair as he
picked him up one last time. "You have so earned Nest time." Xander sniffed at himself. "And I have so earned a shower. I'm lucky you're so out of it or you'd have material for all kinds of snide comments."

Wesley was already at the Nest, rearranging the cushions to hold Spike as securely as possible, and Xander flushed, hoping that Wesley wouldn't inadvertently come across any telling stains in the silk. He moved slowly enough to give Wesley time to finish, then lay Spike within, bending to press his lips to Spike's, though at this point he wasn't even sure if Spike was still aware of it. "You'll stay with him?"

Wesley folded his legs onto the couch, still holding a pillow he was about to tuck beneath Spike in his hands. "Of course."

Xander bit his lip, nodded, and left for a quick shower. Just really fast. Get the sweat off... Get the feeling of plastic off. The memory of the blood and tincture sloshing around his legs... Xander
shuddered, but left the bathroom door open out of habit, so that he could hear Spike if he called. He quickly turning the water on, stripping and stepping under the spray.

Spike was hazily aware of Wes rummaging around - of Xander's lips brushing over his. Then he was being cocooned in the familiar, comforting silk that was rich with the scent of Xander... *Sex...musk...seed...* His thoughts circled lazily and then grounded with a thump and he lifted his head sharply, looking around. "Xander?"

"He - he went to clean up. He'll be right back." Wesley's voice, and Spike blinked up at him - reached out and found a thin, socked ankle.

"Stay here a minute, yeah? Just..." The spangled, flickering darkness moved in, swallowing him up, and he sank gratefully.

Wesley looked down at the pale fingers curved around his leg - at the thin face that was marked by exhaustion and pain. "Of course I'll stay."
You...you're all right, Spike. It's all right."

When Xander came back out of the shower, still wet enough to be grateful for the tropical heat of the room, he found Spike still clutching Wesley's ankle and grinned. "They're so cute when they're asleep."

Wesley jumped at Xander's words, then flushed, realizing that once again, Xander had foregone clothing. "I - I'm not certain he'd appreciate that sentiment."

"Of course he wouldn't." Xander tossed his towel over the couch and crawled in next to Spike. "That's why I waited until he was asleep to say it."

"Oh. Of course. I'll just be gathering up everything, and - I'm afraid the blankets and bloodied towels are a complete loss. I'll be disposing of them of course, and -"

Xander watched Wesley gently trying to extricate himself from Spike's grasp, and put a hand over one thin wrist, stopping him. "Why don't you grab a
shower first? No hurry, right?"

Wesley carefully slid Spike's fingers off of his ankle and looked up at Xander, who was curled around the vampire, eye blinking sleepily and hair sleek and wet over his shoulders. God... shower would be so good... I did bring extra clothes, just in case... Mind made up, Wesley stood and stretched, working at a kink in his back.

"I think that's a good idea, actually. I'm feeling a bit - grubby." Xander nodded, and Wesley went about methodically bundling the soiled bed clothes into a garbage bag and tidying away his own supplies until everything was lined up neatly next to the bed. He went into the bathroom and stripped, pushing his clothes into the last garbage bag and stepping into the hot, pounding spray. It was absolute heaven. It wasn't until he was done - clean and starting to relax and so, so sleepy - that he realized he hadn't brought in his clean clothes. He stood there, towel wrapped tight around his waist, hesitating. Surely they're asleep by now. I can slip out, dress, and be gone before...before they know it. Wesley opened
the door and began to walk quietly to the bed.

But Xander's voice stopped him cold. "Stay."

Wesley clutched at his towel, turning to find Xander's eye on him, watching him from Xander's sideways vantage against Spike's shoulder. "I - I couldn't possibly -"

"You look like shit, Wes. Come on."

"That's quite all right. I can get my own room. Really. It's no trouble at all."

"And I can only keep one side of Spike warm. Comfy Nest. Come on." Xander held out his hand, absolutely still, as if he was coaxing a skittish animal. Or Slayer.

Wesley just stood there for a long moment, but Xander's hand never wavered and his gaze held only concern and compassion. And Wesley was so very tired. Not just physically, but mentally as well. Seeing Spike - former...lover. Friend...still that, at
least... so ill, and so low... Seeing the tenderness between them... It made Wesley long for the easy physicality - for the closeness. Just for a little while. Just...so Spike is warm. Slowly he went to his bag and pulled out a pair of boxers - slipped them on. Then with a small groan he picked up his cell-phone and dialed Angel's office. Someone - some drone - answered and he left a message - left a lie. Research going well, new info brought to light, must stay another day, blah blah. Satisfied that Angel would be unalarmed - but more likely, utterly indifferent - he turned his phone off and shoved it down into the bag. Out of sight... Then he went around the couch to the nest - no, Nest, and crawled in. Scooted close to Spike and burrowed down and finally, finally let loose a long, chest-rattling sigh.

"Thank you, Xander. I... thank you," he murmured, and smiled into the pillow as he felt Xander's hand slip over and curl around Wesley's wrist.

"Thank you," Xander said, feeling Wesley's pulse drum against his fingers and smiling a little. "Weird to feel another pulse. ...Really weird."
As Xander frowned, Wesley fought the urge to pull his wrist back out of reach, letting Xander feel his... *difference*.

Xander closed his eye, feeling that strong *thump* against his fingertips, and then nothing, for the longest time, then another. Like the slow breathing of meditation. And his skin was *hot*. Warmer than Xander's despite the heat of the room, warmer than Spike's when the fever had left him delirious and moaning. "Wow."

"Three point five beats per minute," Wesley said. "I - I'm honestly not certain if the heart beat is even necessary for my circulatory system to function as I am now."

"Wow," Xander said again, then took Wesley's hand and laid it over Spike's cheek, smiling when the sleeping vampire nuzzled into it instinctively. "He's gonna love that."

Wesley's breath caught. "I'm - I'm sure an electric
blanket will do."

"I think Spike's gonna always go for live body over electric blanket."

Wesley had to smile at that - it was true, after all - and then a thought came to him and he carefully rolled over and inched backwards until he was pressed against Spike, only the thin veil of the silk sheet between them. As he got close Spike stirred and his knees bent, pushing up behind Wesley's. His arm came up and over Wes' waist and Spike's face nuzzled into the hair at the nape of Wesley's neck. Turning to the heat like a plant to the sun. It felt good, to have the solidity of another body against him. Xander's hand was over Spike, just touching Wesley's ribs and he breathed, and finally, finally relaxed.

Smiling as he felt both Wesley and Spike relax, Xander scooted up behind Spike, until he could wrap an arm over two slim waists, tangling his fingers with Spike's and melting into the pillow with a sigh. "You did good, Wes." It was easier to talk to
him like this; relaxed and warm and boneless. He could feel the edge of one of Wesley's scars under his fingertips, and under Spike's. He felt Wesley go absolutely still at the praise. "Thank you."

And if it was a long time before Xander felt Wesley relax again, and heard his breath slow toward sleep, he didn't comment.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley woke slowly, feeling more rested then he hand in a long, long time. There was a weight across his ribs - across his hips - and he slowly took stock. Body behind him, curled into him and still. Hand on his chest, loosely tangled with his own. And another hand on his thigh, just touching. And lips, on the nape of his neck, cool and breathless. And heartbreakingly familiar.

I remember this...this waking. Waking to...comfort. Wesley didn't want to move, but he knew he had to - had to get up - had to get out. He lifted his head
slightly and blinked at the clock that was a part of
the television. 7:13 a.m. My god! We've slept over
twelve hours. I've got to get back to L.A... Not that
anyone would be missing him, but he had things to
dispose of - things to do. With a sigh of
disappointment he carefully extracted himself from
Spike and Xander's grip and reluctantly left the
Nest. He used the bathroom quickly and then
dressed and did one last check. He grabbed the
hotel pad by the phone and scribbled a quick note
about the tincture and the dissolvable sutures. Then
he loaded himself up with the various bags and sent
one last, longing look at the Nest.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Spike opened
his eyes, reached down, and laced his fingers with
Xander's, then went back to sleep.

Square Seven
When Xander woke, he knew Wesley was gone. Only vaguely remembered Spike's hand wrapping around his and pulling his arm tighter around him as if Xander had been a living blanket. And since then, Xander had curled further around Spike until, waking, he was wrapped so closely with Spike that it felt - really nice.

Aside from the human-type urges that insisted he get out of the Nest. *Right Now.* Whether he wanted to or not. Stretching to press his lips against Spike's temple, Xander tried not to worry when Spike failed to stir, mumble, grab him tighter or react at all; his skin sheened with a fine sweat that - Xander licked his lips, and grimaced - tasted bitter. Very bitter.

Xander wrapped the silk carefully around Spike, then pushed himself from the nest, staggering on sleep-stiffened knees and grabbing the back of the couch, letting the minor aches and pains and insistent bladder wipe all higher thoughts from his mind until he'd taken care of the most basic business.
Washing his face though, brought the thoughts back full force. The faint antiseptic smell of the bathroom that suggested Wesley had done more than take the soiled linens away, and the-

Xander pressed a hand to his ribs, finally risking a look at them and running his hand over the bruises there, sharp and spreading where Spike's shoulder blades had dug into him as he struggled. And there was something he hoped desperately that they could all forget. And soon. Or at least put behind them. And _jesus_, he hoped Spike didn't remember all of it. Wouldn't.

"And yet, still better than Africa," he muttered. Because Spike was getting well.

At least, in theory.

Xander thought of his cell phone in his duffel bag, and his laptop. Work, and everyone in Sunnydale he'd promised to call, and - then he thought of the Nest, all comfortable and warm and with Spike in it.
He rested his forehead against the bathroom mirror and closed his eye. *Being responsible really bites.*

Xander gave his face a last scrub with the towel and left the bathroom, sitting on the stripped bed with his duffel bag, and pulled out his cell phone, checking the charge, then dialing Wesley's number, laying back on the bed and hoping the call wouldn't disturb Spike's sleep. Though, remembering the utter stillness of the vampire when he'd gotten out of the Nest, he figured a bus could crash into the hotel lobby and it still wouldn't wake Spike up.

Xander squinted at the clock. *Noon. Come on, Wes. Pick up.*

"Wyndam-Pryce" Wesley said, struggling to control a stack of books and papers.

"Hey, Wes?" Xander's hesitant, sleep-roughened voice made him freeze for a moment. And then he was striding into his office - shutting the door firmly and letting the books slide out of his arms to scatter across his desk.
"Xander. Is S- is everything all right?"

Xander winced at the thudding of books, remembering *that* sound all too well from the days of startling Giles in the library. "That's what I'm calling to find out. Sorry if I -"

"No. No, it's quite all right. Spike?"

At the barely-concealed anxiousness in Wesley's tone, Xander relented. "Still sleeping the sleep of the *really* dead. But he's sweating a lot, and it tastes - odd."

"Odd?"

"Bitter."

Xander heard Wesley sigh. "He's sweating out the poison."

"Is it dangerous to -"
"No. No, it's quite safe for you now. The tincture breaks down the toxin, and allows Spike to excrete them both through his skin with a high fever."
Wesley paused, a small smile on his face. "I do advise against licking Spike, however, as he's unlikely to respond and will probably taste quite bad until the tincture and toxin are entirely out of his system."

Xander briefly pulled the phone away and stared at it, smiling. "Thank you, Captain Obvious. How long is he gonna be totally unresponsive?"

"Probably...most of the time," Wesley said slowly. The fever will make him - dazed, and tired. But you can't skip any doses. It...might be difficult to actually get him to drink... Oh, hell, I should have thought of this..." Wesley rubbed at his jaw, thinking fast, wondering how angry Xander was going to be.

"Does stroking a vampire's throat make him swallow? Like it does with a human?" Xander asked, dragging his hand through his hair. "Cause I can do
that. And I've threaded tubes down people's throats before, so I guess I could do that if I had to. Jesus, I'd hate for him to wake up in the middle of that, but I'd do it."

"You have? Where in the world -" Wesley couldn't imagine Alexander Harris - smiling and sarcastic and devil-may-care - getting a tube down someone's throat. And being so...offhand about it.

"Africa," Xander said shortly, and there was a wealth of stories and hurt and horror in that one word, so Wesley let it go.

"I...see. Yes, you could do that if you had to. It's very, very important he not miss a dose. But I think you should be able to wake him up enough to take it."

"Great. Um. Shit, I hate to ask you for more..." Xander let out his breath, frustrated.

"Ask," Wesley said, his voice absolutely firm, then gentling. "I insist."
"Say it like that, and I'll have you bringing me doughnuts at three in the morning. Okay, can you bring a tube and funnel? Just in case? Because he is so out of it, and if he can't miss a dose or go without his blood, I'm not gonna risk it."

"I...of course I can. I can...let me see..." Wesley bent over his desk, scrabbling among his papers for his schedule. "There's a meeting at three, I can send someone else.. And then...yes...cancel that.." He worked for a moment and then nodded in satisfaction. "All right, I can be there in about an hour. Is that all right?"

"Fine. Thanks. And um... Wes?"

"Yes?"

Xander bit his lip. "If you did stop and pick up doughnuts on the way, I wouldn't mind."

Wesley laughed, he couldn't help it. *He's still in there, that boy I met in Sunnydale. Thank god.* "Jelly
"Jelly," Xander said immediately. "Um. There's this kind at Krispy Kreme with lemon jelly in the middle, and -"

Wesley chuckled. "I'll bring you an assortment then?"

Xander sighed, unable not to smile, remembering that night in the hospital standing guard outside of Buffy's room, and Cordelia showing up. With doughnuts. To keep him company. "Thanks, Wes. And hey - say hi to Cordy for me, okay?"

For a moment Wesley couldn't make his mouth move - couldn't make his lungs move, and he hoped he wouldn't choke. Then he gave a little cough, watching his hand go out to touch the photograph on his desk. "I'll tell her you said hello, Xander." God - why did no one tell him? He was... Dammit. "Right. I'd best - best be going, then. I'll see you soon."

"Sure, Wes. And...thanks, okay?"
"Of course, Xander. It's - I'd do anything... Well, goodbye."

Xander pressed the end call button and folded his arm behind his head, thinking. How many times in his life was he gonna be watching over the patient?

He glanced in the direction of the couch, still hearing nothing but perfect stillness, and felt himself smile. *Probably as long as there's a patient to watch. God. I didn't want this, but I wouldn't trade it* - Xander rubbed his face and brought up Carl's work number in the directory.

"Sunnydale Southwest. Carl."

"Hey, Carl. It's me."

Xander heard someone in the background, "*Who is it?*" and Carl's answer: "*Our little runaway.*"

"Hey! I did not run away. I filled out all the paperwork and everything." Xander rolled onto his
stomach. "Besides, I owe my soul to the company store same as you." And that thought wasn't quite as light hearted as it had once been. But if he hadn't, if he hadn't accepted house and package and all that went with it, he wouldn't have been able to take care of Spike either. So maybe it was all right.

"Yeah, and we'll be totin' that bale for a good long time." Carl's voice was wearily amused, and then it became a little crisper. "So - how are...things? Is your friend any better?"

"He will be. God, the last couple of days have been rough, but he's on the mend." Xander dropped his arm to his chest, fiddling with the ties of the little leather pouch, barely hearing the soft click-click of the contents.

"You found a treatment, then?"

"Yeah." Xander hesitated, grinning as he wondered how Wesley would react to the description. "We found a specialist."
There was a sharp intake of breath from Carl. "Specialist, huh? Listen...Mariel and me were talking...and Russ, too. All this, hotels and...specialists..." Xander could hear the next words in his head already - could hear the squirming embarrassment but also the sincere wish to just help. "Well, that's a lot of... If you need any - help - you know..." Carl's voice trailed off into silence, and Xander could faintly hear the warning beep of some big vehicle, backing up.

It wasn't something he wanted to get into with Carl when he was at work, but Xander couldn't just leave him hanging either. "Thanks, Carl. If it wasn't for you guys, I wouldn't have a job to come back to." Xander rubbed his face, part of him wishing he didn't have to come back to a job, but what else was he supposed to do? Hitchhike and sleep in tents for the rest of his life? "It's enough. It's -" He sighed. "It's fine, even. The specialist is a research guy. He did his work pro-bono and Spike's gonna get better."
"Just - you know - don't be all...noble. No eating cat food or anything," Carl said, relief palpable in his voice. Not relief that Xander didn't need anything, 'cause the worry that had prompted that offer was still there. Just relief that Carl had said it. Made the offer. Very probably with visions of Mariel glaring at him in his head.

Xander laughed. "No, no cat food. Trust me. I know when to holler 'Uncle'. Thanks, Carl," Xander added, and he meant it.

"Not 'Uncle',' Carl corrected. "'Carl'. And you holler it into the telephone."

"Yes, mother." Xander's cheeks felt stiff when he smiled, but it felt good anyway. "We'll be back on - Jesus, what the fuck? Carl, what day is it?"

Carl chuckled. "Wednesday, Alex."

Xander groaned. "Okay. Thanks. We'll be back on the weekend."
"Are you sure you don't need anything?"

"Nah. I mean, the house is locked, there's nothing to steal -"

"I'll check your house."

Xander smiled an embarrassed smile. "Thanks, Carl."

"Anything you need, Alex. Even if it's peace of mind."

"Knowing Mariel's out there with a big stick is all the peace of mind I need. Tell her I said hello, okay? And the kids."

"Sure. Take it easy, Alex. Call us when you get home, okay? Any time."

"Okay, sure. 'Bye, Carl."

"Bye, Alex." Xander turned his phone off and rolled onto his back again, staring up at the ceiling. Good
guy. He's a good guy and so's Russ and... He sniffed, then smiled at himself.

It wasn't a feeling he'd had since the Scoobies were really the Scoobies: *family*. He sniffed again, and scrubbed at his eye before the tears could escape and trickle over his cheek.

"Pet?" Spike's voice was dazed, barely there over the hum of the heater, but it made Xander sit up abruptly, and slide off the bed, circling the couch to kneel next to Spike in the Nest.

"What're you doing awake?" *And how do you have such perfect timing, sweetheart?* Xander smoothed his hand over Spike's hair, leaning into the fluttering touch of *Cool again! Thank god*, fingers that touched his cheek.

"Been cryin'?" Spike gazed up at that familiar face, his fingers smoothing away a trace of moisture. Everything was...fuzzy - the edges too bright - and he felt nauseated and desperately hungry at the same time. "Don't cry, Xan - s'all right..." he
mumbled, wishing he could pull Xander down and just...hold him. His fingers slipped through the silk of Xander's hair and then fell away - arm to heavy to hold upright, hand to unsteady to have near Xander's eye, anyway. The sutures burned and pulled, and his shoulder, hip, and knee all throbbed where they'd been pressed under him. Even the super-soft Nest was too much, just then.

"Need a drink, love. Just..maybe a pill, too, I..." He couldn't finish the thought - pushed into the comfort of Xander's hand and let his eyes fall shut.

Xander dropped a quick, soft kiss to each closed eye, then his forehead. "It's close enough to time for your next dose," he said, crawling back out of the nest and walking to the kitchen. He wasn't sure if Spike could hear him, could understand it all, but it felt wrong not to tell Spike what he'd missed. "I called Wesley to let him know how you're doing. He'll be by in a little bit to poke at you and bring me some doughnuts." He poured the whiskey into a glass, not too much, and rifled through the grocery bag until he found the straws, putting in a green
and purple bendy straw, then poured blood into a mug, and put that in the microwave, thinking. "I called Carl too. He was at work, so I didn't know how much to tell him, but god, Spike. It's - it feels so good having someone to call like that. Who just wants to know we're all right down here without asking me for anything."

And that last hurt to say, because he couldn't remember the last time one of his old friends had called him and not asked for something.

The microwave dinged and he took the blood, juggling it into the crook of his arm with a pink straw; grabbed up the pills and put the tincture bottle in his mouth, holding it with his teeth as he carried it all back to Spike.

The whiskey smelled better than the blood, and that made Spike open his eyes, because he had to have the blood - had to have the pills and the damn tincture and... fuck. It was all so fucking nasty he almost didn't want to bother. Almost. But the hope - the gentle concern - in Xander's gaze made him
angry at himself.

*Stop being such a damn...wimp. Not like this is forever. Not like I lost a fucking eye. Bloody hell - lost my hands and they're...fine. Just fine.* He wished he hadn't thought about that - about his hands - because the old scars from that time seemed to throb to life suddenly and he surreptitiously flexed his fingers into the silk sheet. Just...making sure.

"Look like Florence Nightingale, you do," he joked, pushing his unease aside. "Only I bet she didn't push her potions starkers."

"Ahh, but think about how famous she'd be if she did! Like Florence Nightingale and Lady Godiva combined. And then she'd have - medicinal chocolates named after her or something, and okay, that made a lot more sense before I said it out loud." Xander slid an arm under Spike's shoulders, lifting him up enough to get behind him and support Spike against his body. "Let's get the bad over with. Tincture in the blood, and you take the pills with that and then you can have the whiskey."
Xander rested his cheek against Spike's hair, smiling. "And I think Florence was a lot more professional than me, too."

Spike winced a little as Xander got him up and settled - glad Xander was behind him, and couldn't see. He watched the tincture measured in slow drops into the blood and then took the cup, grateful Xander kept his hand on it.

"Think I'll do it without the straw this time, pet - get it down faster, yeah?"

"Sure, Spike." Xander held the straw aside with a forefinger and Spike lifted the mug to his mouth - closed his eyes and tossed the pills back and drank fast, tipping his head back on Xander's shoulder so he'd get every last, foul drop. Knowing one cupful, three times a day wasn't enough, but until the poison had left him it was all he could bear.

"Bloody fucking gods, that's foul," he sputtered, and the empty cup was hastily exchanged for the full tumbler, and Spike drank until he was siphoning the
last drops from the bottom.

"Ah, Jesus," he muttered, and turned his face into Xander's neck, pushing close for comfort - for warmth. "Save me a doughnut, yeah? Jelly. Anything to cut that fuckin' taste..."

Xander nuzzled his cheek into Spike's hair, reaching up to rub at his throat and good shoulder, grabbing a discarded towel to wipe away the thin layer of sickly sweat that had coated his skin to distract himself from what he knew he had to say next. "I've got Wes bringing extra. I - he's also bringing stuff that'll let me get the blood and medicine into you without you having to wake up. Because you need more..." He wasn't sure if that was just worse though, so kept stroking Spike's skin, up and down, shoulder to jaw.

"What...stuff?" Spike asked, not liking the sudden and subtle tension he could feel in Xander's body - fighting the whirling nausea that hadn't gone away yet.
"Like...a tube to go down your throat, and a funnel, for if you can't swallow. It's - Jesus, I don't want to, but he said you can't miss a dose, and can't stick to starvation rations. I know how to do it while you're unconscious, sweetheart. You won't even know it was there when you wake up."

Spike shuddered all over - fought down the instinctive panic of being...that helpless. That vulnerable. And god - he did not want Xander to have to do that. Tension - some tightly-held emotion - was coloring the man's voice and Spike knew it was the last thing Xander wanted to do.

Fuck, fuck... "It's - that's a good idea, pet. You can...that's all right, yeah?"

"Yeah." Xander tried to put all of the reassurance in that one word, and in the way his hands curved over Spike's skin. "Well, no. It's a shitty idea. But it's all we've got. And it's only for a few days." And fuck, I am not going to cry at the thought of this! Jesus, I did this in fucking Africa, and I did it well and - and - and fuck it, in Africa, it was never Spike! Xander
took a long slow breath, shivered, and let it out. "Sorry," he said. "It's been a really fucking long few days." Xander clutched Spike to him as carefully as he could. "It's worth it. You're worth it. Only a few more days of this, sweetheart, and you'll be kicking ass and taking names again."

They both knew it wouldn't be that quick, the change, but Xander needed to say it, needed to hear it.

*If I can I will, pet...anything...* Spike didn't finish that thought - anything for you... Aware, in the haze and discomfort of the drugs and the poison that he might be... Might be wrong. Might be very wrong. It was easy to love someone who was depending on you for...*everything.* So easy to love Dru, even as her madness and her fey notions and outright bloody stupid ideas had angered, exasperated, and terrified him by turns. All she had to do was *look* at him. Helpless dark eyes - trembling chin. And he was clay in her deft hands. *Xander's got more backbone than that...but it feels good to be needed...to be wanted. Feels too bloody good.*
"Do my best, pet. Between you and the Watcher I'll be - be just fine."

"Want you to be fine," Xander sighed, feeling the ache in his chest expand and contract with his heartbeat, and rubbed off the few tears that had escaped on Spike's hair. "Don't mind the crazy man, Spike." Xander eased Spike's head onto his shoulder, turning him so that he could brush their lips together. "You haven't had a cigarette in days and you still taste like smoke."

"Sorry, pet," Spike murmured, wishing he could drag Xander's head down and really kiss him. Making himself be content with the skimming little kisses and touches that Xander seemed to think were all he could bear.

Xander shook his head. "I like it. Tastes like smoke and metal and kind of like sex too -" Xander dropped his head to Spike's shoulder. Okay. I was doing just fine until the babbling made a return engagement. "Um. Really, I have some self control."
"Don't tease me like that, pet." Spike slithered his arm up around Xander's neck - leaned in and got his mouth on Xander's jaw - on the thin skin under the hinge. Nibbled there, while his fingers stroked the warm, satin skin at the nape of his neck. "Don't want you to have any control..."

Xander caught his breath, muttering, "I'll bet Florence Nightingale had more control." He tilted his head into the touch - into both touches, and carefully swept his hand over Spike's good hip and down to his thigh. "If I didn't have any control," he started, feeling his heart banging against his ribs, and it had to be hard enough for Spike to feel - among other hard things Spike was about to feel. "I'd be rolling you over onto your side, the one that hurts less," the imaginary side, Xander admitted, "sliding your leg up just enough to get in behind you, let you feel how hard you make me just touching me -" He licked his lips, "and you can consider this a bedtime story if you want..."

"God...Xan... You know what that does to me?"
Spike twisted in Xander's arms, getting his hip against Xander's cock, that was as interested as Spike's was *not*. He let his hand slip down from Xander's neck to ghost over his chest - caress a hardening nipple.

"Could, you know...don't mind...want to..." Things were - *singing*. The air seemed to vibrate, and this vision was going, tunnel of darkness. But god - he *wanted* Xander to do that - to push into him and bring that heat into him - that *want*. "Xan..."

Xander inhaled slowly, and *god* - he could *feel* his dick expanding with that breath - and dropped his lips to Spike's ear, catching Spike's hand and bringing it to his cock, folding the weak fingers around himself and stroking. He licked his lips. "You want this in you? All slicked up? Moving so fucking slow and careful, it won't hurt. Just make you feel so good, let me do all the work this time." Spike's ear was cool to his lips - colder than the air and Spike's fingers, and *dear fucking god let there be something slick left in this room!"
Spike shuddered all over at the heat in Xander's voice - at the solid, fever-hot flesh under his fingers.

"Oh god...yeah...want it, love, please..."

"I am a sick," Xander said, kissing Spike's lips lightly, "sick," he added, sweeping his tongue over Spike's lips, and then in, tasting him all smoke, and peat, and musk, and clove, feeling the throb of need through his cock, and the slick, soft pulse of pre-come over their joined hands before pulling back, panting, "very sick man." Spike's forehead was hard and smooth against his own as he rolled his head slowly from one side to the other, regaining his breath. "Gonna get something slick." He trailed their fingers over the tip of his cock, shuddering, and brought them up between his mouth and Spike's, licking. "More than this."

Spike savored the sweet-spice taste of Xander's mouth - lapped eagerly at his damp fingers and rolled the savory musk of Xander's pre-come over his tongue. "Hurry, love...can't wait..." he breathed. "Not sick..." he added, looking straight up at Xander
as he pulled away. "Not sick at all, when you make me feel so good."

"Do I?" Xander wished his hand didn't shake as he smoothed his fingertips over Spike's lips, feeling the roughness catch on the soft skin there, and the pressure of Spike's lips. "Gonna make you feel even better." He eased Spike down into the Nest on his side, dropping kisses along his arm before he stood. Xander's knees shook too, making him laugh at himself, and he felt the grin stretch his face as he looked down at Spike. "You make me sixteen again without the stupid."

The words made Xander blush, either stupid or sappy or just silly, he wasn't sure, but he didn't stay for an answer, rummaging instead in his duffel bag, returning with his conditioner and uncapping it to the scent of lemons and cloves and spices, watching Spike. Wanting.

"Sixteen's not stupid, Xan..." Spike licked dry lips, watching Xander move - watching him pour out a little of the spicy-smelling stuff and slowly, slowly
run his fingers over his cock, covering it - making it gleam. "Horny all the time - just what I like." He took in a sharp little breath as Xander teased himself. "God, love...so fuckin' gorgeous, you are - so lovely..."

Xander bit his lip, peeking at Spike through his hair as he knelt in the Nest, back within reach. "And I'm gonna last about three seconds if you keep saying stuff like that." He caught Spike's hand when it hovered over his, bringing it down to his cock to stroke again. And god that was almost enough. Could be enough. "Sure?"

"God love, yes! I'm sure!"

And Spike looked so wild around the eyes, Xander had to kiss him, the air smelling of lemons, cloves, musk, and Spike, so good. He licked his lips, cleared his throat, and tried to find his tone from earlier. "I'd roll you onto the side that hurts less," he said quietly, easing Spike into the pillows again on his side and settling in behind him. "Push your leg up really carefully..." He eased Spike's leg forward,
resting it on the rise of pillows and trailing his fingers up the back of the smooth thigh, feeling Spike *breathe* as his fingers slipped into his cleft to brush over his hole, just touching there, circling slick and warm. "And push up against you," he breathed, easing his aching cock between Spike's legs, rubbing over the taut perineal skin, nudging up behind the weight of Spike's balls, "Let you feel- feel-...*god!*" So hard not to clutch Spike to him, to remember the stitches he couldn't pull.

"Love, love, shhhhhhh...it's all right. Won't break, Xan, you can - just..." Spike shuddered at the heat pressing against him - almost *into* him. Pushed his hips back, trying to get closer - trying to get some part of Xander *in*. Panting, and seeing the spangling lights dancing on the edges of his vision. *Bloody pills...wanna feel him...* "Go on, love." He reached behind himself as best he could and stroked Xander's hip - the top of his thigh. Encouraging him - wanting him - making him know it. "Want to feel you, right now, Xan - please, love -"

"Can you -" Xander caught his lip again, pressing
two fingertips through the tight ring of muscle, remembering African nights, lessons...

'A body remembers, Xander. It remembers how to accept, how to want, take...' Spike shuddered around him, and Xander pressed a fevered kiss to his nape, slicking more of the conditioner onto his cock, and pressing, holding his breath, then in, and it was all he could do to move so slowly, so...fucking...

Spike shivered under his hand - around him - gasping in shallow, desperate breaths.

"Feel that, sweetheart?" His words buzzed against the back of Spike's neck, and his teeth itched to bite there; clamp down and claim with an instinct more hyena than Harris as he swept his palm over Spike's thigh, hip, back and forth in a way he needed to keep from slamming home. And then he was there, and aching to move, and not wanting to move all at once.

Spike wanted to writhe back - wanted to open
himself, wanted to fuck himself back onto the heat and the sweet, aching stretch of muscles long unused to this. Xander couldn't get deep enough, like this - but god, god - it felt so good. Furnace heat of chest and belly and mouth against him - inside him - Xander's hand smoothing and sensitizing his skin - making him shudder. He could feel the merest edge of Xander's teeth on his neck and he wanted that as well. He pushed back, hoping Xander would do it - would understand.

"Fuckin' lovely - Xander - g-god, yesss..."

"God, Spike...!" Xander mouthed the skin over the back of Spike's neck, sucked blood to the surface over the sharp knob of his spine with all the hunger he couldn't let out by pounding into Spike. He nudged his knee higher, digging into the pillows with his own to lift his hips, draw back, and drive in, smooth and not fucking deep enough! but good, fucking good. "Gonna - gonna have this in me when you're well," he said, in between hungry, biting kisses, fingers sliding over the soft flesh of Spike's cock, stroking, squeezing, "hard and strong till I feel
it up in my throat-

God, god, the sucking, biting kisses were driving him mad, and the clinging friction of Xander's cock inside, pushing and pulling. Hot, insistent hand on his own cock and even though his body couldn't he still felt delicious tremors shiver out from the root and over his body - over and over again as Xander stroked and tugged and talked, god.

Xander caught his breath, bare teeth pressing over soft skin, parting. "Want that," and closing, marking, claiming.

"Want that too -" Spike gasped out and then Xander's teeth latched down onto his neck, rough edges sinking in and he was rigid - arching hard - something like a dry orgasm rolling through him, wave after wave, as his body clenched down hard on Xander and his hand - still on Xander's hip - squeezed frantically at muscle and bone, feeling the pulse and heat Xander's orgasm inside him.

"Xander! Ahhh...god -" The spangles were crowding
in, his vision going black with only those random flares of light dancing on the backs of his retinas. Singing, swirling - the room hot and closing in, the sweet spicy scent thick in his throat. Xander was shaking against him and hoped it was enough... "Yesss...yess..." he mumbled, and then he felt it all washing away; tide going out.

Xander's jaws felt like they had tight rubber bands holding them closed when he opened them. Little frissons of aftershock danced along his nerves, but he couldn't bring himself to move. Couldn't...bring himself to separate from Spike just yet, even as he lay soft within his body, only pressing gentle kisses to the livid marks that peppered Spike's nape now, nuzzling into the mingled scents of them.

Wanted to stay like that. Wanted to sleep, joined with Spike...Yeah, sleep. Just a nap. Gonna be...wide awake after a little nap...

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Wesley knocked for a third time, listening to the faint scurrying sounds from inside the room. Wondering if he should try to pick the lock, or call Xander on the cell-phone. *If something was really wrong...surely he can hear me, he could simply call for help...* Wesley shifted his carry-all, feeling the unease rise. He lifted his hand to knock one more time and the door opened under his fist and Xander stood there. In actual sweat-pants, looking flushed and sweaty and a bit... *Debauched. Or...that's my imagination, surely.*

"Hello, Xander. Is everything...all right?"

Xander pressed a hand to his chest where his heart was still threatening to beat its way out from behind his ribs, and hoped he didn't look as guilty as he *felt*. "Um. Yeah. Sorry I fell asleep waiting for you." And woke sticky, aching in all the *good* places, and still nestled intimately between Spike's legs.

As he stepped aside to let Wesley in, he felt a momentary panic like the kind he hadn't felt since
his days as a basement dweller. He hurried back to
the Nest, snatching up and folding the still damp
wash cloth he'd cleaned them both with in what he
hoped was more "casual" than "guilty teenager".
"He woke up for a little while." And dammit. Xander
could feel himself blushing.

Wesley watched a slow flush climb Xander's chest
and throat and darken his face. *What in the world is
wrong with the...man?* Wesley shook his head
slightly, setting his bag down and taking a deep
breath. And noticing a particularly...musky...odor.
*Ah. That is what's the matter...* Wesley smiled to
himself. "Xander? Are you all right? You look a bit
flushed. And - how is Spike?" Wesley moved to the
Nest, and Xander shuffled after him, twisting a
damp wash cloth nervously in his fingers.

"I'm - fine, Wes, I was just startled when you
knocked, was all. Spike is..." Wesley knelt on the
edge of the Nest, examining the vampire. He was
sleeping peacefully enough, and the sutures looked
fine - dry, with no redness.
"The sutures look good. But - what's this?" Wesley hid his twitching mouth in his shirt-collar as he leaned forward to touch Spike's neck and Xander practically leapt on him.

For a moment, Xander wondered if he could get away with playing dumb. "Uh, probably what it looks like," he admitted, crouching next to Wesley and scrubbing his hands over his face, tossing the washcloth behind him. *And the jig is up!*

Xander jerked when Wesley rested a hand on his knee, giving it a squeeze, muscle and bone, though perhaps more bone than was quite healthy. "It's all right, Xander. I'm not...Rupert Giles." The name made Wesley smile, though he clearly remembered a time when it wouldn't have. "You were careful?"

Xander wished Wesley would move his fingers *away* from the bite, because it was making *something* in him jumpy, making him want to push the fingers away. "Yeah."

Wesley followed Xander's line of sight, and brushed
his fingers over the reddened marks, watching Xander's eyes widen and darken. _Odd._

"Maybe you shouldn't -"

Xander stopped himself and Wesley watched him bite his lip, looking uncomfortable and... _Upset. Or - something. Hrmnm._ Wesley pushed himself upright and moved to the bed, sitting on the stripped mattress and waiting. A moment later Xander came around the end of the couch and slumped next to him.

"I really don't have a - a problem with... Well, with the physical nature of your...relationship, Xander. I just want you to be careful. Spike isn't... He doesn't always back off of something, even if knows it's not the best idea."

Xander closed his eye, too tired for the laugh that wanted to come. "God, Wes. I don't _want_ him to back off." He lay back on the mattress, draping an arm over his upper face, the other over his stomach. His knuckles were brushing against a fold
in Wesley's sweater. "I wonder if I don't need to back off sometimes." A tension he hadn't realized he'd been harboring had only loosened when Wesley checked Spike over, but he still felt a weight on his chest.

And only recognized it then. *Waiting to fuck this up.* And *that* was supposed to have been something he left behind. *Far* behind.

"Xander." Wesley hesitated, then lay a hand over Xander's fingers, watching him go utterly still. "Even ill, Spike is more than capable of rebuffing an unwanted advance."

"You didn't see -"

"I've seen all *year.* Harmony worked with us at Wolfram and Hart, Xander. I watched him turn her down every *day* there."

"That's not the same thing, Wes, and you know it. He's - fuck." Xander sat up again, hunching over his legs and tucking his hands tight between his thighs.
"Those pills make him half out of his head! He's - he thinks he's back with Angel and Drusilla - or back in Sunnydale before - or - or in hell, Wes! Or in the Initiative." Xander shivered, and Wesley wanted to put his arm around him, but just - couldn't.

"Xander, I'm sure he -"

"'I'm not sure, Wes! I'm not - sure at all."

Wesley's hand hovered above Xander's back, over the two parallel scars that ran over his shoulder blade, raised and white, oddly translucent in the dim hotel room. "What aren't you sure about?"

Xander wrapped his arms around his chest, staring at the back of the couch and feeling a dull pounding begin deep in the empty socket. "If I'm doing this right," he admitted. "Making the right choices. If I'm - reading Spike right. God, he's out of his mind, Wesley."

"You don't trust him?"
"I don't trust me," Xander said. Because everything Spike had been saying was what he wanted to hear, wanted to believe. And what if he was wrong?

Wesley wasn't sure what to say to that - the pills were strong, and the fever and general debility Spike had suffered were enough to put most people in the grave. He could only imagine the confusion Spike must suffer in the grip of it all. But...

"Spike...is quite straightforward, Xander in..." Wesley cleared his throat. "You'll remember I told you about our...liaisons?" Xander nodded slowly.

"Then, let me just say that... He doesn't - he won't lie to you, Xander." Wesley lifted his eyes, looking closely at Xander, at the pale, puckered skin where his eye once was; at the mobile mouth now turned down at the edges in a pensive frown. "If he lied at all, it would be to make the degree of his attachment to you seem - less. Not more, I think." He smiled ruefully. "It is, after all, the nature of narcotic drugs to loosen the tongue."
"I'm lucky they didn't loosen mine into getting my face slapped by a Slayer." Xander let his arms fall, lacing his fingers together again in his lap. "Talk about powdered courage."

"You, when -?"

Xander raised a hand, pointing to his face, and even before he spoke Wesley felt like an utter heel for not having realized more quickly. "Eye," Xander said.

"I - oh, of course."

"You?"

It took Wesley a moment to realize what Xander was asking. "Oh. I was shot." There didn't seem much else to say about it, in hindsight.

"Shot by a psychotic, super powered priest or by a psychotic, super powered Slayer or - were you mugged?" Xander can't help smiling a little because - because it was crazy, sitting here with Wesley
talking about Spike and talking about scars... And that made him sober up fast because... scars really could hurt, even years later.

"Zombie policeman," Wesley answered, quite seriously, and then laughed.

And when Wesley laughed, Xander could see the line of another scar beneath his jaw - wondered how many more were hidden beneath Wesley's clothes. Other scars he'd failed to notice in his haze of blood and exhaustion.

Wesley gestured to the gunshot scar in Xander's side. "Not a zombie policeman?"

Xander put a hand over the puckered wound, feeling the indentation under his palm, and remembering the disbelief that had been all he could feel at the time. "Good old fashioned militant in a war zone."

"That's - that's -" Wesley shook his head.
"Kind of dull after zombie policemen."

"Certainly the last thing I would have guessed, I was going to say."

Xander shrugged, he hand falling away from the old wound. "Africa was a lot of things. Safe wasn't one of them. I'm lucky, really. The way I was the first few months -" A slow shake of the head and for a moment Wesley saw the old man at this father's club, who'd drink and talk about his glory days in the Transvaal before the Great War. It was...odd, to see such sobriety on the man Wesley had once, in his head of course, likened to a good-natured beagle-pup.

"I'm fairly certain now that there's a small god who watches out for drunken fools." Wesley thought, briefly, of Illyria, but no... She'd only watched out for one drunken fool, and only to her own ends. He shook himself. Those thoughts weren't suitable to either the moment or the company. "You requested doughnuts, I believe?"
Xander chuckled. "Did we use up our required sharing time?"

"God, I hope so," Wesley said. "No offense, but -"

Xander shook his head. "Awkward conversation. Lots of landmines."

Wesley let his breath out with relief. "Yes."

He stirred and leaned down, picking up his hold-all. "Here we are then," he said, pulling out the box of doughnuts he'd stuck inside. Instinct, mainly - never have both hands occupied if you can help it. He set the box in his lap and opened the flap and they both looked down at the display.

"Wow, deluxe assortment!" Xander said, childish glee back in his voice, and Wesley had to grin.

"Of course. I wouldn't have gotten anything less."

"You're official Doughnut Boy from now on," Xander said, his hand hovering.
"I take that as a very serious duty," Wesley replied, and nicked the lemon-custard from under Xander's reaching fingers.

"Well, you already know the first rule," Xander said.

"Oh? What is that then?" Wesley asked around a mouthful of sweet lemon filling.

"Distract your audience, and steal the best one," Xander said with a grin. Because if Xander hadn't stolen the doughnut he wanted before Buffy and Willow got their hands on the box, all that'd be waiting for him at the bottom would be a sad cake doughnut with nuts.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike sat on the bed, feeling particularly useless but knowing that getting up and staggering around would be even more useless. Xander moved around him, packing with the efficiency of a man who had
moved many times, and with no frills - compacting everything into less space then it had taken initially and tossing out trash and nabbing hotel freebies with abandon.

"Do we really need all those little bars of soap, Xan?" Spike asked, amused, and Xander stooped dropping them into his duffel and grinned over at Spike.

"Never know when they could come in handy. They'll just throw 'em away, anyway." Spike nodded and flexed his toes in the lime-green flip-flops Xander had got for him down in the gift shop. Not a good color for the evil undead. He brushed his hand tentatively up his torso, feeling the lingering soreness from the sutures. Mostly they had dissolved, but once his vampiric healing had kicked back in, some had gotten caught and Xander had had to yank them out with a pair of tweezers. Nothing he couldn't handle, but he was glad to have the last of the wounds - the illness - fading from his body.
Xander stood, placing his hands in the small of his back, and stretching. "That's the last of it. Everything else but us is in the truck." He watched Spike's hand play over the pink lines on his torso; he couldn't blame him. And he couldn't help stealing glances at them himself as they faded with every passing hour.

But -

Spike looked up as Xander caught his hand, following it with his eyes to Xander's lips, watching Xander kiss first fingertips, then palm. "What's that for, pet?"

Xander swallowed, playing with Spike's fingers and looking at him through his hair, the patch already back in place for the first time in days. "What, you're getting better, and suddenly I need a reason?" Please tell me I don't.

"No..." Spike said slowly. He began to lever himself to his feet and Xander pulled, giving him a boost. Standing now, Spike shuffled in his unaccustomed footwear until he was inches from Xander. "I hope
you don't need a reason, pet," he said, and closed the gap to give Xander a small kiss - lips barely parted, tongue not in play. Just..contact.

Xander let his eye close and smiled against Spike's lips; Spike's hand against his chest, his other arm slipping around a waist that was still too thin - resting over a spine still too prominent. "No," he said, feeling Spike's lips as he spoke, "no reason. Completely," Xander breathed, sliding his hand up to cradle the back of Spike's neck, "reasonless..."

"Mmmm...best kind," Spike murmured, lips whispering against Xander's, his free hand sliding around Xander's ribs and up, to twine through the silky dark hair. Another kiss, and another, and another, shallow and sweet and short - exquisite torture. Spike wanted to stand there and do that all night.

Xander shivered at the bare brushes of lips, soft bump of noses that - Jesus, hasn't felt like this since High School. And he wondered if Spike could hear how hard his heart was beating from just...that.
"Would it be...girly of me to want to kiss you like this on the beach?" he whispered.

"Could we?" Spike asked, feeling a sudden lift of spirits. After nearly a week in the hotel room he was feeling more than a little stir-crazy, and the thought of the beach - the thick, salt-laden air and the dry rushing of the waves - seemed wonderfully appealing. "That would be brilliant, pet."

"We're right on the beach." Xander curled and uncurled his fingers in Spike's hair, enjoying the soft crunching of the bleached tips and the smooth silky curls beneath. "Seems like a shame to waste it, if you're -" He stopped himself before he could ask Spike if he was up to it, remembering well how much he'd wanted people to just stop asking if he was up to anything. Instead, he claimed a last kiss, leaning back with regret. "Ready?"

"Ready," Spike said, glad Xander hadn't objected - hadn't fussed. He didn't want to be fussed over now - now that the worst was over. Xander shouldered the duffle and they made their way downstairs.
Spike did his best to just walk - to employ that easy, loose-hipped saunter that was second nature. But his joints were stiff, and his legs were weak and his knees would wobble and give with alarming little tremors at the worst moments. And the flip-flops were hard to keep on.

"Buggering hell," he muttered, annoyed, as his left shoe slid off again. He grasped the stair railing and maneuvered his foot back in and then clenched his toes up around the little foam divider, holding it on his foot by sheer force of will, really. Xander stood two stairs below him, watching with a suspiciously smirky expression behind a curtain of hair. "Well, go on!"

Xander muffled a laugh, but stayed only a couple of stairs ahead of Spike the whole time, reassured by the steady thwip-whap of Spike's shoes and the muttered curses that accompanied them all the way to the bottom where he held the door open for Spike. "Your freedom, sir, awaits you."

"Git," Spike muttered, but he trailed a hand over
Xander's ribs as he walked out. On the sidewalk he pulled the wife-beater out of his waistband and tugged it on, then tied the draw-string of the pajama pants a little tighter. They were about three inches too long, and wouldn't stay rolled, but he didn't care. Xander tossed the duffel into the back of the truck and they began a slow walk across parking lot, sidewalk, and sand-choked grass to the beach. A deserted tennis-court was off to one side, and there were tall, thin palms everywhere. But Spike kept his eyes fixed on the horizon - the black and sugar-white expanse of the rolling, living sea.

When they hit sand Spike slipped the flip-flops off and stood for a moment, curling his toes into the rough, loose grains. A faint heat lingered from the day's sunshine and the strong smells of earth and brine, tide-pools and fish filled his mouth and nose as the wet, cool air scoured his lungs clean. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back - lifted his arms in pure pleasure. Smiled when he felt Xander's hands on him.

Xander had only meant to rest his hands on Spike's
waist when he saw him stretch, but the blissful arch of Spike's body, and the expression of pleasure on his face were too much to resist. Xander slid his hands up Spike's ribs beneath the shirt, over the healed skin of his chest to cross at Spike's waist, pulling him back against his body. It felt so good to just be holding Spike, not holding him up. He rested his forehead against Spike's shoulder, feeling the sharpness of bone beneath him, and pressed a kiss into the cool skin of Spike's neck.

Any other time, the beach would have been tacky; an ugly, dirty, Southern California blight, but just then - even with the amusement park close enough to smell the popcorn whenever the wind changed - it was...

"Y'know, I think I like this."

"I think I do to," Spike said, leaning his weight onto Xander. Trusting him to hold him up. That felt best of all, that he could - and that Xander did. "We should live on the beach," Spike said, unthinking, and then shut his eyes, because... That was going
too far, really. Much, much too far. Too fast and too much and... *Can't ever, ever help myself, can I? Always a bloody...axe to the back of the head to myself.* "Xander..." he sighed, and then didn't know what to say next, because - there was nothing to say. He'd felt the sudden tension and the skip-jump of Xander's heartbeat. *Fix this, dammit...* But he didn't know how.

*We* had never felt so good. When Anya had said "we", by the wedding day it had felt like walls closing in. But when Spike said "we", Xander *wanted.*

*Was* wanted.

He realized that he'd been silent maybe too long because Spike was so still in his arms and he resisted tightening them before remembering that he didn't have to anymore. The crook of Spike's neck smelled like leather - like the duster even when he wasn't wearing it. And he wanted to speak, but all he could get around the lump in his throat was: "Sounds perfect."
Square Eight

Spike leapt over a dented trash-can and kicked the hulking vamp in the ribs - spun and kicked him again and neatly drove eight inches of hardened maple into his chest. The brief expression of confused surprise was amusing and Spike dropped the stake into his pocket and dusted his hands off - reached for a cigarette and lit up. A walk in Sunnydale after dark was always fun; there was never a shortage of things to kill. Which was odd, considering the Hellmouth was dead and gone. The strange, nerve-twitching buzz that had used to pull in demons from miles around was as gone as the town itself, and wouldn't be revived with granite kitchen counters and fake Tudor architecture. Course - never hurt to keep an eye out. And keeping an eye out was why Spike liked to walk, most times, instead of taking his bike. Nothing to do with testing himself. Reassuring
himself that everything was in perfect working order. Mostly. He seemed to feel the cold more, now, but Xander never minded building a fire and curling up with him in the rebuilt Nest. To watch movies, and listen to music, and fuck. Not to snuggle. Not to just lie together and talk, and pet, and doze.

_Foolin' yourself, mate. Go on and try it but you know it's for that...closeness. Can't resist it, can you? Can't resist the fact that he just likes to...touch. Touch me. Not even shag, just..._ Spike took a hard hit off his smoke and blew the smoke out in a snort of disgust. _Lisin' it, you are. Things like this don't end well. Or they end in screams and bloodshed. Or just screams. Doesn't matter whose, even. Keep a level head, you'll be all right._

"Yeah, level. Here's me, bringin' the boy lunch. A special, hand-picked, good-for-you lunch. Pathetic, is what I am." He kicked a beer bottle _hard_, feeling no satisfaction when it practically disintegrated against a wall.
Well - same thing as those bloody pillows, innit? And that's not pathetic, that's...that's... "Love", some little voice wanted to say, but Spike squashed it viciously. The pillows are just...comfortable. We both like 'em. Nothing...special there. The big bed in the Master bedroom was Nest in its own right, now, with layers of 'body' size pillows and velvet and chenille and satin pillows that you could practically drown in. And more of those fancy silk sheets that Spike had no clue where Xander got them from - just that they appeared without warning one day about four weeks ago. Rich wine-red and creamy white and navy blue. Absolute sensual pleasure. And the dual-control electric blanket that Spike could turn up on 'high'. And the fleece-soft throws in the living room Nest that held in the heat from the fireplace and made Spike warm enough to be human. Oh, yeah. Nothin' special there at all. He sneered in disgust at himself, and walked on.

Diaspora was a very small, very greasy diner in what appeared to be a caravan, but they served the best Greek food Spike had had outside of Greece, and he
knew Xander would love it. If he'd look past the grape leaves. Wes would like it, for sure, and he'd have to tell him about it next time he called the ex-Watcher. Use it as one more carrot in the slow-moving plan of 'tempt Wes to come for a visit'. Pity there wasn't a place to get decent vindaloo - that's what Wes really liked, and even in L.A. he'd complained about it - had made Spike drive him halfway to San Diego once to 'the only place in this benighted state' so he could have some.

He took his time picking over the menu and settled on lamb gyros and dolmades, taramosalata - which was caviar, but Xander didn't need to know that. Tzatziki with pita bread to dip in it, and salad - although since there was no lettuce, he wondered what Xander would think of it. The flavors of feta cheese and onion, vinegar and oregano should make up for lifeless Iceberg leaves, he hoped.

Baklava, of course, as a reward for eating something good. He contemplated coffee but decided that the tiny, poisonously sweet syrup wasn't the way to go - Xander would be up until lunch tomorrow after one
of those. Lunch under his arm, he sauntered casually through the silent, manicured streets, curling his lip at the dull sameness of each house and street.

This place is so bloody boring! When his contract's up, gonna take my boy and - Spike stopped cold at that thought - literally stopped walking, his gaze going distant as that thought percolated. Would Xander even want to go - anywhere with him? They weren't...soul mates, after all. Not - in love. Just lovers. Just... Just shaggin' each other 'cause we know each other. Makes it more...comfortable. Boy doesn't love me. And I don't... Bugger. Spike dismissed that thought with a shake of his head and walked on. Love was a foolish word - a foolish sentiment. Love was for...kids. And romantic poets, and fools of the first water. Not for veterans of the Hellmouth. Not...for him.

~*~*~*~*~

"Oh Alex, it's that time again," Russ sang, leaning on
the door frame like a shaggy Viking out of time, or one of Santa's cheery crew on steroids with that chipper grin.

Xander groaned, dropping his head onto his arms. "Who made you my mother?"

"I'm not your mother," Russ said, "I'm your accountant. Honestly? I wouldn't care if you don't take your lunch break, but that's the law. You wanna work, you take your fuckin' lunch break."

Xander laughed, pushing away from his desk and leaning back in his chair, fiddling with the sticky note in Russ' handwriting that said: 'WTF, Alex? A guy named Wesley Windham Price called. And when the hell did you start making friends with fancy names? Overcompensating for hooking up with a guy named Spike much?' Xander squinted at the note again, and then tossed it onto his desk, vowing to call Wes at the end of his shift.

"Right. Okay. Fine. What'll it be today, Russ? Cup'o'noodle or do we bother the late night pizza
"You left out the fine cuisine of the burrito wagon." Russ pulled his knapsack up off the floor, fishing out his wallet.

"God, don't tell me you're ordering the special again. It's too cold out there to leave the windows open this time of year."

Russ grinned at him, all perfect white teeth. "I'll eat it outside if that makes you feel better."

"I'm more worried about the aftermath."

"How did you survive a year in Africa being that picky about food?"

"The tin can is a wonderful invention."

Russ laughed. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

Xander sighed, rubbing at his face, and thinking
absently that what he wanted was to go home to Spike, curl up in the Nest, and take the damn patch off. Yep. I had it right the first time. Being a responsible adult sucks even when you like your job. He shook his head. "Fritos or something. A bag of whatever."

"You sound like my little sister. Pick, pick, pick. Eat like a man."

"I eat like a man. I eat -" Spike. **Hard, god, hard at last** once the toxins wore off, stretching his throat, tasting like metal and salt and - Xander drew in a deep breath, and concluded lamely with: "...manly things." *If that man happens to be Tom of Finland.*

"Uh huh." Russ flicked his eyes down knowingly with a smirk that shouldn't have looked that sly on a face that big and open. "Well, I'll leave you with your thoughts. But don't you dare lift a finger to work until your lunch hour's over. I'll know." He tapped a finger to the side of his nose like a big blond Santa Claus.
"You'll know if I've been bad or good?"

"My money's on bad."

"You would so win."

"At least rest an hour, Alex. Get it out of your system 'till it's quitting time."

Xander felt a wash of hot-cold flash through him, embarrassment or guilt, he wasn't sure. "Am I that bad?"

"Only on Fridays," Russ said; smiled, and left Xander alone in the trailer, the door banging shut behind him as he went.

"Oh, Jesus." Because Xander knew it was true. The closer he got to the weekend, the more it reminded him of those two weeks with Spike so sick that nothing was more important than being right there with him. And even though he knew Spike was healed now, healed completely, the memories made it harder to remind himself that this world,
this job, that had to be important too.

*Got a vampire to keep in blood and beer.* And house payments. And water, electric, and sewer, and -

Xander jerked off the patch and scrubbed his hands through his hair because dammit, he might have bills, but he wasn't ready to *be* his bills. But more and more, the bills were all worth it *because* they kept a vampire comfortable. And a vampire there.

Though Xander didn't want to think it was just the free comfort, easy contact, easy *rapport* that kept Spike there -

Because it *was* easy, living with Spike. Easy to look for him when he came home. Easy to laugh with him. Watch TV with him. ...*touch* him. *God, it'd be so easy to l -*

Xander always stopped that thought before it was fully formed though, because that was one word he wasn't ready for yet. As soon as he said that word, it all went downhill. And what was *wrong* with easy
anyway? When it suited them both just fine?

They were *guys* dammit, and didn't need the words to make it good. To make the living good. And god, definitely not to make the sex good.

Xander dropped his head to the desk again and closed his eye.

Then there was sudden flurry of knocks, *hard* and almost panicked sounding.

"Fucking *hell*!" Xander scrambled for his eye patch, jerking it on and into place before the door opened all the way, settling it so quickly that the edge dug uncomfortably into the side of his nose. "What?" His heart leapt against his chest, the response ingrained in a resident of the Hellmouth. The moment you relax is the moment the *bad* starts.

He was already half way out of his chair before Dave poked his head in the door. "Got a visitor, Alex. Tried to tell him you're working, but this guy's pushy as *fuck*. Some English guy, thinks it's still
Xander dropped back into his chair, light-headed and a little sick with the rush of adrenaline. *And damn-it I have got to stop reacting like that!* Though maybe, *maybe* Spike could count as something vaguely Hellmouthy and he didn't have to feel like quite so much of a nervous idiot. "Send Spike in."

"Aw, Jesus, you actually *do* know this freak?" Dave let the door bang shut and Xander could hear the mumble of voices outside.

He took the time to re-adjust his patch into a more comfortable position, untangling his hair from the band, and getting it tangled around his fingers instead. "Need. A. Fucking. Haircut."

"I heard that, pet," Spike said, pushing the door open and bouncing up the steps. He dropped the bag of food on Xander's cluttered mess of a desk and leaned over, getting right in his face. "No cutting of the hair."
"It's all - tangled!" Xander whined, and Spike leaned a little closer.

"Yeah? So, tonight...you come home, and fill up the tub, and I'll climb in behind you..." Spike lowered his eyes a little, licking his lip. Knowing exactly what that did to Xander. "And I'll brush it 'til it's smooth as silk..." Xander was staring at him, his face flushing slowly and Spike leaned back, satisfied. **God, he smells so good when he wants...**

"**Jesus.**" Xander closed his eye, dropping his face into his hands when Spike leaned back away from him and sucking in a long hard breath to reply with something like 'Obnoxious tease'. But the adrenaline still buzzed through him, leaving him a little too sick and dizzy to peek into the food bag yet. "Okay..." Xander cleared his throat, tasting site dust on his lips when he licked them, eye darting over Spike in an unconscious check. Duster, wife beater beneath, blue silk shirt he'd stolen from Xander. Black tips on the ice-blond hair sticking up in mad tufts...all present. But Xander's shoulders
still weren't quite relaxing even as he tried for humor. "Did you come all the way down here just to tease me into a dangerous state of arousal, or fatten me up for Christmas?"

Spike frowned, looking closely at Xander. "You all right, pet?"

Xander tangled his fingers in his hair again, not moving when Spike reached out to gently disengage them, resting his elbows on the desk and folding Xander's hands in his until Xander looked at him, and nodded with a smile he wished didn't feel quite so sick. "Yeah. I'm good."

Spike snorted. "You look it. Good thing I brought you food before you blew away on the wind."

"But -"

Spike tilted his head, and quirked an eyebrow.

"Why now?" Xander finished lamely, not entirely able to banish that first sick jolt of worry at seeing
Spike here in the pit of the Hellmouth again.

Spike felt a little twisting drop of...something...in his belly. Fear? Disappointment? Xander didn't seem...

"Not your lunch-hour then? I'll just go, if -"

"No! Just -" Xander's fingers tightened in his and Spike brought them up to his lips, kissing gently.

"What is it, pet? You look like a goose just walked over your grave."

Xander frowned. "What does that mean anyway? 'Goose just walked over your grave'?" He shook his head. "Never mind. You Englishmen are weird."

Xander let out his breath, resting his forehead on their joined hands. "It's just Hellmouthy instincts. You know? Assume the worst, and - you can feel free to stop me trying to mother the Big Bad any time now."

Spike felt something like relief wash over him. He
came around the end of the desk and settled on the edge - drew Xander in between his thighs and put his fingertips under Xander's chin, tipping the down turned, unhappy face up to him. "You worried about me, pet? Is that was this is all about?" He pushed a lock of hair back as Xander fidgeted, chewing his lip. "Don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself..." He leaned down and kissed the poor, abused lip, tasting gas-station iced tea and mint gum, and dust.

"Instincts," Xander mumbled against Spike's lips, wondering if all of him was this cool from being out in the air or if the duster kept some residual heat from the house trapped against him longer. "C'mere." For the moment, he just wanted to taste that cool night air and ocean flavor that seemed to be pure Spike now that he was well again.

Spike tugged at him, and Xander laughed, letting his chair roll freely over the last couple of inches of floor between him and the desk, until Spike could wrap his legs around him, trapping him there. "That's better."
"What is?"

"Like you smilin' like that, pet."

"Wanna start over again?"

"Huh?" The word was only half out of Spike's mouth before Xander pulled him down again with a surprisingly strong grip on his lapels, warm human tongue invading his mouth with the taste of sweet-lemon-mint-tea, teeth clacking before Xander drew back, and Spike could feel the hot puffs of breath against his lips.

"Hello, Spike," he said breathlessly.

"Hallo, love," Spike purred, and pulled Xander close again, because despite the dust and chemically-sweet tea there was still the underlying sweet that was just Xander, and the spice of his skin and the warmth that tingled through Spike's hands as he slipped his fingers into Xander's hair and held him - tilted his head over just...right.
The band of the patch caught on his hand and he impatiently pulled it free, letting the thing drop to the desk and going back to tasting every inch of Xander's mouth that he could.

Xander tried to laugh, but it was muffled against Spike's lips, Spike's tongue, just Spike, and he slipped his arms under the duster, winding them around Spike's back and holding tight. "Unh. Hello," he said more dazedly this time, blinking up at Spike when their lips parted fractionally, then he was tugging Spike down again, off the desk and onto his lap in the chair, sucking in his breath. "And hello." His skin tingled everywhere Spike pressed to him, from his chest to the absolutely non-work safe hardness stirring in his groin as he willingly let Spike haul him up and in for a devouring kiss.

"You call this lunch, Harris?" Russ filled the doorway with a creak, and a rumbling chuckle.

Well fuck. Spike stiffened, recognizing the voice. The guy he'd mistaken for a soldier in his delirium.
Great. Right. Doesn't matter.

Xander groaned, dropping his head to Spike's shoulder, then peeking at Russ around him, left eye still concealed by Spike's jaw, as he smiled dazedly. "Russ, this is Spike."

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Mmmm." Xander leaned back in his chair, holding Spike close against him, because Hello! Lunch hour! My own private time!. "He got better." He was conscious of the stiffness in Spike's spine, rubbing his thumb along the small of his back beneath the concealment of the duster.

"I'll say," Russ muttered, laughter evident in his voice.

"Nothin' much keeps me down," Spike said, turning a bit - aware of Xander's hand on his back and his growing arousal - aware of exactly how they looked. He stared at Russ, eyes half-lidded, small smile on his mouth. Waiting for the flinch or the sneer of
disgust because... Nobody better have a thing to say about this to Xan... Now or later.

Under the duster, Xander slid his hands down over Spike's ass and squeezed, eye wide and guileless. "Need anything, Russ?" God. Know what I need.

"Batteries," Russ explained. "Oh yeah, and remember the shocks on this thing creak pretty loud, so if you're not willing to answer questions -" Xander laughed. "No questions. This is Spike. It's my lunch hour. And the private trailer is a perk of the job."


"Semi-private with open-minded co-worker?" Xander negotiated.

"Uhh -" Russ' voice took on a slightly panicked tone, and Spike could smell the blood rising to the surface of his skin. He upped the wattage on his 'you got a problem?' look, and watched Russ flush the dark
red of the perpetually un-tanned.

"I don't want to, you know, see anything. I mean - Jesus, Alex!" Russ shook his head, laughing suddenly, and Spike whipped around to see the look of hilarity on Xander's face.

"Just teasing, Russ. We'll...uh..."

"We'll keep the noise to a minimum, mate," Spike interjected smoothly, shifting just right in Xander's lap so the man bit his lip, gasping silently.

"Oh, great. Uh. Batteries." Russ turned his back and started digging through the drawers in the other desk, and Spike turned back to Xander, letting his hands slide down to lay flat on Xander's chest.

"Now, where were we, pet?"

"Just...about...here..." Xander brought a hand up to the back of Spike's head, burying his fingers in owl-feather tufts and dragging Spike's lips to his with a moan of pure pleasure, a thrill of wantpridemine
shivering through him at the juxtaposition of work and Spike, and by the smell of it, food.

As the door banged shut behind Russ and his good natured mutter, Xander sighed, resting his forehead against Spike's, but frowning when he saw the expression on Spike's face. "What's wrong?"

"Who's the weedy git that announced me?" Spike asked, anger seething just below the surface. The hawk-faced bastard who'd given him the evil eye outside, and who'd just had the nerve to make a comment about mine mine mine Xander. A derogatory, nasty comment. One Spike wasn't prepared to let go.

One by one, the muscles beneath Xander's hands were tightening, a tension thrumming through Spike that made his heart trip with a surge of - not fear precisely - but worry. "That's Dave," Xander said, hand creeping down to the back of Spike's neck, kneading there. "He's my lead surveyor. He can be kind of a jerk sometimes, but he's good at what -"
"He'd better watch what comes out of his mouth, if he knows what's good for him," Spike grated, resisting the coaxing touch of Xander's hand. "Fuckin' gobshite."

Xander shifted his grasp, scratching through the short hairs at the nape of Spike's neck, licking his lips. "Do you know anything about surveying, Spike?"

"I know fuck-all, love." Spike said, relaxing just a little.

"Then please don't kill him." Xander sighed, sliding his hand up until it cupped Spike's skull, holding him still. "Although, and I so shouldn't admit this, the thought that you want to is kind of hot."

Spike grinned and jerked Xander close for a hard, possessive kiss, hoping he wasn't hurting him.

"That's my boy," he crooned, when he reluctantly let Xander up for air.
"Ahh...so...did you develop a fetish for office sex at Wolfram and Hart?" Xander was grinning, he could feel it stretching his face as he looked up at Spike, only breathing a little harder than he should. "Or did you actually bring me lunch? Not," he said, tightening his arms on Spike, "that was an invitation for you to stop what you were doing."

"Yeah, the idea of Angelus walkin' in at any minute and catchin' me and Wes shaggin' like rabbits got me hot every time," Spike deadpanned, inwardly cringing at the thought. God only knows how long he'd have had to hear about that, if Angel had ever actually caught them. He settled himself a little closer and got his hands under the edge of Xander's t-shirt - ran them slowly, slowly up the warm, solid muscle there.

"And yeah, I did bring you lunch. And something nice for afters. Have to earn it, though."

Xander sucked in his stomach at Spike's cool touch, shivering a little and slouching in his chair to bring
them closer together, wanting to *touch* and worming his hand into the back of Spike's jeans with a muttered curse for the inventor of tight denim. "What'd you have in mind?"

"I had you in mind, pet... Naked, hard..." Spike dipped down kiss him; nibbling little kisses all along his jaw. "Sliding into me sooo...slow..." Spike flexed his hips, pressing hardness to hardness and savoring the scent of musky arousal that thickened in the air between them. Xander's heartbeat was speeding up - his skin was warming with blood and Spike closed his eyes and let himself drown in it - in scent and touch and taste, in the quivering tautness of muscles aching to move and take and *be* taken.

Spike's muscles, flexing beneath his hands still trembled as they had when he was sick, but now it was with the effort of holding *back*, and god that got to Xander every time - that much power, *waiting* for him.

Xander closed his eye, mouthing over the cool silkiness of Spike's shirt. "How slow? Cause lunch
hour? Gonna end eventually, but I could lock Russ out. Lay you out on my desk while I take calls."

Spike's chest hitched beneath Xander's cheek with an involuntary breath. "Strip you out of these tight fucking jeans." Xander's fingers wriggled between denim and skin, working their way over the hard curve and stretch of muscle to stroke between, eye closed with concentration. "Really...take my time." He lifted his eye to see Spike's wide and dilated, and doubted either of them would be lasting to the end of lunch hour.

"Yess..." Spike hitched his shoulders enough to shrug his coat off and onto the desk - reached down and tugged at Xander's shirt until he leaned up and Spike could lift it up and off. "Want that, Xan...want you to take hours..." He slithered out of Xander's lap and knelt between spread thighs, up on his knees so he could taste the sweat-damp skin of chest and belly. Xander's fingers in his hair, tugging and combing and pushing and he popped the button on Xander's jeans open, slipping his fingertips inside.
Like electric shocks, the touch of Spike's fingers inside Xander's jeans, the wrongness of this going on at - *Work, work, oh fuck! I'm the guy who gets laid on his lunch hour because he's the one with a door*. He dropped his head back, chuckling as the blue-black tips of Spike's hair tickled at his palms.

"What?" Spike's fingers stilled all but for his forefinger which rubbed up, down, in a way that made it hard for Xander to think.

"Just - just hoping Russ doesn't need any more batteries." Which really summed it up. Xander let his head roll forward, lacing his fingers through Spike's hair, and tucking his thumbs into the sharp curves of Spike's cheekbones, watching his smirk reflected on Spike's lips, then shivering as Spike opened his jaw, tongue sliding along the length of Xander's thumb from within his mouth, a smooth caress of skin that made him shiver. "Door," he said, scratching his nails against Spike's scalp, and enjoying the push of Spike's skull back into his hands.
"Door?" Spike asked, raising an eyebrow. He glanced back at it - did a slow push up to his feet and sauntered over. "This door? Want me to lock it?" Xander's eye followed Spike's hand as it caressed down the painted aluminum and cupped the cheap brass-look knob.

"Uuhhh," Xander mumbled, and Spike flipped the thumb-latch.

"Now...locked in...whatever shall I do?" Spike stopped in front of the couch and lifted one leg and then the other, undoing the buckles on his boots and slipping them off - tossing them aside. No socks, deliberately. He shrugged the silk shirt off, tossing it to the couch, then peeled the wife-beater off as well, slow. He undid the first button on his jeans and stopped. Stood there, hipshot, one hand stroking slowly down his own chest, the other slipping into the waist of his jeans. "Gonna come over here and...make me wait a little more, Xanderrr...?" he purred, and watched Xander's eye darken with lust.
It had to be something about Spike that made Xander's muscles loosen like they'd been oiled, made him want to prowl over there and -

"Maybe I want to make you wait from over here." Xander licked his lips, wondering when they'd gotten so dry, and pushed his chair back over the tile floor to let Spike see, the air cool enough against his exposed cock to make him twitch. He rubbed his palms over the arms of his chair, remembering the hard roughness of Spike's denim-clad thighs, digging his fingers into the wood in an effort not to touch. "Gonna - take a lot to get me to move over there." *Or about two more seconds of Spike's hand doing - oh god, that looks good.*

"Yeah? Think I'm up to it, pet..." Spike let both hands slide up his ribs - let his fingers stroke over his nipples, let his breath shorten to breathy pants. Slid his palms down, slow, and popped another button on his jeans. His cock was flat against his belly, the first two inches showing between the black denim and he got his thumbs under himself and pushed forward, straining the remaining
buttons, rubbing his fingers up and down the exposed bit of shaft.

"Jesus." Xander tightened his hands on the chair until he was surprised the arms didn't crack. "Want that," he ground out, giving in and sliding one hand into his lap, grinding the heel against the aching base of his cock. "On my desk, spread out like Christmas morning. God, you're edible." His legs shook as he toed off one sock and shoe, then the other, keeping his eye on Spike's fingers - up, down. Coppery and musky, he could taste sex on the air with every breath. Oh fuck, Russ and Carl are gonna - oh yeah. Cheer me on. Xander drew a sharp breath, feeling the smile stretch his lips. "Take 'em off."

Oh...god... Spike couldn't stop the moan that rose from his throat - couldn't keep his eyes open as the delicious sweet-salt musk of Xander's arousal rolled over him. He took a long breath and lowered his head - opened his eyes and looked up at Xander through half-closed lids while he worked the buttons of his jeans open. Xander was sprawled out
in his chair, a small, fucking sexy smile curling up the corner of his mouth. His hand was slowly rubbing up and down the length of his own erection, and Spike deliberately dropped his gaze to it - licked his lips. Xander shuddered and Spike looked up at him again. Slowly pushed the jeans down and kicked them away.

"What next, Xan? What do you want me to do next..."

"Watch," Xander said, the word rough in a dry throat. His hands shook, one part of his brain still babbling about office and work and naked before the rest got it in a strangle hold and wrestled it to the floor. Xander gave his jeans a push as he stood, and stepped out of them. "Only watch." *Because if I don't get a taste, I am going to go fucking insane* Xander slipped his boxers down, leaving them where they fell, the cold tile floor of the converted camper uncomfortably gritty against his toes. And then his knees as he slid to them before Spike, turning his face up to him, heart pounding. "Keep watching."
"Think - think you've got this backwards," Spike mumbled, shaking with the effort not to touch.

"Watching," Xander breathed, "not talking," and slid Spike along his tongue with a shudder; salt and musk, and something like cloves, and good and Xander let Spike go with a wet sound and a moan that he wasn't entirely sure came from him. "Okay. Now, where were we?"

"We were..." Spike couldn't help reaching out and slipping his fingers into Xander's hair - couldn't help tugging him just a little closer. "Now you're gonna let me climb on top of you and take you in, love... Gonna let me ride you so...very...slow..." Xander's eye was fluttering, open and shut and open again and Spike's knees felt fluttery - his belly did. The heat from Xander's body was like a feather-light caress and he wanted it in - wanted it burning him from the inside. He tugged up, making Xander stand - rubbing all along that heat. "C'mon, Xan...want you, love..."
Xander stopped Spike's words with lips and tongue, wondering how a body so much cooler could make him *burn*. Tugging blindly back toward the couch and banging into it, grimacing as bony knees clashed. He was forced to pull back from Spike's lips, panting and sitting hard on the couch cushions.

"Y-yes. That's a *yes,*" because misunderstandings were so not in the cards just then. He curled his fingers around Spike's hips - curled and uncurled and leaned forward, rubbing against Spike's cock like a cat until even *he* could smell Spike on him. "And a 'right now, please'."

"*God* yes," Spike whispered, shivering as the silky strands of Xander's hair slipped over him - as the rough-smooth of Xander's cheek and barely-there beard made his already-sensitive skin tingle. His *want* - his desire for Xander was pouring through him in waves of static-spark heat and he was ready - *more* than ready, to feel Xander push into him and fill him. He eased his knees down on either side of Xander's, onto the rough, cheap fabric of the couch and inched forward, pushing Xander back as he
"Ready for you, love..."

God, so close. Xander dropped his head back to the couch, shivering as Spike nibbled a path down his throat. "Oh fuck." Xander's hands clenched, his entire body shuddering with right now need. "Lube - lube, please say you brought -"

Spike's tongue curled behind his teeth with a hiss as he sank down, slick and tight and savoring Xander's wide eyed disbelief.

"Yeah. Brought lube."

"God!"

Spike laughed softly but his breath caught as he sank lower, Xander fully inside and radiating heat, pulsing in time with the heartbeat under his hand. Xander's chest was hitching under his palms, his breath sweet and warm on Spike's mouth as he moved in for a long, probing kiss. Xander's hips
were moving under him; lift and slide and push and Spike groaned, pulling slowly away - arching back and lifting up, dropping *down*, back curving as he positioned himself for fullest penetration.

"Want you - like this in a kilt," Xander panted, Spike's skin slick and smooth, cool beneath Xander's palms as he swept them up over Spike's ribs, thumbs finding and rubbing over darkened nipples. A droplet of sweat trickled over Spike's collarbone, and Xander lunged forward, catching it on his lips, sucking, biting at the salted skin beneath with a groan, the rest of his thoughts on the subject skittering away beneath the taste of salt and lemons and spice.

"Kilt? Xan..." Spike rose and fell, rose and fell - keeping it slow but *pushing* on the downstroke. Loving the burning stretch, the pressure and the shivery little tingle, like nails down his back, every time the broad head of Xander's cock hit right *there*. *God...so fuckin' good...want this always, always... Xaan..." Spike fisted a handful of hair and pulled Xander's head up, tasting himself on Xander's lips,
inhaling the spice and musk and sweet of Xander's skin.

"Ahhh?" Xander asked vaguely, eye unfocused, tongue seeking more of that taste on Spike's lips, Spike's skin.

"Kilt," Spike said again, giving Xander's hair an affectionate tug until Xander actually looked at him, then twisting his hips as he sank, holding very still.

"K-kilt." Xander panted, trying to get Spike to move, but a vampire could make himself very, very heavy when he wanted to. "Want you in a kilt. Slick and ready," he managed, "like this." Xander's fingers crept down, rubbing over the skin stretched so tight around him, shivering. "Take you a-anywhere. Anytime."

"Fuck," Spike whispered, and squirmed back into Xander's touch - moved his hips in a fluid circle, again and again, clenching down hard. Xander was panting, his other hand on Spike's hip, grasping hard enough to bruise. "Want to... All bare, ready for
you...just push me over, *fuck* me, when...whenever you like, Xan, *yes-*"

Too fucking *much*. Xander arched back, fingers spasming into Spike's flesh, the *image* enough to push him hard and fast and far and - "God!" He closed his hand around Spike's cock, fingers finding Spike's already there, clasping, catching Spike's lips with a groan and clash of teeth against lips and tongue tangling tongue and *want* that left Xander breathless.

Fingers slipping, grasping, dragging over him and Xander's mouth on his with a desperate greed and Spike rose up and pounded down, again and again, shuddering at the sudden rush of liquid heat that he could feel inside. Xander was shivering and bucking and groaning under him, hot breath in his mouth, nails in his thigh and Spike curved over Xander, his body jerking in rough spasms. He gasped and twisted and pushed his face into Xander's neck, his teeth worrying the wet, hot skin and their hands slicking as he came.
Xander shuddered at the feeling of Spike's teeth on his neck, spent cock twitching gamely at the dull prickle. At Xander's sharp inhalation, Spike began to pull away but Xander's hand flew up, catching the mussed white and black whorls of Spike's hair and drawing him back down with a shaky hand, heart pounding in an echo that he could feel inside Spike's body. "Come on." Whispered.

'Come on...', and Spike froze. For one moment just froze, a dozen thoughts tumbling through his head. But instinct, desire - want - drove him. Want, and need, to take in more of this man - to have him - to have some part of him forever in himself. The demon rose eagerly, and Spike licked the sweetly salty flesh and then, delicately, bit.

A shiver ran through Xander at the first sharp prick of fangs, the fingers clenching in Spike's hair shaking too as icy pain blossomed into spreading, seeping heat that made him moan and clutch Spike closer. "God"

Xander was still inside, still half-hard and Spike
pressed down, pressed closer; wound his arms around Xander's shoulders and held him tight. *Oh, god, oh...yessss...* Xander was honey and iron and rich red earth - as layered as old wine and as heady. *Oh, fuck, has to be a next time, want it again, again...*

Xander arched his head back; wanted to howl, wanted to *snarl* the intensity of it, hissing air in through his teeth and clutching Spike hard to his body, thrusting *up* into that clutching slickness with a growl both possessive and *possessed* and needing, feeling his ribs shudder with the pounding of his heart. "Fuck, yes!"

Spike couldn't help it - he bit harder - deeper - not so much drawing more blood as intensifying what he was doing and knowing that Xander wanted it. The clutch of Xander's arms around him was frantic and demanding and Spike burrowed closer, thrusting a hardening cock into Xander's belly and feeling his own body stretch again as Xander firmed and lengthened inside him. He realized he was growling around the mouthful of succulent flesh in
his teeth, but he didn't care.

The hot and pain and pulling flared with Spike's bite and Xander arched, shaking with an orgasm that ripped through his veins, driving deep and rough into Spike's body, only distantly feeling the strangely cool splash and seep of Spike's fluids over chest and belly. He sank back into the scratchy cushions with a moan borne on the soft pulses of aftershock; echoes of Spike's suckling at his throat that made him pull Spike closer, fierce possession turning to protection, ache, need for contact. "Sweetheart..." Love, love...

Spike was trembling - fizzing aftershocks all through him as he stiffly unlocked his jaws and pulled away, licking the welling drops of blood from the bite. Can't...take too much...never hurt him...god, god that was...was... He caught Xander's face in his hands and kissed him, 'Sweetheart' in his ears, something hot and fierce and Mine, mine, want him! surging up from the demon.

Spike tasted of old pennies and new iron, and
Xander sighed into the kiss, unkinking his fingers from Spike's hair to rub and stroke shakily over his head. Because it was good and his throat ached and tingled around the wound and made him feel light headed and cold now in the little trailer, naked and sticky, and clinging to Spike, and he didn't care.

He lifted his head, eye tracking over the mussed spikes of hair, and the swell and bruise of Spike's lips, almost as telling as the streaks and swirls of come on his stomach. "You look so well-fucked." His voice came out hoarse as if he'd been yelling, and he smoothed his hand through the stickiness over Spike's belly, sweeping circles and arcs.

"I am, love." Spike was all but purring - the demon was sated and content, wanting to lie down and sleep - curl around its human, reinforce its claim. Spike - wished they could. A post-fuck nap usually led to sleepy, half-awake post-nap fucking that could grow into a lovely, lazy cycle that lasted all weekend. But it's Thursday and he's working... Wonder if the food's still warm? Spike leaned down and kissed Xander, slow sweep of his tongue and
gentle pressure.

"Let's get clean and get you some food, yeah?" Spike slid off of Xander's lap reluctantly, stroking a hand over Xander's face that he leaned into, lips pressing into Spike's palm with a little laugh.

"God. Sex and food? I think I love you." Xander pushed himself up from the couch, staggered, and flopped back down, head spinning. It seemed like a really good idea to close his eye until the room stopped tilting around him, too. Okay, not trying that again so soon.

"You all right, pet?" Spike asked, 'think I love you' in his head, echoing. Didn't mean it, didn't mean it, post-fuckin' brilliant shag, s'practically cliche. Spike crouched down next to Xander, hand on his knee, squeezing gently. "Need something?"

Xander leaned down, resting his forehead against Spike's, rolling it gently. "Hmm. Oxygen's good." Touch was good too and Spike felt nice under his hands, sleek and solid. A few more minutes, and
he'd try standing again a bit more slowly. "What did you bring me?"

"Oh, gyros and some dolmades, salad - good stuff. You'll like it."

"Nothing weird though, right?"

"Guess that would depend on what you meant by 'weird'," Spike said, grinning, pushing a little into Xander and running both hands up his thighs. "You trust me, don't you, pet?"

"Yeah," Xander said, his voice coming out more seriously than he intended, and he slid his hands from Spike's wrists up to his biceps, then to frame his jaw, thumbs meeting beneath Spike's lower lip. There was supposed to be more after that - a quip, a light put-down, but nothing followed.

Spike didn't know what to say to that - felt something warm and sweetly sharp in his chest at Xander's steady gaze and tender touch.
"That's good, then," he murmured finally. He pushed himself slowly upright and held out his hand, smiling when Xander took it. "Slow, now, and let's get this mess off of us before it turns to glue."

Xander stumbled, leaning against Spike, and taking a deep breath of _muskysweet salty_ with that copper tang, and groaned. "Right." He shivered, wishing there was a blanket in the trailer too, but not about to go ask the on-site medical team for one. "Here. We've got about five minutes of hot water once it heats up." He cranked the faucet on high and leaned his hip on the counter, dragging a hand through his hair, unconsciously making it stick up in a riot around his head.

Spike snorted, wanting to say something but finding the 'backwards through a hedge' look too endearing. He hoped Xander's hand hadn't been...sticky. He sidled up close to Xander and bent his head to the bite mark - licked it once, broad sweep of his tongue. Xander twitched.

"I'd lick you clean if we were home. Lick you clean
and then fuck you dirty again..."

Xander's heart beat a quick heady thump against his ribs, and he reached out, gathering Spike against him, belly to belly. "If we were home, you'd be on the bed with your legs around your ears and my tongue in your ass."

Spike inhaled a sharp little gasp of pure lust, Xander's words like fingers caressing him inside and out. "God, love...you got any sick days yet? Tell 'em my lunch made you sick."

"Wouldn't I have to eat it for it to make me sick?" Xander swayed on his feet though, reaching back to clutch the counter ruefully. "Not that eating wouldn't be a good idea right now."

"Didn't take too much -?" Spike frowned, and Xander closed his eye, goosebumps rising on his flesh as Spike's fingers traced the edges of the bite.

"Which is the answer that'll get you to bite me again?"
Spike snorted. "Yeah, you're fine all right."

"I just need to eat." Xander lowered his head, resting it comfortably on Spike's shoulder. "Will it do anything? The bite?"

"It will make you my willing sex slave," Spike intoned, his best Dracula voice, and he laughed at the look of horrified speculation that crossed Xander's face - laughed again when the look changed to something altogether different and Xander put his hands on Spike's hips.

"Already your harem boy, aren't I?" he half-whispered, and Spike shivered.

"Fuck, yeah, you are..."

"Then let me take care of you." Xander stole a kiss, twisting and fetching down a hand towel, soaking it in the warm tap water and wringing it out before kneeling again and sliding the warm roughness over Spike's chest, sweeping down over his belly in slow,
careful arcs, rinsing the cloth, then returning to carefully lift Spike's cock, cleaning with tender concentration and absolute focus on the slide of soft flesh cradled in his palm.

Spike leaned into the rough, warm caress of the towel, eyes half-shut, watching Xander. Seeing the concentration and affection on his face as he rubbed gently at Spike's body. Cleaning him...caring for him. Making him feel... Loved. Makes me feel loved and I don't care if it's love or not, I'll take whatever he's giving, take it all... "You look so lovely, Xan, kneeling there..." Spike breathed, and smiled when Xander looked up.

"The view's not so bad from here either." Xander's thumb brushed over Spike's tip, tracing the edge of Spike's foreskin, and god it was tempting to just lean forward, take Spike into his mouth, and -

"Gonna run out of hot water, pet."

Xander sighed reluctantly, finishing his cleaning with gentle strokes, then letting Spike pull him to
his feet, leaning against the counter to wet the 
towel again with lukewarm water, this time, 
rubbing it over his chest. "I'm spending this year's 
Christmas bonus on the biggest water heater in the 
home improvement store."

"Mmm... I like that. Can never have enough hot 
water." Spike kissed Xander lightly - softly - then 
took his hand and tugged him over to his desk, 
snagging jeans and shirts along the way. Xander 
dressed slowly, still a little unsteady on his feet and 
Spike felt a moments concern that'd he'd taken too 
much blood. Dressed as well, he settled on the edge 
of the desk and opened the bag from Diaspora, 
pulling out the salad, pita, and tzatziki for starters.

"Here now - eat up. Gotta get your strength back 
for when you get home, pet." Spike smirked at 
Xander's momentary dazed look and tore off a piece 
of pita bread - swirled it into the dip of yogurt, 
cucumber and garlic. The light, fresh flavor was 
wonderful, and the slight burn of the garlic nothing 
to the Hellmouth-hot wings Willy had served.
"Christ, you're distracting." Xander muttered, snatching up a piece of pita, shrugging, and copying Spike with the tzatziki, frowning.

"Don't like it?"

"Huh?" Xander shook his head, swallowing. "It's...good. Reminded me of something."

"What's that?" Spike tore off another piece of the pita bread.

"Cordy." Xander glanced up, explaining. "She was always the dip."

Spike felt a pang at that - sighed, and poked another piece of the bread into the dip.

"Yeah. 'Bout the cheerleader... Wes - didn't tell you..." Spike looked up at Xander - at the too-familiar look of trepidation. At the rigid set of his shoulders that said he was bracing himself for something. "She died, Xan. 'Bout a year ago. She was in a coma, for a while, an' - she died."
Xander just sat there, food in his hand and a dull look of pain in his eye and Spike hated Wes for a moment - hated them all for not calling and telling Xander what had happened - how she was. Maybe he could have said goodbye...

"Sorry, love. I'm -" Spike sighed again, feeling inadequate - feeling helpless. "Just...sorry. She was a firecracker, that girl."

*Firecracker*. Loud, dazzling, colorful, and gone while the after-image is still burned into the retinas.

He wanted-

Didn't want-

Xander shook his head, laying the piece of bread carefully on the desk, and then his head on Spike's thigh, needing *real*. Because somewhere in his mucked up mind, with a soldier and a hyena was the belief that Cordy was supposed to go on forever and be happy somewhere. Or at least longer and
happier than him. She was supposed to have gotten out.

He felt Spike's hand barely settle on his shoulder and jerked upright, taking a ragged breath and stiffly picking up his bread. "Yeah, she was." And he hadn't expected to feel quite so...numb for the loss of a woman he hadn't seen in years. It was funny. He should know what to say by now. But he didn't.

"Yeah," Spike echoed. Wishing Xander had let him...give some comfort. Something. He watched Xander eat - mechanically, slowly - and squashed the anger that wanted to blossom. Anger at Angel and his pack of do-gooders, anger at Wes for not telling - anger at the mood being spoiled. Doesn't need that, now. Doesn't need you acting like a sodding girl. He poked into the bag and pulled out the caviar - scooped some up in a plastic spoon and tried it. Oil and lemon, onion and salt - heavenly. But the fun to be had teasing Xander into trying it was gone.

"Don't fret, love. Wes said... She got a chance, at
the end. Came back for a day or something - said her goodbyes..." Puppet on the strings of the PTB, but he wasn't going to tell him *that*.

Xander looked at the last scrap of bread in his hand, and laid it on the table, resting his head in his hands with a sigh that he wished didn't shake so badly. It wasn't even as if someone *should* have thought to tell him. She'd known a guy in high school. A stupid, crazy teenaged guy who'd loved her, but not enough.

If he could just get the first words out, the pressure in his chest would - go away or something. Because he *wasn't* one of her loved ones by the end. There was no earthly reason she should think he needed her goodbye. He hadn't been her first, or her last, or even her biggest mistake, and contradictory as it was, he just wished Spike would touch him again, remind him that he was still there, whether he should be or not.

And he so shouldn't be thinking 'at least Spike's *already* dead' as if it was a *good* thing. He didn't
want to be laughing. At least he hoped it was laughing. Because the sound hurt. "It's pretty fucked up, Spike." They weren't the words he'd hoped for, but they did what he needed and let him lay his head back on Spike's thigh, one arm curled loosely around his calf.

"Proper fucked," Spike agreed, and hesitantly put his hand on Xander's head - felt relief go through him as Xander shivered a little and pressed closer, his hand on Spike's ankle clutching tighter. He ran slow fingers through the sweat-damp hair - let his other hand go out to smooth down Xander's back, again and again. Letting him know he wasn't alone. Letting him know... Somebody cares.

"I want to go home." Those weren't the words that were supposed to come out, either and Xander laughed helplessly. "God, I've come in to work expecting apocalyptic things to happen, and now here I am at work when I find out my first girlfriend died almost a year ago and all I want is to go home." He swallowed, wishing his voice hadn't come out so broken.
"Then let's get you home, love." Spike slipped his hand under Xander's cheek - tugged gently until Xander turned his face up, blinking and mournful looking - shattered. Oh, love, love... I'd spare you if I could. "Call that Russ - tell him we're off." Spike hesitated a long moment, and then leaned down and gently kissed him; taste of dill and salt and cool cucumber. "Let me take care of you, pet, all right? My turn now."

Words rose again, words that Xander should have said. Words like 'I can't leave work' and 'the guys depend on me' but instead he just nodded, hitting speed dial for Russ' cell phone and laying his head back on Spike's thigh. "Russ? I've gotta take off early..."

"Everything okay with Spike?" Russ hesitated. "It sounded okay."

Xander felt a painful knot in his chest tighten, amazed that his voice sounded so much closer to normal than he felt. "Yeah, I just got some bad
news. Really -" Jesus he was not going to cry on the phone with Russ, but the words were stuck again, trapped in his throat, and he scrubbed his hand over his face.

"Alex?"

Xander shuddered as Spike's fingers closed around the phone and drew it from his grip, the other cool hand settling at the nape of his neck. "Death in the family, mate. It all right if I -?"

"Oh god, yeah. Take him home. I'll take over until Carl's shift."

"Right. Thanks, mate."

"Just - take care of him, okay, Spike?" Russ' voice was full of genuine concern and Spike was glad for that even as the demon bristled in proprietary threat.

"'Course. And - don't expect him tomorrow, either." Spike hung up the phone and gave Xander's hair a
gentle tug. "Let me up and we'll clear out, yeah? Let me get this mess." Xander sat up slowly and Spike made short work of the aborted meal, packing it all back up into the bag, knowing Xander hated to see food being thrown away - habit he'd picked up in Africa that lingered on. Spike swept up his duster and looked around. Xander's jacket was on the arm of the couch and he picked it up - fished the jingling keys out of the pocket.

"C'mon, love - all done here."

Xander let Spike bundle him into his jacket, then the patch, cool fingers settling it tenderly over his face and freeing his hair from the band. He simply stood still, maybe swayed a little under the touch, but he couldn't tell, and then Spike walked him to the truck, helping him into the passenger side.

He just closed his eye and let Spike drive, shivering when the rough terrain of the site gave way to paved roads; unbuckling his seatbelt and stretching across the seat, laying his head back on Spike's thigh.
And by the time they pulled into the garage, he had words, at least a few. "It's not just Cordy," he said, listening to the whine and clatter of the garage door closing behind them.

"What is it then, Xan?" Spike asked, twining his fingers in the dark hair again - looking down at the tired - too tired - face half-lit by the muted glow of the dash lights.

Xander smoothed his hand up and down Spike's thigh, tracing the curve of the muscle through denim that was only just beginning to fade from pitch black. "I think I'm buried out there, too," Xander said, and wished it made as much sense once spoken as it had inside his mind.

"Feel solid enough," Spike said, hand tracing a curl behind Xander's ear. "And believe me, I know from solid and ghostly."

"That guy Cordy knew? I'm not him anymore."
Spike's fingers moved slowly, beginning to comb through his hair. "He's not dead, pet."

"No?"

"Just grown up, maybe."

"And suddenly Peter Pan is making so much sense." The words were supposed to come out with a laugh, but all that came out was a choked breath, and the first embarrassing tears.

"Ah, love -" Spike cursed the awkwardness of the truck seats and coaxed Xander up - scooted him over and popped open the passenger door, guiding the man out - holding him against a wobble - holding him against the tears. Just too much, this. Doesn't sleep enough - always running himself into the ground - eats garbage... Spike hugged Xander close and walked him into the house, the demon restlessly checking that everything was as it should be. Spike's own influence here and there, in more gaily-colored dishes and a huge *Yellow Submarine* movie poster and some of the brighter pillows. Also
a trail of muddy footprints across the dull-beige carpet, but that couldn't be helped. Needed to be with him, didn't I? Watched him swimming - couldn't help but want him...

Spike stopped and pulled Xander into his arms, feeling the dampness on his shirt from tears. "Want a shower, love? Or just bed?"

What Xander wanted - suddenly, desperately - was to be clean. "Hold me up in the bath? Make sure I don't drown?" The house around him was a swirl of dimmed colors with his eye half closed, but it smelled of wood smoke and tobacco, and a little bit of lemon and spice that told him Spike'd been in the bath already, but warmth and weightlessness and Spike sounded - good.

"I'll make a hedonist of you yet, love."

"I'm too tired to be a hedonist."

Spike tipped Xander's head up - carefully wiped tear tracks off his face. "I can wait, love, while you sleep
yourself out."
He kissed him, gently, then guided
him into the bath - got that monstrously sinful -
decadently wonderful - tub filling. Pouring in the
bath-oil Xander liked best, making it good and hot.

Xander was weaving on his feet, his eye still
suspiciously bright, and Spike made short work of
his own clothes, hurling them blindly out the door
in the general direction of the bedroom. Then he
carefully got Xander naked, caressing every bit of
newly-bared skin - feeling the tension and
exhaustion almost vibrating through him.

"In we go, now," he said, stepping into the tub and
holding his hand out. Xander took it, treading
carefully, and they lowered themselves down.
Xander settled back against Spike with a wobbly
sigh and Spike wrapped his arms tight around
Xander's ribs - kissed cheek and temple and the
edge of the empty socket and then rested his cheek
on Xander's hair.

"I've got you now, love. Won't let you go. Just let
go, pet, and trust me..." he murmured.
Xander let the heat seep into his skin, into his bones; all but where Spike's cooler skin touched him, held him just tight enough that Xander couldn't forget he was there. He wrapped his arms over Spike's, too tired for anything but honesty when he answered. "I do." He just hadn't expected that to be the one thing he was still certain of.

"Thank you, love," Spike whispered, and held him a little closer - closed his eyes and breathed in the scents that meant...so many things. Comfort. Home. Love. God... Fool for it, die for it...have to have it...don't care. "Shhh, shhh, shhh..." he whispered, even though Xander was silent - was breathing slower and slower, and his body going limp in Spike's arm.

Sleep, and don't dream, Xan, don't dream... "Sleep, pet. I'll be here." He didn't think Xander really heard him, but it didn't matter. That he lay in his arms and slept...was enough.
Cool water bubbled over Xander's hands, across his face, still rough with morning stubble, the motion doing more to wake him up than the temperature as it tickled at the edges of his eyelids and eased the ache in his socket that always seemed to follow a night of crying. This morning though, he felt mostly...numb.

Not the numb that had turned into bone-crushingly tired, but numb as if a piece of him was missing.

His breath hitched and he choked on the water; twisted off the taps and groped for a towel, scrubbing it roughly, impatiently over his skin until it tingled and his coughing stopped. And then, the lime green of the towel making his skin look sickly, he met his eye. "Harris, you look like shit."

Spike rolled - burrowed - reached for the body that went with the heady, spicy scent, but there was no
body and he lifted his head with a jerk, looking for Xander. Not there, in the messy, pillow-cluttered bed, and Spike eased out of the warmth, shivering and snagging the heavy, cashmere robe that lay across the foot. Lined in silk, gods-awful expensive and it hugged him like Xander did - wrapped him in warmth and what felt very much like love. Spike stroked one hand down the deep-blue sleeve, smiling, and left the belt undone. *Find him and give him a good-morning full-body kiss. Wonder if he's feeling...all right?* Spike had almost forgotten about Cordelia and now he hesitated for a moment. *Damn. Maybe just... No, stop it. First find him, then...*

He could *hear* Xander - hear his heart beat, and he knew where he was. He walked slowly into the bathroom, wondering what he would find.

Xander's reflection stared back at him, seemingly content not to answer, and god, that would freak him out if one of these days it *did* answer and - considering all things Hellmouthy, he probably shouldn't even be thinking it, but...more and more,
he didn't feel as if his reflection was *his*.

Or maybe if *he* was *his*, which didn't quite make sense but felt like it was moving in the right direction. At least mentally.

He dropped his eye and looked away from the mirror. *Gotta just...snap out of it. Nothing's different today than it was yesterday.* That thought shouldn't have hurt. Because things *should* be different. Xander slid his fingers over the puckered scar on his stomach, only now finding the placement oddly fitting. He wondered if Cordy's scar from her fall had ever faded.

He barely remembered getting shot now, only the pain and *disappointment* that he was 'gonna be fine, Harris', which only meant he'd have to go back out and do it all again. He frowned. It seemed wrong that the things that he didn't want to remember were the things that left the most visible marks.

Mostly.
Xander laid his fingers over the still-livid bite on his neck, and wondered if it would scar, too.

"Your neck sore, love?" Spike asked quietly, body not quite touching Xander. Watching Xander's face in the mirror - the tiny flinch, the confusion. *Doesn't look happy... Looks... Fuck. Can't be regret. Please, love...don't.*

Xander shook his head, reaching back to put a hand on Spike's hip beneath the robe, rubbing the bed-warm skin. "Tingly. Not bad," Xander said, sighing when his voice came out in a dry croak. "Do they always scar?"

Spike hesitated, and Xander could feel the uncertainty even though he couldn't see Spike in the mirror. "Sometimes. Mostly, if the human survives the bite."

Something like relief shivered through Xander, and he leaned back against Spike. "Good. Look, I'm sorry I - ruined your surprise last night."
"Oh, that's not important, pet. M'sorry you had to find out, like that. Bloody bastards should have told you..." Spike hugged Xander a little closer, inhaling his rich, warm scent - inhaling sorrow and weariness, and it made his chest constrict. Made him hurt, and made the demon rage. *Just want you to be happy, love. Haven't had a lot of that, have you?* And then his brain caught up. "*Good? What's that mean?*"

"That I want this one. I mean, I want to *remember* this one." He wished he could see Spike's expression, but it was easier to say when he couldn't. Xander leaned his head back against Spike, closing his eye and feeling the burn in the bite on his neck, wrapping his arms over Spike's. "*Maybe... I guess...maybe this was a long time coming, but I don't know what's happening to me.*"

"*How d'you mean?*"

Those strong arms tightened around Xander's waist, making him shiver but hold onto Spike harder
before he could loosen his grip. "I don't know. But I know that the guy who signed on to be a vampire fighting hero has left the building." Xander licked his lips, looking down at the pale arms that didn't show up in the mirror. "And he never got what he wanted."

"What do you want, pet? Do you know?" Spike caressed the lean belly under his palms - nuzzled into sleep-tangled hair and then, gently, ghosted his lips over the bite. Because...Xander wanted it, and Spike...wanted him to.

Xander shivered, the barest brush of Spike's lips over the bite feathering its way in little sparks and tingles to his groin, making him suck in his breath. "He wanted to be The Guy. The - the hero of the day." Not the guy with the vampire love bite. That's me. Spike was still warm from the bed, hair soft against his hand when he reached back to cup the back of Spike's skull, and tilted his head to the side. "I - want something he was supposed to hate." You.

"That all you want though, Xan? Just... A vampire?
Slayer wanted a vampire, too - didn't make her not the Slayer." He pushed back into Xander's caress, turning his head just a little. Rubbing.

Xander's fingers clenched in Spike's hair and his heart beat a painful tattoo against his chest, hearing something in that question that reminded him uncomfortably of cheerful quips about drywall and window repair. "I want you."

Spike took a deep breath, hating himself for his next question. But he had to know, because he couldn't...do that. Again. Or...anymore. Something. Couldn't give his heart to someone who wouldn't...Keep it. Keep me. "You've got me, love... I'm right here. I just... I have to know if... If you think you have to give up...anything..."

"What if it's something I want to give up?" Xander's heart gave a soft, odd flutter even as he asked, the words heavy with implications that were still too big for him to think about clearly. "Something...that doesn't belong in my life?"
"Only if..." Spike eased his hold on Xander - took him by the shoulder and turned him around, so he could see him face to face - so Xander could see him, and see the truth of what he was saying. "I wanted Dru to give up Angelus for me, and she - wouldn't. Buffy thought - " Spike grimaced, hating to bring that mess into this talk that was just them, but he had to. "She thought she'd have to give up...her friends, her - humanity - to be with me. I just - don't want you to think you have to...change, or - or be somebody else. You are different - Xander Harris circa 1999 would have died rather than...share lunch with me." Spike couldn't help but smile at that, because they'd shared so much more than lunch.

He could see a glimmer of recognition in Xander's eye, as well, and knew he was thinking about the night before. If only for a moment.

"But I won't ask you for - anything you don't want to give me, love. Promise."

Xander shook his head. "It doesn't work that way.
You - *ask* me. You don't put up with me. I've...done being put up with."

"Never *put up* with you, pet, I just..." Spike shook his head - reached out and touched Xander's face - the 'bad' side, smoothing the tiny lines of the skin there. "Everything about you...is beautiful to me. I don't ever... Don't ever want you to think you have to be - anything but this. Anything else." Spike watched Xander's eye flicker over his face, not sure if he was saying what he *needed* to say - what Xander needed to hear. "I'll ask, love - I always did." *And the answer was always no.* Unspoken, but maybe not...unnoticed.

"Spike..." I *never noticed* Spike *babbles* before.

"What?" There was a wariness to Spike's expression, and a tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there before.

Xander shrugged a shoulder. "If I wasn't like *this*, I wouldn't have *you* now, but -" he took a breath, "what if it's something I want to change? What if
"part of me...wants to be more like you?" The last words came out in a whisper, sounding stupid as soon as they hung in the air between them, but he didn't take them back.

_Be like...me? What does_ - For one moment Spike thought 'vampire' and his stomach twisted in something like dismay, but something like...hope, as well. _Can't be what he's sayin', though._ "Xan, what do you - like me how? I'm just -" Spike was helpless to finish that thought - utterly bewildered, and he had to smile a little, and let his hand slide back into Xander's hair. "Not lettin' you bleach this, pet."

Xander lowered his head to Spike's shoulder, shaking in his arms with almost silent laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"It's just - I just -" Xander shook his head, sliding a hand over the back of Spike's skull again, the crisp bleached curls crunching against his palm. "I just realized how stupid it sounds."
"How stupid what sounds?"

"Alive. I want - to be more alive." He swallowed. "Like you. And again with the irony."

"Can't be less alive than me, pet. Dead twice over, now." Spike cocked his head to one side, looking at Xander quizzically. "What's going on in the brain of yours? Twisty as a snake's back."

"I said it was irony. I don't know - I just - when I was in Africa, everything seemed so big, and I felt so small. But here, everything feels so small. But when we're in here, just us, or in the Nest, or fuck, even in the Jacuzzi, everything's the right size, and you may now point out how incredibly dirty that sounds -" Xander dragged in a deep breath as he felt his lungs straining for air, and released it in a sigh. "And that's what I'm thinking. Um. Except for the alive thing which still sounds stupid, but I'm not taking it back."

Spike let his hand slip down to Xander's shoulder - let his other hand slide around Xander's waist.
"Nothin' to take back, pet. I - get it, I think. You...trust me and... I make you feel -" Spike stopped and shook his head. *Don't know how you feel, really...not about...everything.*

"I'm half-asleep still, Xan, I don't want to - say the wrong thing..."

"Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?"

"I don't know if you've noticed this, but..." Xander tilted Spike's face up to look at him seriously. "I'm not a girl."

Spike snorted. "Hard not to notice that."

"I mean, there's no right or wrong thing. I'm not gonna play word games with you." Xander bit his lip, watched his thumb slide over the ridge of Spike's cheekbone, feeling the ache in his belly that still hadn't gone away soothed by the warmth in his chest when he touched Spike. Held - oh, okay, *was*
held by Spike. "You make me feel alive."

Which was only part of it, but the only part Xander had words for, because the usual words...were so cheap. Please, please get this, Spike.

Spike tipped his head into Xander's caress - stood there, for a long moment, just meeting Xander's gaze and feeling - what Xander was saying. And what he wasn't saying. Letting his fingers do slow circles in the small of Xander's back. And Spike couldn't stop the affectionate - loving - smile that slowly curled his mouth up - that made Xander's eye sparkle back at him. Alive. If only you knew, love. I'm only alive when I...have someone to be alive for and god...you make me want to do - so much...be so much. Make me...

"Happy. That makes me...happy, love," Spike murmured, and he leaned forward and kissed Xander lightly, just a taste. Cool skin and hint of tap-water and Xander-sweetness that never faded.

"But...something's not quite right, yeah?"
Something's bothering you, pet."

"You're right," Xander said, quietly but needing Spike to know that - feel that before they went on. He slipped his hands around Spike's waist beneath the robe, turning them so that he could see himself in the mirror. "It's so weird seeing my arms, but not you or the robe. Why -" Xander shook his head, leaning gratefully into Spike when he felt his arms tighten around him. "Sorry." He licked his lips, tried again. "All my life, I've been reacting to things. Running away from or to things...adapting to what I get...and coming back to it because it's what I know. Even when it's not what I want."

Xander dropped his gaze from his missing eye and turned back to Spike, resting against him forehead to forehead, relieved when Spike just...let him think. "Before the big showdown with the First, Anya and I had a last - okay, a lot of last hoorahs."

Spike smiled at that, and Xander could feel him chuckle. "I know, pet. There were a lot of last hoorahs goin' around then. There's nothin' wrong
with that on the eve of a big battle, yeah?" His thumb stroked arcs that tingled on the back of Xander's neck.

"Not...wrong, just...We were over then. Really over. Friends who have sex and can't look each other in the eye afterward over. But we kept coming back to each other because it was what we knew. Xander and Anya fuck away their troubles. Except when we couldn't." Xander closed his eye, wishing the thoughts would line up in neat order and make sense to him, and he really hoped they were making sense to Spike. "But we did. And it didn't help. And we knew it wouldn't."

"Are you tryin' to say that's why you came back to Sunnydale?"

Relief flooded Xander so quickly, so completely, that his knees shook. "Yeah. But, not why I chose you. You - okay, you're familiar, but you're not that kind of familiar, and that's - I think that's what I wanted, but didn't have the balls to take even back then..."
"You sayin'...you wanted to shag me instead of Anya before the big battle?" The note of stunned disbelief should have made Xander laugh, but it didn't.

"I'm saying I would have if I hadn't had my head so far up my ass. I just - it makes me see now..." Xander shook his head, as if that would make the swirling half-formed thoughts make sense.

"Makes you see what, pet?" Spike asked, but Xander just shook his head again, hugging him tighter, and Spike hugged back, trying to sort what he'd said into something he could react to. Or...against. *Man's had things shoved down his throat all his life. Shoved in his face. Never really chose anything but he...* Xander's words played back and Spike smiled suddenly. *Chose me. That's what he said. Chose me...* That made a bloom of heat and pleasure unfold in Spike's chest but he struggled to tamp it down, because this was about *Xander* now, not him. Now Xander was making his own choices - or at least wanting to, and...
"You...chose me, love and, what - that scare you? Think you made the wrong choice?"

"Fuck no!" Xander jerked upright, staring at Spike in horror, the thump of wrong that Spike came to that conclusion enough to loosen his tongue. "I made the choice. And for the first time, it feels right, and I - okay, this is going to sound stupid, but for the first time, I'm thinking that maybe I can be the kind of guy who...chooses things," he finished lamely.

_Right choice, then, right, _Spike thought, and the squashed the little gleeful voice because this was still about Xander, not him - about choices and Xander feeling...

"Course you can choose, pet! Choose whatever you like." Spike stroked the dark hair back and back, loving the sleep-tangled silkiness of it - the rich, dark color that was full of glints and highlights. "Choosing's easy - it's choosing right - choosing what you want, and not what's expected - that's the hard part. Xan - " Spike looked at the man, and
Xander looked back, still frowning a little - hands clenched tight into the edges of Spike's robe as if he'd like to shake him. "Love, whatever you choose - I'll be right there, yeah? I'll help you if I can, and I'll - tell the world 'sod off' if nobody else likes it. Promise, love."

"I know, and that's - very disturbing on more levels than you know," Xander admitted, watching his fingers knead the rich blue of Spike's robe. "It'd be so fucking easy to just follow you, because I never thought about this shit before. People told me who I was, and I was that guy. I have been literally hand molded into -" Xander shuddered with the memory of the slow push, pushpushpressurepressurepain! of Caleb's thumb putting out his eye and held his breath until he was dizzy, letting it out in a rush. "I want to look into the mirror and see the guy I made."

Spike held Xander against the sudden shudder that wracked him - the burst of fear-scent that made him pretty sure Xander was remembering Caleb and his miserable fucking hands, rending and tearing
but not destroying - *not* ending. Spike took Xander's shoulders in his hands and made him turn - made him look in the mirror.

"There you are, love. There's *you*. Fuckin' gorgeous. Fighter. The heart of a lion and the face of an angel, Xander - that's *you*." Xander was shaking his head again and Spike slipped his arms around him and hugged him *hard* - physically reminding him he had back-up. That he had - someone.

"What do you *want* to see, love? Wanna bleach this lovely head of hair? Wanna - get a fake eye? A fancier patch?" Shake, shake, but a small smile, and Spike kissed the side of his neck - let the tip of his tongue just ghost over the bite-mark there just above the leather thong, and the shake turned to a shudder. Spike grinned, then lost it at a sudden and sobering thought. "Wanna come see...my side of things, love? Live the demon life for a while?" And that gave Spike shivers, because he'd offered that to *Buffy*, once upon a time, and it had made her go just that much faster...
An ache radiated from the bite, like the ache Xander got when he was *desperate* to be fucked and he groaned, catching the back of Spike's skull gently, holding him there. "Um. Little Xander says 'yes', but he *really* likes to get me in trouble." Xander flexed his fingers in Spike's hair, pressing into the warmth of the open robe, silk and cashmere and *God, it would be so fucking easy*...

"No good if the rest of you don't want it." Spike's voice was distant, dull, and Xander rubbed a hand over his arm, hating that tone.

"The rest of me...is really tempted." Xander pressed his cheek hard against Spike's hair, and wrapped his arm over Spike's, fingers lacing with fingers, gripping. "But god, I can't just - abandon the guys, I - fuck, sweetheart." He laughed quietly, but there wasn't much amusement in it. "And Choices Guy lasted all of five minutes. It's a new Harris world record." And that shouldn't be so depressing.

"And that's *you*, love, nobody else," Spike said, leaden disappointment sinking down in his belly.
But it was true - the White Knight complex that had sent Xander running after Buffy and that had stared Angelus down was the inner core of Damascus steel in this otherwise unremarkable human. The heart, in more ways than he knows. In all the ways that count. Didn't learn that from that miserable excuse for a father. "You're always too good to everybody around you, love..." He put his mouth back over the bite-mark and let his tongue-tip just flutter there. Xander shivered in his arms and Spike watched his eyelid dip and almost go shut - watched his head loll back against Spike's invisible shoulder. "Know you can't leave your mates hangin'"

Spike freed a hand to trace the line of Xander's throat - skate over his collarbones and the dark brown of the leather thong.

"Look so pretty with a tattoo here. You know? Collar made out of ink..." Spike murmured, Xander's body pressing into his making his sleep-dazed body respond, tingling rush of blood to his cock.

"Collar?" A subtle tension flooded Xander's body,
easing under Spike's lips against his throat.

"Not that kind, love. Somethin'...decorative, yeah? Somethin' you choose." Spike's fingers traced back and forth, a subtle heat, and Xander leaned back into the growing hardness behind him, shivering. "Reminds you whenever you look into the mirror. That you're Choices Guy, choosin' to stick around so his mates won't suffer."

Xander reached up to touch the unmarked skin over his collarbones, eye flickering over the scars that were visible in the mirror, then lingering on his empty socket, all of the marks he didn't choose, that shaped him, that defined him... He nodded once, relieved that it felt as certain as the decision to take Spike home. "I want that."

"Yeah?" Spike felt himself bounce ever so slightly at that - turned it into a little hip-shimmy, instead. Xander smelled deliciously of sleepy sex and awakening arousal and salty-sweet-spicy and fuck, want to taste him all over - lick him all over, just... want him... "That'd be fuckin' hot, pet...that'd
be..." He let his hands drift, up to a nipple, down to dense, curling hair and basked in the increased heat and the rising heartbeat - the little shift in breathing. So beautiful...sweet... "Xan...derrr...", he crooned, and bent his mouth to the mark again.

"Want this too," Xander whispered, feeling like his whole body was responding to Spike's lips on his throat, and the silk-over-steel hardness pressing against him that made him want to grip the counter, arch his back, and beg. And why the fuck not? Maybe Choices Guy wants howevermanyinches of vampire cock up his - Xander let out a deep, soul-jarring moan, and pressed back against Spike.

"What's going through your pretty head, pet?" Restless shifting, and a voice with just enough predatory growl to make Xander's legs spread and spine tingle.

Xander clenched his fingers on Spike's wrist until the bones ground together, and tilted his head back to encourage Spike at his throat. "I'm thinking I wanna feel your fangs slide into me the way your
cock does; fill me up and drain me down till there's nothing but you in me and me in you and I can't think anymore for - god - just for a little while." He turned his head, lips brushing over Spike's hair. "Please?"

Spike knew that he hurt Xander, but he couldn't help it - his fingers curled down hard into the dense muscle of Xander's thigh, and his ribs - he jerked Xander back so sharply against his chest he heard the man's breath oof out of him.

Offering me - bloody hell, giving me - His cock ached, he wanted what Xander was offering so bad. He ground against hot, taut flesh and pushed his face into Xander's neck - sucked at the bite mark hard enough to bruise, and Xander made a groaning, needy sound down in his chest - more animal than human and Spike bit, and it was absolute ecstasy.
Xander kept his eye closed against the rush of rapidly cooling October wind buffeting him, chilling him, vibrating his skin at speeds that shouldn't excite him as much as they did. He mouthed the tempting expanse of Spike's neck between hair and collar, chasing down the muted flavor that still lingered - more strongly in the crevices of his mouth, between his teeth, at the back of his throat. Made him feel like he had sparklers going off inside; a collection of fizzing fuses laid out from the bite on his neck to his groin and lit with that first, fiery sip of -

_God. Blood. Spike's blood. Barely feel the cold with it burning through me._ Couldn't believe it was still Friday. God, felt like _days_ since that blood first slid over his tongue like a heartbeat - not hours, and he felt _good._

He bit, not quite hard enough to break Spike's skin,
and felt the bike swerve - Spike shudder - and chuckled, nuzzling into the marks he left behind with something almost like a drugged *euphoria*, the high of almost getting bit by something *nasty* without the nasty and without the *almost*, and *Jesus, I know how people get addicted to this now. So fucking hopped up*. And best of all, didn't have to *think* like this, didn't have to *feel* anything but the wind, the bike, and Spike's hard body.

Except that it wasn't the *bite*, even though that was fucking fantastic, the *good* hurt of it and the fuzzy warmth that felt like he was melting into Spike and the only solid thing left in him had been Spike's cock.

And it wasn't just the drinking of the blood, though that...

Xander groaned, rubbing his face into the leather of Spike's jacket collar, shivering as he felt strong fingers squeeze his thigh, rub back and forth along his jeans until he rocked up against Spike on the seat, dragging a shaking hand down to cup Spike,
just *rub* and hold, because why *not*? Wondering if that shudder was him or Spike and if he should stop *before* they ran off the road.


Because it was like sex that *lasted* - went on and on in that good non-thinky way. Only when the orgasm *stopped*, that nothing-else-matters high kept going. Him in Spike, Spike in him, and *that* was what made it feel so good even when he felt like a shaken bottle of champagne that was ready to pop after the second time in one day. And he did stupid things, then, like getting on the motorcycle behind Spike and wanting to throw his head back and *yell* into the wind when he cranked it up to a hundred on the mountain highway.

He didn't know, didn't care where they were except that it wasn't *Sunnydale* and wasn't L.A., and it wasn't some dusty crater in the earth. Instead, desert and low scrub flew by to either side of the
highway and Spike leaned demon-faced and grinning into the wind, eyes hidden behind a pair of *fucking expensive* sunglasses that were probably stolen, but Xander didn't care about that either.

*How can you spot the happy vampire biker? By the bugs in his fangs!*

Xander muffled a mental giggle before it could become an out-loud giggle and licked up the nape of Spike's neck again with a growl; salt and copper, mountain fog and desert dust chased each other across his tongue.

They'd turned away from the coast as they roared through Santa Maria, and Spike hadn't said *where* they were going for his tattoo, and Xander hadn't asked. All Spike had said was: "*Right. I know a fella - well, I know a demon - got a shop - that's where you wanna go, pet. Not some ex-con scratcher with Hepatitis on every needle an' a meth lab in the back. Gonna do this, gotta do it right. Gonna take care of you, love.*"
And it'd been the roar of wind and the big black motorcycle that *screamed* demonic owner - and probably demonic builder too - ever since.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was like a squirmy, grabby blanket draped over him and around him and Spike couldn't help the idiot grin of pure pleasure that stretched his mouth wide. Xander's teeth on his neck made his eyes roll back briefly and the bike swerved a bit, and he wanted to pull over right *there* - lay Xander out and lick him up one side and down the other - make him howl like a coyote to the high desert moon.

*God, how he looked...under me, legs wide...begging for it - Jesus, wanna see that again...see that every day...* The sense-memory of Xander's body clenching down around him made him shiver in delight and Xander's hand - coming around to cup his aching groin - made him moan into the wind. *Be lucky if we get there in one piece!* The steady,
roaring thrum of the bike between his thighs was like a heartbeat, and Spike's whole body pulsed to it.

But they *would* make it, because Spike was oddly-*thrilled* at Xander's plan. Thrilled at the thought of him taking this step into...something new. Into *change*. *Brave, he is. Trusting me... Never hurt him.* That was the best thing - the most amazing thing. The trust that Xander had. Trust in every line of him - in every touch. Trust in the way he held onto Spike and kissed his neck and put his life into Spike's hands without a second thought. And that was the ultimate turn-on. Even though Spike knew some of this was the manic high that vampire blood caused in humans. He'd seen it once or twice - Dru had liked to do that, to make the most uptight of prey wide-open to her particular brand of fun.

Up ahead, Spike could see the halogen-glare of floods around a truck-stop parking lot and he turned his head enough to shout back to Xander.

"Wanna stop, Xan?"
"Yeah!" Xander yelled back, fingers sneaking into the top of Spike's jeans, and Spike grinned and gunned the bike, making Xander yelp and grab on hard. Spike laughed aloud.

When they reached the gas pumps, Xander slid off the bike with a hiss of sore muscles, jerking off the dark blue bandanna he'd tied over his socket and jamming it in his pocket. The patch hadn't been up to the pressure of the wind on the bike, and the more fragile skin had to be protected. He left the patch in his back pocket, stalking off to the main building - hair wild, head down - and Spike grinned after him, topping up the bike's tank.

Done, he sauntered inside for a bottle of something cold to get the dust out of their mouths. He ignored the giggling clutch of high-school girls by the soda coolers and paid the grandma at the register with a wink. Xander was at the door as he turned and he couldn't help it - he grabbed him close and kissed him hard, and the demon wanted to roar aloud in triumph as Xander just grabbed back, thigh
between Spike's and - when he finally pulled back for air - a dazed, *feral* grin on his face. The high-schoolers were whispering now and Spike lifted a mocking eyebrow in their direction and tugged Xander out. He'd coasted the bike over to one side of the building where a couple of splintery picnic tables were standing.

"Come have a drink, pet?" he asked, holding up the soda and Xander hopped up on the table next to him.

"Fuck, yes! I think I swallowed a bug." Xander tipped his head back, gulping cold Coke, a sticky sweet line escaping his lips to trickle down his throat and Spike leaned in to lick it away, staying to lay a feathery kiss there, close to the bite.

*God, he smells so good...*

Xander sighed in pure pleasure, legs still rubbery and loose from the wind and vibration of the bike - from fucking and *being* fucked - aching in just the right places to throb a nice counterpoint to Spike's
kiss. "Christ, Spike. This stuff is making me want to do crazy shit."

"Still?" Spike hovered between amusement, lust, and concern, nuzzling his jaw.

"Oh hell yeah." Xander slid an arm around Spike's back, cool leather and cooler vampire beneath, but he could feel the wiry hardness of muscle there too, and a wave of wanttakehavenow washed through him. "Wanted to make you pull off in the mountains, fuck me again over the seat of the bike in all that fog..."

"Should have said," Spike grumbled, nipping at Xander's jaw and the strong column of his throat, easing his fingers up under Xander's layers - old leather jacket and flannel and tee. Running his fingertips up the ridge of Xander's spine and letting his left hand slip between denimed thighs, coaxing and stroking and creeping higher. "Would have been more than happy, Xan, to oblige..." Spike cupped his hand over Xander's groin, kneading the hardness there - let his other hand slide back down
and dip into the waist of his jeans. He sucked Xander's earlobe into his mouth for a moment, then whispered: "Would have loved to have slid these down, pet, nice and slow... Bet you're still wet from before - bet you're still so open..." Xander's breath hitched, and Spike glanced up to see his eye was closed, lips parted, and he could barely make out Xander's tongue sliding against his teeth in the diffused glare of the truck stop's lights. "Would've been nothin' to push right into you...fuck you hard, bent over all that leather and iron..."

Xander hitched forward on the table at the feel of Spike's fingers creeping down, down, so close to back inside of him and he groaned - growled. "How much," he asked in the lowest voice he could manage, "do you think we can get away with in plain sight?" It was too late at night for any families passing through, and god damn it, Spike could take any trucker alive who got in his way. A pulse of lust swept through him at the thought.

"What've you got in that pretty head of yours, pet?"
Xander licked his lips - slid a leg over Spike's thighs and knelt on the table, knees to either side of his hips, and that chill hand still tight against him under his jeans. He shuddered violently as Spike's fingers slid lower, then dipped in, cool and hard, breaching the clutching flesh. "Fuck. Something a lot like this."

"Would you, Xander? Let me?" Spike burrowed further - deeper - pushing with two fingers into the hot, slick vise of that hidden muscle and Xander shivered, forearms on Spike's shoulders and hands locked together, knuckles grazing the back of his head. "Let me split these jeans open and just pull you right down on me - right here with the cars and the punters...?" The chill night air was full of the scents of sage and greasewood and petrol and dust, but thick and heady and right there was the musky arousal - the sweet-spicy scent of Xander's want. Spike growled low and caught Xander's mouth in a hard kiss, crooking his fingers deeper into grasping heat and fist ing a handful of knotted hair. The blood, he knew - the mostly-magic blood that animated him and healed him and kept him as he was was roaring through Xander's sensitive human
body - was flattening his inhibitions and teasing out endorphins and in general acting like a great big wallop of cocaine. *And the comin' down's gonna be hard, too. But he needs this. Needs a few hours to just...feel good. Deal with the fallout later.* What the fallout was like, exactly, Spike didn't know. He only had Dru's stories to go by. But it couldn't be too bad, really - Xander had barely had a cupful - probably less.

The kiss *hurt*, and bruised in the way that sent bolts of pure lust down Xander's spine. He shoved back onto Spike's fingers with a growl of his own, feral and low, teeth and tongue marking Spike's lips - leaving them gleaming and swollen when he pulled back to pant for breath, arching his back to feel the intrusion of those two slim digits. He clutched at the back of Spike's hair, forehead to forehead, *feeling* the crazy gleam in his eye. "Let you? Gonna rip them off *myself* and jerk myself dry right here if you don't. Want you *in* me till I can feel you all the way up in my *throat.*"

Spike *snarled* - he knew he did - he felt the demon
surge up and out and he snaked his head forward and got a mouthful of hot, salty flesh, Xander's heartbeat fluttering wildly against his tongue. He held on without actually breaking the skin as he ripped his hand free of Xander's hair and slid it down leather to denim. The seam of the jeans shredded and then parted under his nails and he cupped the tensing flesh beneath, driving his fingers in deeper and pulling Xander open, feeling Xander's hands fumbling urgently at his own belt and buttons.

Xander was panting - shaking - and Spike got a handful of flexing muscle and pulled him up - let go of his throat long enough to mumble 'hang on' and then was slamming in - back in - hot and still slick and fucking perfect, perfect.

It was as if Spike's cock had slammed all the air out of him with that hard, solid goodgoodgood - oh fucking god! Behind them, one of the semis rumbled to life and Xander shuddered, eye opening wide to the night; the highway, the smell of fumes and food, the distant squawk and chatter of a CB
radio, and Jesus Christ the world hadn't ended.

He looked at Spike in something that might have been wonder, might have been mindless fuckin' lust, drawing up, savoring the slickly textured slide until Spike was almost out of him, then rocking back down, grinding onto him until his body shook in time to the rapid pounding of his heart. "Spike..."

"Xan...der...god -" Spike put his hands behind him on the table and braced and thrust, and Xander's arms were around his neck again, yanking him close - bringing Spike's face in close, hair sweeping down like a curtain around them. Xander's mouth on his, bump and click of teeth and fangs, sweet-soda kiss that was edged in metallic salt as a fang nicked Xander's tongue and Spike growled, pumping up, battering into that clinging, slipping, grasping heat. A splinter of wood was working into his palm and he didn't care - let the lancing prick of it shudder into pleasure.

"Not gonna last," Xander groaned into the kiss. "Not- not - " He gave up speech, tongue plunging
back into Spike's mouth hungrily. The bump and slide of his cock against Spike's shirt and belly painted sticky trails on the smooth fabric and the orgasm already threatening buzzed, *snarled* at the base of his spine, revved with every engine in the lot.

Breathing hard against Spike's skin with flickers of tongue, tasting salt, metal, *want*, Xander ducked his head to Spike's neck and *bit*, worrying the skin to muffle the yell that wanted *out*.

Spike did the same, sucking the skin of Xander's neck into his mouth - prickling with the needle-tips of the fangs and feeling Xander shudder all over - feeling his body clamp down impossibly tight.

"Want me to? Xan - want it?" he gasped out, and Xander's reply was an gut-wrenching moan - fingers digging into his back under the duster so hard Spike knew he was bleeding. He leaned forward, arms coming up and around the man, holding him tight and lifting him and bringing him *down*, in the same moment that he bit and Xander convulsed around
him, keening.

The world grayed around the edges with Spike's bite, the push-pull-*thrust* of Spike's hardness pounding him, filling him, making light sparkle in the phantom vision of his missing eye. His mouth working in a silent echo to the pull and nurse of Spike's lips on his neck, every heartbeat echoed with that deep, thrumming suction and the kind of dizziness that made the world spin pleasantly around him - left him clinging to Spike as he growled and shuddered against Xander, *panting* and when had making Spike *breathe* gotten so fucking sexy?

"That - that was the kind of sex that makes you plan on Friday to call in sick on Monday," Xander managed to say, burying his laugh into Spike's neck, *giddy*. But not too giddy to notice that Spike wasn't laughing, in fact, wasn't answering at all.

*Fucking hell. No rest for the wicked. Heh.* Snuggling Xander a little tighter to him Spike stepped down off the picnic table, turned, and deposited the limp
weight of the man on the table-top in one motion, hissing a little as his cock slipped free. Hastily tucking himself away, he grinned at Xander - pulled the demon back, because fun was fun but they had things to do.

"Don't go anywhere, pet," he said, then he spun around and stalked straight ahead, head down and arms loose at his sides, gaze never leaving the two burly men who were sidling towards them.

Xander watched Spike go, almost too dazed to zip what was left of his jeans before flopping back onto his elbows. He knew he should have been scared out of his mind but instead, he just wanted to laugh; knew he had a wide, crazed, and not so fuckin' nice grin on his face. It was a grin that remembered a cage in a zoo.

"What the fuck're you doin'?" one man shouted, and Spike stopped - dipped one hand into his pocket and pulled out his smokes. He tapped one out and put it to his lips - tucked the cigarettes away and found his lighter.
"I'm havin' a cold beverage and a bit of a shag with my boy, there. The fuck do you want, tosser?" He plumed smoke upwards and the men gaped at him.

"Spike?" Xander said, but Spike ignored him, for the moment.

"Jesus! You can't f- you can't do that here! There's kids! -"

"Nothin' they haven't seen on the telly," Spike said, cigarette to lips and eyes half-lidded - body coiled tight beneath his coat. Ready to do whatever damage he needed to do - wanting to, really, since fucking and fighting all came under 'what vamps do best'.

Xander ran his palms over his thighs, watching Spike through a half closed eye. He felt too good, too lazy, too well-fucked to do more than watch. Listening distantly, rolling his head backwards to look up at the moon. Shivering at the cold of the table on slick, damp, and still bare skin that should have made
Xander cringe and wrap his jacket around him, but didn't.

Instead, he pushed himself shakily off the table, short, jerky but uncomplicated movements, jacket falling down into place around his thighs as he walked. He made his way to stand behind Spike, for once in his life not feeling the need to do anything more than look at the aggressors interestingly. Spike leaned back into him for just a fraction of a second, reassurance and possession.

"God. Fuckin' perverts," the other man said, sneering voice and twisted lip and Spike took two long strides forward and his fist swung up and around, catching the man neatly on the chin and knocking him back into the dirt and gravel - making his teeth click shut hard on his tongue so that when he rolled groggily to his side, blood began to drizzle out of his mouth.

"Say that again, then," Spike purred, and the second man launched himself, large fist going fast and low towards Spike's kidney. Spike turned into the blow,
absorbing it easily and *changed*, and drove his own ridged forehead into the man's, hard and sharp, crack like a breaking stick. The man dropped and Spike shook his head - shook the demon away and watched both men scrabble and flail in the dirt, bleeding - cursing.

"S'called a Glasgow kiss, you gobshites. Want another?"

"Man. I get all your *good* kisses, huh?" Xander rested a hand in the small of Spike's back, as much for contact as balance, fingers curling possessively in the rich-smelling leather.

Spike snorted. "Reckon I did *that* one up a treat." Spike turned into Xander's touch, the coiled tension melting into concern as he took in Xander's unsteady look. "Didn't hurt you, pet?"

For an answer, Xander clutched a fist in Spike's collar, hauling him up and *in* for a dizzy clash of lips and teeth, eye sliding sideways to two men in the dirt who - *Had it coming*. "Let's get out of here."
Ten minutes out from Ojai and their hotel - fifteen, tops - and Xander's grasp on Spike was feeling - iffy. Spike could feel, over and above the solid thrum of the bike, a steady shivering coming from Xander - as if he had a fever, or was in pain. His head was on Spike's back, and the usual spot of heat that would have caused was almost absent. Bloody hell. Couldn't be the crash already. Not that fast, not that soon. Not after that much.

"Xan? You all right?" Spike yelled, the wind whipping his voice back - knowing Xander could hear him, even if he couldn't answer. But there was nothing - just an increase in the shivering to a hard, bone-deep shake, and Xander's arm, slipping down off his waist a little. Spike grabbed it - hauled it up and gunned the bike, seeing a gas station just ahead. Feeling the dangerous laxity of Xander's whole body and thinking the best way to ditch the bike and grab Xander if the man started to slide off
altogether.

"Almost there, pet! Hang on, love - almost there."

The gravel of the parking-lot slithered under the bike wheels as Spike did a particularly hard stop. Xander's body was limp weight across his back and he lifted his right leg up and over the tank of the bike, Xander's arm tight in his hands. Spinning around, he sucked in a hard breath. Xander was pale - a sort of sickly grey under his tan, his lips bloodless and his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. His eye was open but dazed - not tracking right - and Spike felt a lurch of terror. Oh, god - what? The come-down? Too much blood? Can't be - can't be, didn't get that much, was careful - love, I was careful - "Xander?" He pushed straggling hair back of off Xander's face, cradling him against his chest. Xander's skin was chilled - sweaty - his heart was racing in his chest, fast and stuttery-wrong.

"God, pet - Xan - what's wrong, love?"

Xander opened his mouth silently, and his lips and
tongue felt as if they belonged to someone else as he tried to form the words. "Not - not feelin' so hot, Spike." The faster Spike had driven, the further away the world seemed, as if Spike was driving him away from everything with each mountain curve until he felt as if he was floating along behind himself like a balloon on a string; everything distant and disconnected and wrong, and jesus it had to be - "Probably just - just shock or something."

Xander tried on a smile that felt like rubber with teeth that chattered. "Y'know - up - upstanding citizen - arrested for public indecency. Gonna - gonna call my parents or something and Tony's gonna open a can of -" Xander's teeth snapped shut on his tongue and he flinched, easing himself weakly down against Spike's chest, and started to laugh.

"Xan? Love, c'mon. Look at me now. What's so funny?"

"I - I can't crack up now. I've gotta work on Monday," Xander mumbled, wondering if he was
shaking, or if it was Spike. He didn't say that out loud though - because it wasn't very funny.

Christ! "Love - you're not workin' Monday if you're sick. C'mon - gotta get up -" Spike got his shoulder under Xander's arm - got his arm around Xander's waist and hauled him upright, grateful to be back at full strength. Xander's feet were tangling and he waited while the man slowly sorted himself. Waited, but wanted to scream. What is it? Think, damn-it! When Dru did this...they didn't get sick like this... lasted a lot longer too. Well, that one chit did, the singer, but she was...already sick... It's not that I took too much blood - I didn't, I know I didn't - As he frantically tried to come up with something he turned and carefully led Xander into the gas station, knowing Xander's coat would cover the torn jeans.

"Let's get you a drink, pet, and see what's what -"

The door buzzed unpleasantly as they walked in, and the girl behind the counter looked up, bored expression rapidly going to one of avid curiosity.
"Hey, he all right? He looks like he's gonna throw up," she said, and Spike wanted to growl at her.

"He look all right to you?" Spike snapped, maneuvering Xander between the narrow aisles to the drinks, propping him awkwardly as he fumbled with the glass case, pulling out the first marginally healthful looking bottle he could grab. "Gonna drink this, love, yeah? Sit down till you feel all right."

Xander shook his head, trying to remember why he was shaking his head, whether it was a bad idea to wait or if he just couldn't keep his head still with the shakes. Product labels flashed through his mind in a series of snapshot views of the store until he closed his eye dizzily and leaned harder on Spike.

Spike lowered his voice so that only Xander could hear, casting a sideways glare at the clerk who was still watching them. "Y'gonna throw up, pet?"

Xander shook his head again, cautiously opening his eye and raising a violently shaking hand to stare at it - feeling his heart beat a quick tattoo against his
ribs. "Spike?"

"Yeah, Xan?" Spike quickly tucked the bottle under his arm, cupping Xander's cheek with a chilly hand. Xander shivered, but leaned into it like a puppy, eye wide and dark, the pupil swallowing down everything but the last trace of brown around the rim.

"I'll be - fine. Just - just gotta lay down. Not g-gonna tattoo me like this, huh?" Xander felt himself slipping, going down with his knees giving out, but Spike just went down with him, lowering him to sit on the floor, and crouching protectively over him.

"Nope, won't touch ya like this, Xan. That's why you gotta drink this." Spike fumbled with the cap on the drink - something with a weird green lizard on the label - and looked up, startled, as the cashier suddenly appeared at the edge of his vision.

"He got low blood sugar? Diabetic? My Aunt Kary, she's got it. Goes out just like that." The girl held out an mini-jug of orange juice, already open. "This
works best," she added. Spike hesitated for one long moment, crouching there - panic making the demon want to rip her throat out and offer her to Xander. But Spike ignored the demon - bit his lip and put the bottle he held down - reached up and took the orange juice.

"Yeah, he - yeah, thanks. Xan - here, love, drink up now." He scooted a little closer, pulling Xander into his chest, getting his arm behind Xander's head and holding the bottle to his lips. Willing him to just drink. Xander's eye tracked dazedly over the girl - over Spike - and one hand fluttered up and then back to his lap. His whole body vibrated from the shakes but he lifted his head, slowly, and took a tentative sip from the juice.

Spike's hand was rubbing circles on his back, felt nice - good - and Xander opened his mouth to say that only to choke on the juice, coughing.

"Easy, pet. Take it slow, yeah?"

Xander nodded, concentrating on drinking, wishing
the girl wouldn't *look* at him like that. A guy'd think she'd never seen a one eyed man and a vampire walk into a bar -

Convenience store.

Whatever.

He pushed the bottle away with a shaking hand, dragging the back of it across his lips. "I'm good. Let's - get out of here, okay?" The floor was cold under his ass, and he felt a little queasy, the euphoria at the truck stop seeming like a million miles and years away from sitting bare-assed on the scummy floor of a too-bright convenience store where everything smelled like fake oranges. But Spike wasn't *moving*. "Just tired," he insisted, turning his head and wishing the clerk would go *away*.

"Just a little more, Xander, okay? Please?" Spike held the juice hopefully, trying to say with his eyes what he would *not* say aloud, in front of a stranger. That Xander was scaring the fuck out of him.
"My Aunt, she always has something to eat, too," the girl said, and then she was crouching down too, fingers busily ripping open the wrapping on an apple turnover. She was - *Fuck, she looks fourteen. Looks like the Bit... Damn-it, fuckin' women will be the death of me...*

"Thanks, love, that's good, that is," Spike said, reaching out and twitching the pastry from her fingers - giving them a little 'pat pat', hesitant and brief. Trying not to spill the juice. "He'll be right as rain in a minute, yeah?" Beneath his arm Xander was moving jerkily, as if trying to stand up, and Spike pulled him a little closer. "Just give us a minute, yeah? We'll be outta here in a tick." The girl stared at Xander for one long second - looked up at Spike and nodded.

"Yeah. Better get him home. Stuff's on the house," she added, and stood up and padded away.

*Thank Christ. "C'mon Xander, one more drink of this, okay? Just one."*
When she left, Xander wrapped unsteady hands around the juice, tilting it back and swallowing convulsively at the sweetness before pushing it away again, really not...wanting it, and pressing in against Spike. The shaking was starting to get scary, and that wasn't something he was gonna think about sitting on the floor with his back up against a rack of snack cakes and a set of symptoms that would've had Andrej cursing in three languages and going for the quinine. "B-be really funny if I made it all the way through Africa with nothin' worse than dysentery only to g-get Malaria at a California fuckin' truck stop."

*Malaria? What the fuck? You don't get that here...do you? Where the fuck does that come from?* "Love - you don't have malaria," Spike said uncertainly, plucking at the wrapping on the apple turnover, wondering if Xander would eat any of it or not. He was still shaking, and Spike was starting to wonder if he should call an ambulance - or just put Xander on the back of the bike again and go find the hospital at top speed. *Why didn't Dru say they got*
this sick? Fuck, this is bad...

"I know, I'm - god, Spike, I'm so fucking tired. Can we just...?" He tried to struggle upright again. The trembling and weakness didn't help, but they didn't keep him down this time either. He grabbed onto Spike's duster when he stood, giving up completely on the concept of smiling. "Just find a place to lie down?" He pressed a hand over Spike's chest, steadying and reassurance. "Keep me from drowning in a nice hot bath?"

Spike rose with Xander, abandoning apple turnover and juice, looking worriedly at the too-pale face that stared back, exhausted and...scared.

"Course we can, pet. Got a room real near here - big tub an' all. C'mon and - and we'll go check in - oh, fuck." Spike stopped, thinking. Want us to go check in there at the Blue Iguana, but the room's miles away at the Green... Fuck that. "Gotta call somebody, love - let's go outside." Spike got Xander's cell from the man's pocket - got his arm around Xander's waist again and led him slowly out,
dialing. Letting Xander sag down again once they were outside, holding him tight as Xander went to his knees in the ratty grass 'landscaping' at the front of the store.

"The Blue Iguana Inn, how can I help you this evening?"

"Yeah, listen, mate, I've got a room all booked and a small problem -"

"Which room, sir?"

"Peacock. Here now, my partner's in a bit of a bad way. We're just north of town -"

Xander's attention drifted from Spike's words - requesting the concierge to meet them at the room in town - to the voice itself, pressing his fingertips to the dip in Spike's throat, trying to concentrate on that vibration instead of the itchy, jumpy, irritable shakes. Or the urge to just close his eyes and -

"C'mon, pet."
Xander jerked awake to Spike pulling him to his feet, stumbling with him back to the bike.

"Gonna meet the bloke who works night shift. Have him let us in, yeah?"

"Fuck, yeah..." Xander locked his hands together around Spike's waist once they were on the bike, but kept his feet firmly on the ground, pressing his face into the nape of Spike's neck. "...it's just shock and blood loss or something - right?"

Spike hesitated one long moment, hoping it was one and not the other - knowing it wasn't, but not sure if Xander would... *What if he doesn't...believe me?* Bloody hell... He stroked the hands that were locked together over his ribs. "It's the blood, love. It... Lemme tell ya in the room, yeah? Let me take care of you first, Xander. All right?"

For an answer, Xander lifted his feet onto the bike's frame, pressing his cheek against the duster. "I'll try not to become road kill before we get there." He
felt Spike's hand tighten sharply over his forearm and winced. "I'll hold on," he amended, and took a shaky breath, concentrating on just that as the bike roared to life, and Spike pulled out onto the road more carefully than Xander had ever imagined him capable of doing.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was drifting, his eye fluttering shut and opening, again and again. But the grip of his hand on Spike's was strong, still, and Spike leaned against the pillows they'd piled up and kept up a slow sweep of his thumb, over and over the back of Xander's hand. Xander was under all the covers - under a velvet throw that had been across the foot of the bed - and he still shivered convulsively every few minutes.

"Shhh, love. I'm right here. Won't let you go," Spike murmured. Curled around him, skin to skin, cheek against the wind-knotted hair. "I've got you, love..."
Calm, calm, calm for Xander, but inside he seethed. Gonna call Wes and tear him a new one. Bastards.

Spike's skin felt nice against Xander's. Smooth. Cool. Sweep, sweep across his hand nice and steady while everything else jumped and jerked, too bright, too sudden. His mouth didn't feel right, didn't feel connected when he tried to form words. Had to stop and start again before they'd come. "P-promised to tell me what's wrong with me."

And god, he should be so much more freaked, but -

It was better in here than on the bike with the roar and chill of the wind and slipping, skittering fingers, and -.

Xander shuddered until he felt Spike's arm tighten around his shoulders. Harder to be freaked out wrapped up in warm, and rich, and Spike, arm like steel curled around him. Trust you. Jesus, feel like shit, but trust you, sweetheart. Xander pressed his cheek to Spike's shoulder, feeling a muscle twitch and jitter under the skin.
"Course I did, pet. It's like this..." Spike paused for a moment, thinking. How much detail was too much? Well - in for a penny... "Dru liked to give a little blood to her prey sometimes. Just a few drops in a glass of wine or cup of tea. It makes you feel -"

"Know how it makes you feel," Xander grumbled, and Spike hugged him a little closer.

"Yeah, okay. Like you're flyin'. Like you're the king of the world. She liked those straight-laced types to dance a jig or take off their clothes in the garden. But she usually had her fun and that was that - drained 'em right after. She only let one live, that I remember..." Another pause while Spike brought the woman up in his memory. Blonde and tall and icy as the Snow Queen, until Dru's blood had made her into something of a wanton. And then...

She did this, too - shakes and faintin' and all... But she had consumption, she was taking Laudanum every night... God, she was just like this! Spike couldn't pretend - the singer Dru had done this to
had reacted just the same.

"I've seen junkies act like this, pet. Comin' down off a high... It's the blood, Xander. It shot you right up into the clouds and then - dropped you hard."

But whether it would be like that every time - or get worse, or better - Spike didn't really know. Dru had only kept the woman around for another day or so.

He kissed Xander's hair - temple - eased him closer. "We'll figure it out, love. No more of that for you, yeah?"

Xander shivered, wanting to argue, but god, so fucking tired. "Ask me again when the sh-shakes stop." Xander groaned, pressing his nose into the crook of Spike's neck, feeling that nagging instinct that more makes it better.

"Shh. No more, pet." Spike's fingers were chill in Xander's hair. They didn't help the shivering, but felt good, so he pushed into the touch, closing his eye. "You'll feel better after a little sleep, yeah?"
Xander wanted to ask how he knew, *if* he knew, but couldn't make his lips and tongue form the words - gave up, gave in, and let the shuddering blackness take him down.

Spike kept up his soft petting until he was sure Xander was asleep - or unconscious. Then he slipped silently out of the bed and strode outside, lighting a cigarette and puffing furiously.

*Bloody hell. Got to figure this out, got to find out... I wonder if Wes...* As his thoughts lit on the ex-Watcher Spike felt his lip curl in a snarl. *Fuck that. I can ask later. I wanna know why Wes didn't tell him.* *Why nobody did.* Sucking down half the cigarette, he ground the rest out in a planter and shoved the butt away in his pocket - went inside and hunted up Xander's cell. He knew Wes' number by heart so he dialed it in and paced back outside, listening to the sounds of the pool-water lapping softly at its concrete edges, and frogs peeping somewhere in the underbrush. Doing his best to be calm but knowing he wasn't - not one bit.
"Pryce." Wesley's voice sounded tired. Not quite worn to his last threads, but tired, and judging from the background noise, he was in his apartment.

"Wes. Wanna tell my who thought it'd be a good idea to keep Xander in the dark about the cheerleader?" Spike ignored the tiredness in Wes' voice. He wasn't going to let the man off the hook so easily.

"Spike." Wesley fumbled for his thoughts in a whiskey fog, reaching up to drag his fingers through his hair. "What on - Cordelia?"

"Yeah. Xander's friend. His ex. Who was in a coma for some reason and died and nobody told him. I had to tell him, damn it!" I had to see his whole face fall and his eye just...go dead. Fuck, never want to see that again... Spike paced back inside and grabbed a bottle off the mini-bar and cracked it - took a long gulp. Xander was still asleep, unmoving, and he went back outside.
Wesley rubbed his hand over his jaw, then up to his temple, leaning on it. "I -" He sighed, straightening to pour himself another whiskey, filling the highball glass to within an inch of its lip. "You know we had little to no connection with Sunnydale, Spike. I suppose it was simply - seen as a part of the rift between Buffy and Angel. The...territorial lines..."

Even as he said it, it sounded like a poor excuse, and he took a long drink of whiskey, searching for clarity in the amber burn. "She hadn't spoken of him in years. We didn't even know where he was."

"You knew when Andrew showed up, spouting all that bullshit about the Council an' all. He said Xander was in Africa! He said he was working for the Council - fuck, Angel saw Buffy to give her that damn amulet, he could have told her! Her and the Slayer were...kind of friends, back in the day. I almost killed 'em together more than once..." Spike took another long drink and leaned wearily against a plant-covered stone wall. "Dammit, Wes..." He sounds sad. He sounds exhausted. It's...not his fault. Not really... Ah, fuck.
Wesley let the glass rest on his desk, giving brief thought to searching for a coaster, then abandoning it along with the wood's finish, already marred by overlapping rings of discoloration. "We - discussed Cordelia while you slept in the hotel, Spike." Wesley hesitated, hearing the voices in his head already beginning to berate him for leaving this difficult revelation to Spike alone. 'Coward' would not be an unfair accusation.

"And you didn't tell him then?"

"I didn't feel it was my right!"

"Your right! Bloody hell -!" Spike checked himself and glanced nervously inside, but Xander hadn't moved. "Wes, that's - that's fucking -" That's Wes. And why should he have told him? Barely knew Xander, from what they've both said - didn't like each other much... Couldn't have known about the cheerleader since he was gone by then... And if she didn't mention him... Spike felt a twist of pain in his chest for Xander, that Cordelia hadn't contacted him at all once she'd left the Hellmouth. Her choice.
"Ah, fuck it. Wes, I - Listen, mate, I... M'sorry, yeah? Shouldn't be yellin' at you about this. It's just... I had to tell him, Wes, and he... He was...so hurt."

Spike heard Wesley sigh, the clink and slosh of bottle and glass, then a long pause before the glass was set down again.

"How is he now?" Wesley tried to gentle his voice, the tone of sympathy he used with distraught clients but more...open, perhaps. For Spike. He smiled despite the painful twist in his belly, remembering well that it was Spike's fire, passion, need to connect when upset that had brought them together so briefly in the first place. "You sound terrible."

"Me? I'm - fine, I..." Spike sighed - turned and slid slowly down the wall, able to just see Xander through the open doors. "I'm... Wes? Something...happened. I don't... Listen, I had to tell him and he was - so upset. So we went home an' -"
an' I did my best to make him fell better, yeah?"

"Of course," Wesley agreed easily, pressing his palm to the desk, tracing those interlocking circles with a forefinger. Part of him, the part that was Academy-trained, wanted to jump on Spike, demand to know what he'd done. But nearly dying, actually dying, and being brought back to life as a demon had somewhat dampened his enthusiasm for Council doctrine. So instead, he did what worked with Angel - he kept agreeing. "It's very plain that you care deeply for him, so naturally you would want to take his pain away if you could."

Spike could feel his eyes wanting to roll - being back with Xander was bringing back old habits already - but he only felt in his jeans-pocket for his cigarettes, lighting up again and sending smoke pluming towards the star-dazzled sky.

"Leave off, Percy. We shagged, yeah? Somethin' you know quite a bit about. Enough to not put that poncy Watcher tone in your voice." Spike heard the indrawn breath, and then the slight chuckle and
grinned into the darkness.

"Anyway, we...he... Got a little carried away, didn't he, and - well, he bit me."

Dead silence from Wes, and Spike sighed and closed his eyes. *Wait for it...*

First, he heard only a soft, indeterminate sound, then a low chuckle, and finally, helpless quiet laughter, and the clink of glass against glass once again. *Sounds like Xander's not the only one hitting the stuff too hard tonight. Gotta stop that some time, Wes.* Since Illyria had turned up and took over, Wes'd barely spent two nights sober in a row. "'S not funny, Wes."

"I suppose - I suppose you had to be...well, me to find it quite so amusing." Wesley sighed, taking another long drink and closing his eyes to savor the warming path of the whiskey. "Man bites vampire. It's a bit like a gag headline, don't you think?"

"This's serious, Wes. He's passed out on the bloody
"bed like a junkie dyin' for his next fix!"

"That effect will...fade some, with time and repetition as his body adjusts to the magic in your blood." Wesley dipped a finger into the whiskey, a paper cut there burning and tightening in the alcohol. "Since I presume this is something that will occur again?"

"Too bloody right," Spike snapped. Then he sighed again and felt after the bottle he'd put down. "Yeah, it's gonna happen again, Wes. And I bit him, and... And it is gonna happen again. Felt too damn good not too. Well, fuck. "Damnit - it never made anybody sick before!"

"Spike, forgive me but - I have read your history."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Wesley explained with all the patience whiskey could grant him, "that I know you don't have much practical experience in this case. Angel and Drusilla toyed with their prey, but you have
never shown an inclination for anything but killing humans or acting like one."

"Oi!"

Wesley didn't give Spike time to clarify which half of the sentence he was objecting to and continued. "How often have you seen a human dosed with vampire blood, Spike? One who survived long enough to come down from the high," Wesley added quickly.

"I -" Spike started, and then stopped. "I saw one Dru did that to. Was just...the same. It was the same, Wes," Spike said softly. And it was and he wondered if Xander really would want to do it again, after this. Or if this mess had scared him away for good. *Wouldn't blame him if it did. Can't be any fun, feelin' like that, and just goin' on a Watcher's word that it gets better...*

Spike felt a sort of depression settle over him - a sort of brittle hardness form around him. Whatever Xander decided would be...it. Would be the way it
was going to be. *Please don't be scared of it, love... Want you like that, so much. Your life in me...feels so wonderful - feels like the best thing ever...*

"Spike?"

"What?"

"I can hear you worrying from here."

Spike snorted, lifting two fingers in the direction of LA. "You hear that too, then?"

"You making a rude gesture?" Wesley guessed, beginning to relax. A few more minutes and he might even feel the urge to smile. "What were the circumstances surrounding the similar case?" He fished a yellow legal pad from the bottom of a pile, flipping it to a clean sheet of paper.

"Oh, it was just - Wes. I can *hear* you writing."

"It's something I do quite often," Wes said, and Spike shook his head, lifting his bottle up for a quick
"Yeah, you do. But you're not gonna write about me an' Dru. That's private. Let's just say - the girl was sick - she had consumption - so I didn't notice the coming-down so much. She was taking laudanum, I figured that's all it was." Spike leaned a little to see Xander better and then leaned back again, smoking the last half-inch of his cigarette in rapid puffs.

"Chit at the store thought he was diabetic - gave us orange juice."

Wesley frowned at the notes he'd already made, idly circling 'juice'. "Spike? When did Xander last eat? Humans do need to do it rather often and Xander's diet is appalling."

"Well, he had... There's this brilliant Greek place at home, I got him some lunch and that was...Thursday night around...one or so... But no - we got...distracted and then he asked about the cheerleader so..."
Spike went silent for a moment and he clearly heard Wes' exasperated sigh come down the line.

"So what you're saying, Spike, is that you have no real idea of when Xander last ate - or what he ate - and... Has he eaten since all of this happened? Since he bit you?"

"Well, not as such..." Spike ground the cigarette out sulkily, frowning at the black smudge it left on his finger. "Listen, Wes, he's a grown-up, he knows when to eat."

"Spike, he still lives on bagged chips and doughnuts!" Wesley resolutely did not mention the contents of his own refrigerator, which contained several not-so-gracefully-aging take away boxes. "And even if he does keep better food than that at home, clearly he hasn't eaten any of it, and that certainly can't be helping his body to cope with either the blood loss or the crash."

"Didn't take much from him," Spike muttered, fumbling for another cigarette and lighting it
impatiently.

Wesley sighed. "If you intend to drink his blood, Spike, and particularly if you plan to let him drink yours, he will need to eat regularly. He can't live on your blood. It simply doesn't work that way."

"And I suppose you know that, do you?"

"Yes. Yes, Spike, I do. What? Do you think Watchers only watch?"

"Kinda implied in the name, innit?"

Wesley huffed, then drained his glass, setting it down heavily. "You know better than that. The good news is that despite current appearances and official Council doctrine, if he observes a healthful diet no permanent harm should come to him once he's become used to the effects of your blood in his system."

"Pedantic gits," Spike muttered, groping for the bottle. He heard Wes make a choking sound of
"Your education is showing, Spike."

"Bloody hell, Wes. I can't make him eat! And I barely had any of his blood - m'not daft..." Another noise from Wes and Spike nodded, knowing Wes couldn't see it. "I'll do my best, yeah? He's a stubborn bastard."

"Just - be careful, Spike. If the effects are anything like has been written, the sensation is fairly addictive. He'll want you to give him blood - and to take his blood - even if he's sick."

"Yeah," Spike said, remembering Riley and the other clients at that place. "Thanks, Wes. You're...you're good to help me without the lecture, yeah?"

"Without much lecture," Wesley corrected wryly. "He'll feel wonderful while he's on your blood. Perhaps in time, he may well be able to avoid the crashes with regular doses. But at heart, he will
remain absolutely human in his bodily needs."

"So it's not gonna hurt him?"

"Nor heal him," Wesley agreed.

"So long as it doesn't hurt him, he can make up his own mind about the rest." Spike stared at the glowing square of light where Xander was - stared at the long lump he made in the bed, and the bit of dark hair and suede-tan skin that showed above the bunched bedclothes. Can't hurt him. Won't. Took me in - helped me and...did so much... Why can't I just enjoy this, instead of wanting...?

"Guess I'll go, Wes. Get cleaned up. Xan'll probably want to call you tomorrow. I - didn't really know what to tell him 'bout Cordelia."

"You told him the right thing, Spike. You told him the truth." Wesley turned his empty glass on the desktop, the lamplight sparkling on the water trail beneath. "I think - that sometimes...a man needs that release, that escape from a reality he finds
difficult to accept."

"You think?" Spike's voice was more gentle, but still didn't quite manage to escape sarcastic as well.

"Very well, I know. And Xander is a grown man, perfectly able to make his own choices. He's fortunate to have you there to give him those choices and look after him when he needs that release. Good night, Spike." Wesley hung up the phone gently, refilled his glass, and returned to work, the scent of whiskey and ancient parchment reassuringly familiar.

"'Night -" Spike started to say, but the line was dead already and Spike turned the phone off with a snort. *Typical. Thinks I didn't hear what he said or - or by hangin' up on me I'll forget it or something. I know you're hurting, Wes. We both do.* Spike stood slowly, bringing the bottle with him and wandered back into the room. Xander slept on, one hand outside the bedclothes, twisting slowly on the heavy cotton of the duvet. His heart beat slowly - regularly - and Spike knew he would sleep for hours,
yet. Which was good. He was hungry, and needed to hunt. He slipped his boots and coat back on - pocketed a key and a stake from Xander's bag and went quietly out.

*Should get him into the bath...get him something from room service...* Spike thought, two hours later and comfortably full. He stood beside the bed for a long moment, just looking at the figure that lay curled there. Then, a small smile on his face he stripped off jeans and shirt and climbed in, tucking himself close to the fever-warmth that was radiating from Xander. He wasn't ill, but sweating lightly, the scent of salt and iron overlaid with something faintly sweet. Spike's blood, maybe, sweating out of him.

*Or just him. Tastes so good - smells good...feels good. Nothing that isn't good about him...* Spike kissed forehead and temple and cheekbone gently - got as close as possible and settled down, letting his eyes flutter closed. *God, Xander...love you...*
Xander woke slowly to the feeling of Spike's fingers splayed over his chest and breathless lips against the soreness of his throat. It felt...

Xander cautiously opened his eye, staring at a white ceiling and going through the usual post-binge check in those merciful few moments before the hangover made itself known.

Only this time, it didn't. Instead, he felt - Spike's fingers shifting, and Spike leaning up on an elbow over him, face a study in bed head neutral.

Xander opened his mouth to say 'good morning' and grimaced. "Who installed the wall to wall carpet in my mouth?"

"Feelin' all right, Xander?" Spike asked, his fingers unconsciously stroking Xander's chest. Xander's own hand moved to rest lightly over his.
"Yeah, just - really thirsty." And that was something to marvel at because the last thing Xander remembered, he was - "Oh, fuck."

"Pet?" Spike's hand slid up to cup Xander's jaw, the worry more clear now in his voice.

"Um. How good...is the average truck stop security camera?"

Spike chuckled, and bent over Xander to press his lips against warm again - thank god skin. "Not that good, love."

"Oh. Okay. Then I am -" Xander licked his lips, waiting for something more detailed than 'thirsty' but nothing came. "Kind of freaky calm."

"Not feelin' sick or anything? Not - dizzy?" Spike didn't want to panic Xander, but he had to know. His heart's beating fine, not too fast. He's the right temperature, he smells right, he looks...fuckin' good. The lightly-stubbled cheek under his hand was cool
and Spike leaned down and nuzzled into the other side of Xander's face, kissing gently along his jaw.

"A little dizzy, um..." It was hard to think with Spike kissing along his jaw, little sparklers of 'want now' making their cheerful way down to what passed for morning wood that morning, and he shivered. "Of course, that could be because you're kissing me. I usually get kinda dizzy with your lips doing that thing." He caught Spike's hands in his, trapped them, and waited for Spike to really look at him. "Sweetheart, I am hungry, thirsty, a little horny -" He lifted the tip of one pale finger to his lips, kissing it, "- and kinda numb," he admitted, "but that's all."

"Numb? Where, love?" Spike tugged his hand free and let it roam over Xander's body, slipping under the covers and making Xander squirm, laughing.

Xander got both giggles and Spike's hand under control at the same time, trapping Spike's hand against his chest again. "In here," he said, pressing down. "It's like - none of it hurts right now, but nothing's filled the hole yet. Just - numb in there."
Which might just be good. He rubbed his fingers over the fine bone and tendon web work of Spike's hand, lacing their fingers together. "But okay."

"Yeah? You sure?" Spike watched Xander think about it and slowly nod, and he smiled then, relieved. Numb was all right; better than agony, better than misery. He could fix numb. "Wanna come in the bath, then? The hotel stocked us up with things - juice and all this fruit and whatnot. I'll feed you grapes, love, just like a good harem boy should." Spike couldn't resist pushing a little closer, thigh sliding up over Xander's thigh, pelvis bumping into the warm muscle of Xander's flank.

Xander slid his hand up Spike's thigh beneath the blanket, palming the bones and hollows of his hip to keep him there. "I thought I was the harem boy." And maybe it would all come crashing in on him. But...later. A brief flash of Cordelia passed through his mind, but it wasn't bad. It was...acceptance. He brushed his lips over Spike's, closed to spare the vampire senses his morning breath. "Spike? Did you remember to recharge my cell
phone after calling Wes?"

"Huh? Ummmm..." Spike knew his expression of deep thought didn't fool Xander for a minute, but he didn't care. He rocked his pelvis into Xander's hip a little harder, those delicious low-level tingles starting up in his belly and in his balls. *Always want him. God... "You were sick last night, so I get to be the harem boy, pet. Feed you grapes with my mouth and wash you....all over..."

Xander shivered, letting go all thoughts of phones and phone calls easily at that, fingertips brushing down over the satiny skin of Spike's hip to comb through short wiry curls - slide beneath the weight of Spike's balls which got him a rumbling purry groan and a tightening of the Spike-constrictor around him. "Does that mean you have to carry me around so the young master's feet don't touch the floor?"

"Mmmm... I can do that, love..." Spike slithered a little, getting more of himself over Xander - getting his face right down into Xander's neck so he could
kiss and nibble over the skin there - over the healing bites. He licked at them, rasping with his tongue and arching a little into the all-over shiver the licking caused in Xander. "Can do whatever you like, pet. Just tell me...command me," he added, lowest purring of his voice and writhed in satisfaction at the shuddery gasp from the man beneath him.

"C-carry me to the bath - hot - scalding hot water. Wanna come out of it red. Ohhh. I am so close to ordering you to forget it and just keep doing that- that's really ni-ice." Xander laughed helplessly, tipping his head back into the pillows and going into a full body stretch that popped his spine all the way down. He thrust against Spike on a trail of slick, sliding a leg over Spike's. "Ummm. Where was I?"

"Bath," Spike prompted from his neck, nibbling in a way that should have hurt, but only made Xander want more.

He dropped his head, licking, then biting one pale shoulder. "Bath," he said again, "fruit. Orgasms," he added, sliding his hand around to curve over Spike's
buttock, shuddering at the strong flex under his touch. "Not necessarily in that order."

"Mmmmm...not." Spike twisted and rolled and Xander was flat on his back, looking a little breathless. Spike sat astride him, rubbing slowly up and back, groin to groin and his cock gliding lightly along Xander's. He put his hands on Xander's chest and flicked his thumbs over the hardening nipples there. "You're so pretty like that," he murmured, as Xander arched up into him.

Xander dropped a hand between them, wrapping his fingers around both hard lengths and jacking them lazily together, warm and lukewarm, feeling that glow in his chest that went beyond want. "Gonna get us messy before you get us clean?"

"You're so smart," Spike said, grinning, and leaned down for a kiss.

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The bath was a little narrow, but that just meant more flesh touching flesh, as far as Spike was concerned. He got a chair and the huge fruit-basket the hotel had provided and carried them both over to where an ornate screen half-hid the claw-foot tub from the bed. Xander was lying back, eye shut and body utterly limp, but he cracked his eyelid when Spike came in and set the chair down.

"Ooh, looks good." He reached for the bottle of water Spike had tucked in next to the dusky-blue plums and cracked it, taking a long drink. Spike slid into the water facing him, gently lifting Xander's legs over his and running his hands up the sleek thighs.

"Grape, oh my Sultan? Or fig... What's your...pleasure?"

"Orange," Xander said firmly, dropping his head back against the rim of the tub, hands draped over Spike's knees.
"Don't like grapes and figs?"

"In Junior High School, there was this guy on the football team who had a brother in college. And we'd go to their haunted house every year where they had gross stuff to freak out the girls. Bowls of guts, bowls of eyes...um, not real bowls of guts and eyes. The eyes were always grapes."

"Ahh..." Spike said, but it was more of a 'can't possibly imagine why that'd put you off grapes' noise than an 'oh, how awful, let me throw them far away' noise, and Xander knew it. He grinned up at the ceiling and Spike plucked an orange from the basket - rolled it between his palms for a moment to loosen the skin and press the juices to the surface, then started to peel it. He let the peel drop piece by piece into the hot water and soon the steamy air was fragrant with the sharp, sweet scent. Spike broke off a wedge and leaned forward - traced it lightly over Xander's mouth.

"Have a bite then, love," he murmured, and Xander lifted his head.
The sweetsour taste of fresh California Navel burst over his tongue, and Xander sighed, letting it sweep away the last of the dryness. "Huh. If there's any cinnamon or something in there, we can come out of this smelling like chai." Xander caught Spike's hand, sucking the sticky juices from one finger then trapping it against his chest, between the thongs of his leather pouch. The more normal he felt, the more *abnormal* the last two days felt. It was like - the days after his wedding. Only this time, instead of beating Spike up...

"I don't know if you remember this, but when you were sick, I said you made me feel sixteen again, only not stupid?"

"Yeah?"

Xander lifted his head and Spike's hand, kissing the fingertips. "Leave off the not-stupid. Thank you."

"What for?"
"For witnessing the Harris not-coping mechanism and - god, feeding me oranges after."

"Didn't do so bad, love. It was...hard to hear, I know. And coming from me..."

Xander shook his head, rubbing his hand over Spike's leg from shin to thigh. "Actually, I think I'm kinda glad it came from you. This is going to sound - terrible, but...it's not all about Cordy. It was at first, but it..." He licked his lips. "When Anya died, I didn't have time to mourn in Sunnydale. So I went to work in Africa, shitfaced drunk for months, and somehow survived instead." Xander groped for the connections, knowing it was all part of the same thing, feeling it, but - "And feel free to help me out here, Spike."

"You did survive, love," Spike said softly, smiling because Xander didn't mind that he'd known about Cordelia. "Did it well."

Xander smiled back, but his smile faltered and his hands did, moving over Spike's skin. "But that's all I
did. I ran away to Africa. Got as far away as I could from everything and everyone and... And fuck, Africa's real, you know? It's more real than any place I've ever been..." He took an offered piece of orange and chewed it slowly, watching Spike do the same. Watching him listen, in a way so few people did.

"I didn't ever really...bury Anya. Not in my head. And when I came back from Africa it was like - the gang wanted to shove me right back into that...mold. Be - the Xander-shaped friend but... I'm not Xander-shaped anymore! Not - that Xander... You know?" he added, helplessly, not sure any of this was making sense.

"Sure, pet, I know. Angel did that, yeah? I let him, but - he just sees me like he did over a hundred years ago - nattering little mama's boy, tagging after him, trying to get Dru - trying to...impress him. Even when I stopped, he just...doesn't see it. And I just react, like I always did." Spike traced the gun-shot scar on Xander's abdomen - looked up at the man, who had tendrils of steam-damp hair curling around
his temples and his throat. "I'm not - Spike-shaped anymore, either."

"Yeah." Xander sighed - hitched himself a little lower. "And then - in Sunnydale... I kept thinking how we had to - pretend the demon remains were animals from the zoo. Pretend they were...nothing special. Just pretend, like I pretended to care about what the girls were telling me. And god - I couldn't...I can't stand the thought of f-finding Anya, Spike, I just can't..."

"Thought we were talkin' about Cordelia," Spike said gently, his hands going still on Xander's body.

"Cordelia..." Xander dragged a hand through his hair, wet and frustrated. "Was more pretend. Everyone pretended she was fine. It's about -" He could taste the word, close by. Words had never been his bosom buddies, but this one would be important. "It's about lies. That I thought I was done with. And I want to be done with," he said slowly, "but I'm not. In Sunnydale, I keep telling myself, it's okay to lie to the public about the demon remains
as long as I keep remembering what's true." He shrugged. "But I - don't."

"Some things're awfully hard to tell the truth about," Spike said slowly, thinking of Buffy and what they'd done - what she had done. Thinking, with a small twinge of unease, the lies he was telling himself, regarding Xander. 'Cause I do love him. Gods and the angels, I do, and... I don't want to be alone in this. I want him to love me back. Want it more than anything...

"You did. You tell the brutal truth. And - I think I need that," Xander admitted. "I want that. Everything's been based on big lies, little lies, all my life. Jesus, my entire vampire slayerette career was based on the lie that -" he took a deep breath, getting the words out loud for the first time, "That it was a demon wearing my best friend's body that I killed, not my best friend. Lies to get you through the night, and there's so many of them... God, this seemed so much easier in Africa. In Sunnydale the people got really good at lying to themselves. And they're still lying to me." He looked down to where
Spike's hand rested over his leg - covered it with his. "And it's so much easier to live like that, and I'm fucking scared because I can't, anymore."

Spike had long since put the remains of the orange on the chair, and now he reached out and pulled Xander closer - scooted him until Xander's legs were around him, and they were inches apart.

"Love - if you can't, then you can't. Whatever truths you want to say - I won't stop you." he said softly, not letting Xander look away - not letting himself. Because this was important - this was Xander letting go of something that had held him down in dark water for so long, and now he was shooting to the surface and the new world he was getting closer and closer to was scaring him - was blinding him - and Spike wasn't going to let him sink back down.

"Truths. Um...okay." Xander leaned his forehead down until it rested against Spike's, the air bathwater warm between them and scented sweetly with oranges. "I'm naked. In an old fashioned bath tub. With a vampire. (Male) Who I
think I'm kinda falling in love with. And I want to scream *that* from the rooftops. Or at least write home about it. If I had a home. Which I don't. Which is another truth that's kinda hard to take. And I...think I might be too much of a girly man to *do* that, the screaming from the roof tops thing, but I *want* to do that. Some day."

'Kind of falling in love with.' Words that echoed and shimmered in Spike's head. Words as warm as the water was - as heady as the scent of oranges and as sweet as the heavy-headed roses in the basket. "Are you, then? Wanting to tell the world that?" Spike said, feeling a small smile at the corner of his mouth. Xander blinked at him - shut his eye for a moment.

"Well - fuck. I kind of wanted to...well, be more subtle or maybe more...convincing? Or at least wa-" Spike didn't let him finish - just leaned forward and pulled him into a hard, orange-spice kiss.

"It's sweeter when it's a surprise, love," he murmured a moment later. He reached up and
pushed the long strands of hair off of Xander's forehead - off his neck - and let his fingertips ghost over the bite. "Don't have to lie to me about anything, love, and all this - this mess -" he touched the bite again, watching Xander shiver. "We'll sort it, Xander. You've got...miles to got yet, yeah? And we've got time."

"And you've proved that you're not gonna run away or anything when I lose it and show what a total idiot I can be," Xander sighed, once he had his breath back, already wishing he could get back into that nice place where nothing mattered but immediate desires.

"Not an idiot, pet. S' called grief."

"I barely knew her anymore."

"Still loved her, didn't you?"

"I loved - who she was when I knew her."

"An' you *lost* her. Lost her an' everyone else who
didn't tell you about her."

Xander looked up quickly to find Spike watching him sadly, cool fingers dusting along the hollow of his cheek. "It's never gonna be the same with any of them," he admitted, and knew that was true too.

"You want it to be?" Spike's thumb felt nice, brushing over the two day stubble on Xander's cheek.

"No. Hey, I admitted it and the world didn't end!" Xander slid his fingers up, brushing over Spike's neck. "Can I admit something else?"

"Anything."

He brused his thumb over the spot he'd bitten, already healed, long since vanished into the skin. "I liked this too. I'm a child of the Nineties - if it feels good, don't do it. Just say no."

"Can't hurt you," Spike said, flare of contentment like a shock of warm honey. "Have it on the best
authority that it won't do a thing to you but what it does to you. Wes said." He pushed into Xander's touch a little, because that was something he'd never done with Buffy and it was amazing how different it felt with Xander. Nothing like Dru; they'd shared blood like sparring tigers, but it hadn't had that spark of... Life. Sharing his life - trusting me not to steal it. Makes it...better.

"So if I said I wanted to do it again, you'd say -?" Xander lifted his head just enough to see Spike, to see his eyes dilate, then close.

"I'd say yes, pet."

Spike's lips tasted of orange and salt, and parted to the taste of copper, smoke, and Spike that never changed, no matter what he ate or drank.

"I want to do it again."

Spike leaned his forehead into Xander's - took a long lungful of sweet-spicy-musky air, tasting Xander on his tongue and on his lips. Feeling Xander
under his hands; flex of rib-cage as he breathed and the subtle tremoring of his body as his heart beat furiously.

"Yes, pet," he whispered.

Xander shivered at Spike's whisper, at the way it made his accent soften and warm. He wanted to push into it - settled for tasting Spike's lips, the indentation beneath them as he spoke - wanting closeness. "Will they still see me? At the studio tonight? There's not gonna be a 'we reserve the right to refuse service to anyone high on vampire blood' policy?"

"No policy, love. Probably make it easier on you. But...s'gonna hurt again, coming down. You sure you want to do that, love? You don't -" Spike stopped and slowly, slowly rubbed lips and cheek over Xander's - let their foreheads brush. He could feel the bridge of Xander's nose against his eyelashes and he nudged forward a little, tasting the chapped, mobile lips fleetingly with his tongue. "You don't have to do that. It's not...part of it."
"Yeah, I know." Xander slid his arms between Spike's back and the back of the tub, sliding forward until he could wrap his legs tighter around Spike. Even bath warm, Spike didn't feel human, and Xander - didn't want him to. "I'm a big demon magnet -" and god, Spike's skin felt nice under his hands, satiny smooth like Xander's wasn't, "- and, okay, maybe a big ho too. And lots weirder has happened to me than you. So...what if I want it to be part of it? What if I want to stop pretending to be Mr. Normal B. Vanilla too?"

Spike had to laugh, soft chuckle that rocked them both. "You've never been normal, Xander. Normal hears some blonde bint and a stodgy old Englishman talking about demons and vampires and runs far away - he doesn't start whittling stakes." Xander snorted soft laughter and Spike ran his hands slowly up and down the sleek muscles of Xander's back. "But I won't tell you no, love." He looked up at Xander then, putting every bit of sincerity into his gaze, because it was true. He
wouldn't say no to Xander about this - or anything else.

"Hey, I said pretending, buddy. I had everyone fooled pretty good for years. Had you fooled." He gave Spike a squeeze with his legs, settling his arms onto Spike's shoulders and ruffling the bed-head curls. "I had me fooled."

"Won't be able to fool anyone anymore once you start markin' yourself up, pet." Spike traced again the route over Xander's collarbones where the tattoo would go.

"You have been listening, haven't you?" Xander tilted his head back until he could see Spike clearly. "I want to say - 'Hey, this is me. Take it or leave it!' just by walking into a room."

"I hear you, Xander." Spike traced the skin again - rubbed a little, as if testing the tension of it - the grain. "I heard you make jokes when the monster of the week was breathin' down your neck, too. You talk the talk - can you walk the walk?" He saw the
disappointment in Xander's eye and shook his head fractionally. "Don't doubt you, love - I don't. Just want you to be sure. That's all."

For an answer, Xander took Spike's hand and put it on his neck, over the new forming scab that covered Spike's bite. "Is this gonna scar?"

"Usually does, yeah."

"If I was going to back out, it would have been then." Because that mark, more than any other Xander wanted to put on his body, put an end to his Xander-shape for good.

Spike didn't say anything to that - there wasn't any point, because it was true. Braver then you ever knew, love... He leaned forward and kissed the mouth that was tight with resolve until it melted and softened with desire under his.
Square Ten

The new blue jeans scratched along Xander's legs with every step, whispering *I know what happened to the last pair* in a way that made it harder and harder to keep the grin off his face.

Xander felt - good - to have something decided, even if that something was a gigantic *fuck it* and the willingness to embrace uncertainty.

And the three slow, sparkly, spangly mouthfuls of Spike's blood he'd taken were making the cool California night warm and the leaves sing every time a gust of wind rustled down the colonnade and blew Xander's hair into his eye. "So *where* is this place?"

Spike was smiling along with Xander's there-and-gone-again grin, guessing what he was thinking about from the flush that came and went with each smile. "Not far. Topa Topa Street. Owner's got a
little mojo on it, keeps the tourists out."

"And tourists in this case means...?"

"Tourists."

"So I'm not gonna get some kind of - speciesist treatment, huh?" Right then, he felt too good to care if he did.

"Not if he knows what's good for him," Spike said, flat statement of intent that made a tingle of shivery pleasure dance down Xander's spine. That was the blood, too, in a way. Whatever it was that made Spike so fucking fearless, no matter what. Fearless even in the face of the Initiative, and a chip of silicon that made him helpless. Xander leaned over and kissed Spike, hard and fast, and strode on, grinning in earnest.

*Now what's that all about?* Spike wondered, slowing for a moment. But the enticing bunch and stretch of muscle in the *so far* un-torn jeans made him jog a step or two and catch up.
"You'll fit right in, pet."

"Fit right in with what?" Xander had half turned to the sound of Spike's voice by the time the vampire caught his elbow, steering him onto a side street off the colonnade. "I thought the whole point was not to fit in." Stumbling, he gained his feet, catching Spike around the waist from behind and Jesus, fuck when did I go insane?, because yes, he was aware of the basic risk that should be involved in grabbing William the Bloody like a high school sweetheart.

And the best part?

Nope. Still didn't care. "Unless you mean fit in right here. Kinda liking it here." And he did. Like it, that was, the way he and Spike fit together. Just right, and his neck didn't hurt when they kissed too long.

Spike put his hands over Xander's, enjoying the heat and solidity of the body right behind him - holding him. "Fit in 'cause Seb, he attracts all kinds. But they all want one thing." Spike stopped and twisted
around, yanking Xander up hard against him and rolling his hips, just a little. "They all want the best, and they all want something unique. That's you, love."

Xander let his hands creep down beneath Spike's duster, sliding into the back pockets of his jeans, and *Hello back pockets. Best invention for the discerning gay man since lube.* "Tell me again what it'll look like." He was vaguely aware that they were still walking, him forward, and Spike backward and he supposed he should be putting more effort into steering them, but a: he didn't know where they were going, and b: who could concentrate with a double handful of Spike?

"Like a garland, love," Spike said, glancing back over his shoulder and steering them left. "Like...a Greek god, his wreath of laurels slipping down..." Spike made a seductive little moue with his mouth and Xander laughed out loud, his hands hot and proprietary on Spike's haunches.

"I'm no god."
"Good enough to immortalize, though," Spike said, and speculation flashed in Xander's gaze.

Xander squeezed Spike against him until he felt the flash fire burn of that illegal hip-shimmy Spike had going for him, then relaxed his grip. "But I'm not letting you bronze me. Nuh uh. Or put me in a carbonite freezing chamber either."

They paused and stared at each other. "Geek," Spike accused with an amused snort.

"I may be a geek pal, but you're still getting off on me," Xander pointed out, one leg slipping between Spike's with a rasp of new denim against old and a muffled hiss when Spike's hip bone dug into Xander's dick, which was apparently convinced that he was sixteen again.

"Any time I can," Spike husked, crowding Xander back into a vine-hung lattice and leisurely thrusting into him once - twice - three times. Twist and roll of his hips that made Xander groan and Spike ducked
down and bit lightly at the fresh mark on Xander's throat.

Xander's head was tilting back obligingly before his mind caught up, but since it was only to give its unconditional approval to the proceedings, he just made a low noise in his throat and raised a hand to cup the back of Spike's head, grinding into Spike's thrusts. "Hey, keep me in fresh jeans and you can get off on me whenever you want." He dipped his head, feeling the colder cold of Spike's ear against his lips. "But I'd rather be somewhere I can ditch the jeans, too."

"After, you satyr," Spike whispered, biting once more, and harder, before hopping back off the trellis and tugging Xander along like an eclectic and ambulatory balloon. Seb's place was just down the block and Spike didn't want the blood to 'run out' before the tattoo was over. It was gonna hurt.

Xander laughed, letting Spike drag him along. The blood, he was starting to think, was something he could get used to. Would kinda like to get used to.
None of that weird fuzziness he got with pot, or the sluggish alcohol feeling. Just nice.

_Fearless._ Xander'd never thought about how _much_ fear he'd had, or how many kinds, till it was all gone.

Yeah, he could get used to it.

"So where is it?" Xander asked when Spike stopped beneath a trellis still sweet-scented with heavy green hanging plants even this late in October, where the street noise seemed oddly muted by the white walls and rough wood.

"Right here."

Xander looked, confused - and then he _looked_, taking a long breath and scanning the stucco and stone of the storefronts. And it was there - a heavy, carved door of some dark wood with a wide, embroidered piece of cloth hanging down beside it. A brass bead - as big as his fist and carved all over with strange symbols - finished the cloth and
Xander watched as Spike reached out and took it in his hand - tugged twice, gently, and then let go, smiling over at him. A brass plaque on the wall said 'Nine Steps to Heaven" in angular script, with more of the odd symbols beneath.

"Do you see it, pet?"

"Either that or you're putting something in the blood when I'm not looking. Which, okay, kind of doesn't make sense, so shutting up now." He felt Spike chuckling into their kiss, and pushed forward to pin Spike against the door frame, and would have, if it hadn't opened and Spike hadn't gently disengaged from the kiss, keeping his arms latched loosely around Xander's waist.

"Delilah! What a treat," Spike said, smiling with genuine pleasure at the tall, dark-haired woman who had opened the door. She was of some Asian extraction mixed with the local Indian tribe and the combination gave her a high-boned, regal appearance not in the least marred by the tight, worn jeans and 'Hello Kitty' baby-doll tee she wore.
"Spike! It's been ages!" Delilah said, and her dark, cat-shaped eyes swept over the vampire and then Xander, glittering and amused.

Something in that greeting and sweep of eyes spoke to Xander's inner cave man which wasn't about to give up its grip on Spike's ass just yet.

"That it has, pet." Spike leaned into Xander a little, loving that the man's arms tightened around him - that Delilah's causally *claiming* aura had sparked a possessive response. "This is Xander, for Seb."

"Oh? Not you?" Delilah stepped back, gesture of her head ushering them in, and Spike urged Xander up the single step and across the bare landing to the second door. The first swung silently closed, shutting them in to aqueous blue-gold light.

"Not today," Spike said with the tone of someone who'd had the conversation before, which really didn't do much for making Xander *relax*. But the way Spike leaned into him, and that possessive little
smirk did. Just enough that Xander could notice, even appreciate the utterly tranquil atmosphere, the light that seemed to filter in from everywhere and nowhere, and -

Xander hurried to keep up with Spike, slipping his arm back around his waist. Appointment. Right.

There really were nine steps down into the studio, and Spike counted them silently, as he always did. They emerged from the tunnel-like staircase into the lobby of the studio, an oasis of greenery and art and low, squashy couches flanked by tables and more art in books and portfolios. A towering bookshelf took up one wall and Japanese paper lanterns and Cambodian shadow puppets hung from the ceiling. A tattoo machine buzzed somewhere in the depths of the shop and the medicinal scent of antiseptics and cleaners was overlaid with frangipani, musk, and lime.

"Seat yourselves. Seb's working on Venus."

"He has skin left to ink?"
Delilah winked at him. "Barely. And not anymore. Seb will be out soon." She went behind a counter and disappeared into a back room and Spike took a deep breath and eyed the many books, searching for one in particular.

Xander's brain was still jumping back and forth between Venus - he? and imagining what skin someone with that much ink would have left to tattoo as Spike led him to one of the couches, tumbling them both onto it and making himself at home with a Xander blanket.

"Pass me that book there, yeah, pet? The one in red."

"What is it?" Xander squirmed until he was comfortable against Spike, the couch's back surprisingly squasy behind him, then grabbed the book in question. Big, heavy, and slippery, he was grateful to Spike for catching it before he dropped it in Spike's lap which, vamp or not, would have dampened the mood.
Spike manhandled the heavy book around the right way and pulled Xander closer. "Art, love. It's art." He opened the book to the front and they were both confronted by a nude back, elaborately tattooed with a portrait of three women in draped, classical garb.

"It's Seb's best," Spike added, for Xander's benefit. He wanted Xander to see that Seb really was the right man - well, demon - for the job. And before he saw Seb in the flesh, since that could be a little - disconcerting.

Xander's fingers hovered over the image, not quite touching the page where the three women tread so lightly. "Matt has tattoos. From when he was in the Marines. But they're nothing like this."

"That's because Marines are soldiers, love, and soldiers haven't got any brains. Poured 'em all out when they enlisted, didn't they? Seb isn't a tattooist - he's an artist. He'll make you wish you had more skin."
"No. You'll wish I had more skin for him to tattoo, because you're gonna be looking at it every day for the rest of my life. And you'd better appreciate it every day too, pal." Not, Xander's cave brain thought gleefully, that there's much doubt of that. Which made the rest of him feel pretty good too.

"Appreciate what, your skin?" Spike asked, shoving the portfolio aside to slid a hand up under Xander's shirt and stroke the thin, sensitive skin along his ribs. "I appreciate it, love... Appreciate the way it feels...the way it looks...." Spike tugged the shirt higher - leaned forward to trail a series of languid kisses from sternum to navel. "The way it tastes..." he bit lightly at the firm muscles of Xander's abdomen and grinned at the little shiver that went all thought the man.

"I appreciate your appreciating," Xander answered quickly, every inch of the skin in question feeling like it was trying to crawl eagerly forward for its turn being bitten because hello! More Xander to appreciate here and it wasn't as if they had
anywhere to go just yet. And he'd bet the farm and a few puppies that Delilah wouldn't mind them engaging in a little PDA. Hell, she'd probably tape it or - something something something. Xander moaned when Spike's tongue swirled wetly around his navel.

"Your attention's wandering, pet."

"Let's see...what could be making it hard for me to concentrate?"

Spike just chuckled softly - and then a little louder as Xander's stomach gurgled under his mouth. "Shhh," he admonished the stomach. "I'm trying to be seductive."

"It's your fault, you know. All that noise," Xander clarified, when Spike peered up at him in confusion. "If you hadn't made me eat the biggest plateful of antelope this side of Africa..." Xander patted his full stomach and Spike bent and kissed it again.

"Needed a decent meal in you, love - it'll help with
the come-down. 'Sides, you can't get tattooed on an empty belly. You'll get sick."

"But antelope, Spike? What's wrong with good old American cow?" Xander moved the petting to Spike's head, grinning when the Big Bad pushed his head into Xander's palm like Miss Kitty Fantastico on a good day.

"Silly git. 'S as American as any cow, and better for you too. Darker, richer."

"So that's why you made me eat the liver too? Which by the way, is not an experience I would traditionally look forward to."

"Cleaned your plate, didn't you?"

"Uh, I reserve the right to not respond to that in the interest of protecting my reputation as a red blooded young American guy who hates liver."

Spike snorted. "Liver's where all the good stuff is. An' you liked it, pet. Next time we'll try the
kangaroo." Spike rolled his head slowly over Xander's petting hand, letting his own hand slide around Xander's waist to the small of his back, to stroke there with his fingertips.

"'Sides, promised you a nice treat for afters, if you were good and ate it all..."

Xander shivered, tongue ghosting over his bottom lip where he could still feel the ragged edges of Spike's skin, parting beneath his teeth, and the cool seep of ruby red cocaine. Like a little piece of Spike's demon flashed and flickered through him, licked all around his heart and brain. "Oh yeah. And when you promise, _jesus_ you deliver."

"Can't help that, pet - you make it easy," Spike murmured, lifting his head enough to take Xander's mouth in a slow, slow kiss.

"You need a couple more minutes?" a husky voice said, and Spike looked around, grinning.

"Seb!" He felt Xander shift, just a little - heard the
small indrawn breath. But nothing else. Good - that's good. Shouldn't be scared, pet. Seb was something to see.

Taller than both of them, with ink-black skin that sheened starling's-wing iridescence in the light. Seb's hair was pure white, braided back tightly from a narrow, triangular face. Mobile, bat-like ears and a long, stretched-looking body. But mostly it was the tail, that flicked and twitched restlessly, thin and long and barbed on the end. And the eyes, which were solidly white and eerie in that dark face. Seb grinned, and the inside of his mouth showed pale pink-white, with sharp teeth like black ice.

"Just havin' a little...moment. You ready for us?"

"All ready, yes."

Spike rolled off of Xander and off of the couch, pulling him to his feet and sliding a cool arm around his waist. "You ready, pet?"

Ready? The jumping under Xander's skin had turned
to a low tingling buzz of anticipation that left him hard - or maybe that was the afterglow of Spike's lips and tongue on his stomach.

He wanted to laugh, almost did laugh, but a guy sure as hell didn't survive his first twenty two years on the Hellmouth by laughing in the presence of demons.

Okay, so there might have been some giggling involved, but Seb didn't look offended. Not that Xander would know how Seb looked when he was offended, but Spike didn't look like Seb was offended, and that was good enough for Xander. "Lets do this."

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"Doin' all right, Xander?" Spike asked quietly, as Seb paused to re-fill an ink cap and Xander shifted a little on the reclining chair he was face down in, rustling the plastic cover. His neck was red and a little swollen from the needles but they were in the
final stages, now - Seb was doing the white highlights along the little tattooed 'knot' that lay over Xander's spine - knot of old leather thongs, that 'tied' the garland of narrow leaves around Xander's shoulders. It lay low down over his collarbones, easily hidden by a t-shirt.

"M'okay," Xander said, his voice a little muffled. He flexed his right hand around Spike's hand, the pouch from Africa creaking a bit between their palms.

"Almost there, pet," Spike said, rubbing slowly up and down his lightly sweating back.

"Need a bath," Xander said vaguely, and then turned his head to look at Spike. "A long bath and more of that antelope. And...I dunno - Sultan for the day, I guess," he added, smirking a little.

"Think so, huh?" Spike leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose. "You've been very brave and very good," he whispered, "and I think you deserve a special treat for that."
"How special?" Xander breathed, feeling another wave of tension crawling up his spine despite his best efforts. 'Breathe', Seb had advised. And so had Spike. And Delilah too when she poked her head in, and Xander would have complained that he didn't need to be reminded to breathe except that by the time Seb had come back to his spine for the finishing touches, breathing was feeling oh so optional under the fiery cutting pain that wasn't about the buzzing anymore. No, no, no.

"Pet, breathe."

Oh yeah.

Xander dragged in a slow, shaky breath and let it out, eye fluttering - trying to concentrate on Spike's hand petting up and down his spine. "How's it look?" Because hello, babbling didn't require much coherent thought, and to babble, he had to breathe. It'd worked for him so far. "Um, and how special?" He flinched as it felt, for a moment, as if the skin back there was the consistency of all the
scraped knees of childhood on top of each other with Seb fishing around in there for something. He tightened his hand on Spike's until he could feel every rock, bone, and twig in the pouch digging into his palm.

"Work of bleedin' art."

"Bleeding art. Right."

Spike snorted, plucking the original design from the side table and holding it where Xander could focus on it. "He's right here, pet. The white bits. Makin' it look all real."

"That's all?"

"'S the worst bit, love. But the last. You're almost done, yeah?"

Xander sucked in another breath against the light-headedness. "Yeah. Okay. Tell me about my special reward again? And feel - feel free to get as detailed as you want to. Because anything that distracts me
is so of the good."

Spike bent down low, out of Seb's way but close to Xander's ear. "I know you're sore, love. I can feel it. You're so tense..." Spike ran a finger up Xander's arm, feeling the tightness there as Xander fought to stay still against the bee-sting kiss of the needles.

"I know what would make you relax, love... If I touched you...all over. Just slow, like this...gentle..." Spike worked his fingertips in a spiral, around Xander's bicep, outer arm to inner arm, pressing down. "Your arms and your legs, your hands and your feet...your hips and back and chest...belly..." Xander breathed, and Spike smiled at the little hitch in the inhalation.

"And the blood would be right there, wouldn't it? Right under your skin... And I'd want to taste you - taste it... You don't know what it's like, if I drink from your thigh, Xander..." Another hitching breath, and Spike stroked his fingertips up again, to the single visible puncture mark on Xander's neck. He lowered his voice to the merest whisper, lips close
enough to brush Xander's ear.

"I can drink from your cock, love. While I suck you, I can bite, and it feels just...like this..." Spike caressed the mark, merest edge of a nail and the pad of his finger and Xander's hand in his closed like a vise.

Xander's breath stuttered in his throat and he closed his eye, grinding down against the chair with a quick intake of air. "So. Fucking. Hard - to think."

Seb laughed, a quiet hissing. "As long as you're still."

"Still - still as a mouse," Xander promised, bearing down on Spike's hand as that buzzing turned good imagining Spike's fangs around his dick, good like Spike's bite good and okay, fuck, not good etiquette to come in the chair. Jesus. "Are mice still?"

"Not known for it, love."

Xander groaned, another wash of hot-cold radiating through him from the pressure of Seb's hand and the machine and the trickle of sweat sliding down
from his hairline and into his socket, making him shiver. "I am so holding you to that promise."

"Won't be hard to do that, pet," Spike said, and then leaned back as Seb spritzed the tattoo down with an antiseptic wash and contemplatively wiped off the thin coating of A&D, ink, and blood.

"We're done, then," Seb said, and set his liner machine down on the stainless tray that held ink caps, cups of water, and the heavier shading machine.

"Done done?" Xander asked, and Seb stood up, rolling his left glove off and balling it in his right fist, then rolling the right glove off around it, turning it inside out.

"Complete. Can you sit up?"

"Course he can," Spike said, and then got a hand on Xander's chest and eased the man upright, watching him grimace as stiff muscles protested the movement. "Go slow, love - three hours is a long
time," Spike advised, pushing sweaty hair back off Xander's face. Spike's hand was still locked in Xander's and he gave a soft squeeze. "Looks fuckin' beautiful, pet."

Xander cautiously rolled his head from one side to the other, wincing at the rawness of the new tattoo - and *that* he'd expected, but not the rolling ache underneath, like he'd spent the hours hauling lumber instead of slouched in a chair. "What's it look like?"

"See it for yourself." Seb returned with a broad mirror, the right size to reflect Xander's head and shoulders and absence of Spike. He could feel Spike's hand still on his chest, and put his own over it, curving his fingers around the edges.

It also reflected the manic gleam in his eye, hair disheveled with sweat and Spike's petting, and a grin so wide it fuckin' hurt. And it was like stumbling out of the closet after the first blow job from Cordy, shaky and all new in his skin and *changed*. 
And it was - beautiful. The leaves feathered and brushed over the tops of his shoulders, swept over his collarbones in a rush of reds that reminded him of African earth and the one tree in Sunnydale that always turned the color of old rust in the fall.
"Wow."

The leaves were a little bigger at the very front - they meshed and formed a sort of centerpiece, the tip of which just touched the top of his sternum, where the pectoral muscles started to bulk out.

"Here," Seb said, handing the mirror to Spike. The demon picked up a second mirror and held it behind Xander, so he could see where the 'garland' was tied together at the back, and the curling ends of tattooed thongs hung down his spine, ending between his shoulder blades.

"It's fantastic, love," Spike said, and Xander looked up at him, his grin infectious and so wide it had to hurt.

"Yeah - yeah it is," Xander agreed, taking Spike's
arm to be helped out of the chair and muttering under his breath when his knees immediately gave way and Spike had to haul him back to his feet, leaning him against the chair as Xander gingerly eased his tee shirt back on.

"Let's get you back to the hotel love, yeah?"

Xander vaguely remembered nodding, and then everything was a blur. Cash had changed hands at one point, and he was pretty sure Delilah had said something complementary and embarrassing on their way back out. He just stumbled along next to Spike, cool solid arm, and chill insubstantial wind making up most of his world for the walk back to the hotel room, and the side trip into a brightly colored Mexican restaurant where Spike ordered things Xander had never even heard of, but if it wasn't on the menu of Taco Bell, Xander probably hadn't heard of it anyway, and god he was hungry, the scent of spice and chilies and meat making his mouth water.

Then Spike was back at his side, a large paper bag
dangling from one hand and they were headed home or at least back to the hotel, and - "Would it be completely gross if I ate whatever you bought in the bath?"

"Can eat anything in a bathtub, pet," Spike said, grabbing Xander's arm and steering him around a mailbox. He tucked Xander's arm into his, not caring if the old-fashioned way of walking looked a little odd - it was better than the man staggering into traffic on the tail-end of a blood-and-endorphin rush. "And I can feed you anything in the bathtub. I'll fix you right up, yeah? Make you feel fine."

"Did it really look good?" Xander murmured, head on Spike's shoulder and his eye half shut, trusting Spike to steer him right.

"Looked good enough to eat, love," Spike murmured. Xander's grip tightened on his arm and Spike grinned, swinging the bag of Mexican food, feeling a little giddy himself.

The air seemed a few shades warmer, and a lot
more damp in the green, green, green courtyard that Xander felt like a jerk for not appreciating more, but he only wanted to get in.

Into the warmth, into the privacy where he could strip down to nothing at all, into the bath, and one way or another into Spike. He shivered, the erection that had flagged during the walk making a rallying leap against the roughness of his zipper, and he leaned harder into Spike, overbalancing him until he thumped up against the door frame of their room, doing his red-blooded best to kiss a vampire breathless. Spike's skin was so smooth and cool where Xander's hands crawled up under his shirts to slide over compact muscle, the hardness of Spike's nipples tickling his palms and he dragged his fingernails over them with a huff of breath. "Inside. Now," Cave Xander said.

"Yes, my Sultan," Spike breathed, twisty little flutter of want love need in his belly - loving the way Xander's gaze widened and then darkened as the words were processed. He got the key in the door - got the door open and let Xander man-handle him
across the room - into the annex where the bathtub was. The chair was still there from before, minus the fruit basket and Spike dropped the bag of food and let Xander bend him back in a hard kiss. Darting, hot tongue and scrape of teeth, hands up under his shirt and digging into this back, want want want with every panting breath and thrust of hip and Spike...loved it.

"Christ, you feel so good," he muttered, shredding Xander's t-shirt up the back so he could get to more skin, and arching up when Xander bit at his collarbones and dipped the tips of his fingers into the waist of Spike's jeans.

Xander hissed at the coolness of Spike's fingers over the burn of the tattoo, where the leather thongs curled down between his shoulder blades. He got one leg between Spike's and ground against him. "Vampire flesh. Better than an ice pack."

Except that an ice pack was sounding less and less appealing as the shivery shockiness began to set in, the outdoor chill seeping its way into Xander's
bones until he shuddered against Spike, goose flesh rising along his arms.

"C'mon, pet. Let's get you out of these things and into a hot bath, yeah?"

"God, yeah." A bath sounded like heaven to sore muscles that cramped with shivering, and skin that itched with sweat and blood.

Spike kissed him once, chill hand in his hair, lips and teeth clashing hard and fast before Spike let go, leaving Xander to fumble his way out of stiff jeans and loosely tied boots.

Spike worked fast, getting the tub filling and getting a towel for Xander to lean back on, so that his sore skin wouldn't be against the cold porcelain. Xander climbed into the filling tub and huddled there, looking a little miserable.

Spike stroked his hair gently and then went to the little wood-burning stove that stood in the corner and got it going, using the oil-soaked sawdust
provided in a little bucket for a starter and setting chunks of fragrant cedar and apple-wood to burn.

The water was higher now, and Xander was leaning back - trying to uncoil shivering muscles. Spike stripped hastily and padded into the kitchen, gathering a bottle of water and a bottle of pineapple-orange juice and the aspirin before heading back to the tub. He set everything on the chair and stepped in himself, facing Xander and settling carefully so as not to slop water on the tattoo. Xander's eye was closed, but his skin was pinking, and he looked - comfortable.

"Here, love, take a couple of these and have something to drink, yeah? Make you feel better."

Xander obediently downed three aspirin and half the bottle of juice with them, and by the time he'd finished, the tub was full, the room was warming, and Spike felt less like an ice cube in the bath.

With a sigh, he rolled his shoulders experimentally. "All right, pet?"
"Yeah - tired." Xander wished he could sink down up to his chin in the warm bath but there was no way he was going through all of that to fuck it up the first night for the sake of wallowing in heat. "I think I'm gonna need help with..." He gestured to his neck and shoulders, wincing at the muscle pull. "Because there is no way I'm gonna be able to reach the back."

"Course I will, pet. Said I was gonna take good care of you, didn't I?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Xander's mouth. "Yeah."

"Always keep my promises, love." Spike's hands slid up Xander's shins and he couldn't hold back a moan of pleasure when Spike dug his fingertips into the muscles.

"It is so unfair that I'm sore there when I got the tattoo here."
"Could'a bounced a quarter off your back, your were so tense," Spike said, concentrating on kneading out the knots of tension he could feel - everywhere. He worked silently for a while, listening to the soft groans and little ahh! sounds Xander made, feeling the muscles under his hands gradually smooth out and relax. He ended at Xander's shoulders, just skirting the tattoo and Xander was a boneless lump in the tub.

"Better now, yeah? And now - you need to eat."

"Can't - lift my head," Xander mumbled, rolling his head a little on the towel and eyeing with longing the little paper-wrapped bundles and Styrofoam boxes Spike was pulling out of the big bag.

"You'll have to, pet. Can't eat like that or you'll choke." Spike took a huge bite of some kind of meat in sauce, and offered a forkful to Xander, knowing he couldn't resist.

Xander moaned at the scent of spices and rich deep flavors, taking the offered meat with a groan and
chewing, the flavors bursting over his tongue. "S this?"

"Chicken mole, love. Open up." Another forkful made its way into Xander's mouth, and Spike watched with amusement as Xander chewed.

"But what is it?"

"Is it good?"

Xander briefly thought about glaring at Spike, but decided it took too much energy, and it might make Spike stop feeding him, so he opened his mouth obediently again for another bite, and nodded.

"Secret ingredient's chocolate."

Xander choked on his mouthful, and did glare at Spike as he coughed and chased the mouthful with a sip of water. "You're kidding me."

"I know better than to kid you about chocolate, pet. Not much chocolate in it, and none of the sweet
kind you'd eat straight," Spike said thoughtfully, taking a bite himself. "Got lots of other things in it too, don't it? Bit like a Mexican curry."

"Less talk, more feeding the hungry man."

As he ate, the burn in his mouth warmed him from the inside as the bath and fragrant wood fire warmed him from the outside and he settled his hands onto Spike's knees, counting his heartbeats as the skin of his shoulders and collarbones throbbed in time. Hot. Soothing.

"Perfect, pet, you're so perfect," Spike murmured, smoothing soap gently onto the fresh tattoo, using careful fingertips to loosen and wash away the small amount of ointment and blood and ink that still tainted Xander's skin. Xander twitched a little under his hands, and hissed when Spike poured cool water over him, rinsing the soap away. He'd already washed Xander's hair and now he could see the man drooping with fatigue - no more blood, no more endorphins, and a full belly.
"Bed, love," he said, getting his hands under Xander's arms and lifting, and Xander let him haul him up and out - let Spike dry him off and steer him to the bed.

"You goin' out?" Xander mumbled, and Spike hesitated a long moment. He was hungry, but not that hungry, and he rubbed the damp towel through his hair a last time and climbed into the bed with Xander, curling as close as he dared.

"Not goin' anywhere," he said, soft kiss to Xander's temple, and Xander smiled and sighed and was asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander leaned against the kitchen counter, the edge of a cheap stool cutting into one nude hip, and looked out into the back yard with longing - at the pool and the sun and the sea sparkling in the distance. Three things that were, for the moment, off-limits to him and the tattoo he couldn't quite
keep his eyes off of. Or his hands, but as his fingers crept up to scratch-

"Hands off!"

"It itches!"

"That means it's healing, you git. Now keep your bloody fingers off of it."

Xander didn't know how Spike had seen him with his eyes glued to the television, sprawled out in one of the Nests with a controller clutched in both hands, and decided it was a mystery best not examined too closely. Giving up on the pool and sunshine for the day, he poured a quick glass of juice and mug of blood and headed into the living room to watch, setting the mug next to Spike's elbow and squinting at a game he didn't recognize. "That's new."

"Yeah." Xander watched Spike obliterate a series of demons, then wander into a shrine, never taking his eyes from the screen.
"You didn't get enough demon fighting in L.A.?

Spike snorted. "Did you?"

Xander glanced at the game rack with a shrug. "Pretty sure Professor X never visited Sunnydale. Or Africa."

"He visited Africa once."

Xander chuckled, dropping a kiss on Spike's hair. "You're sexy when you're geeky."

Spike made a rude gesture at him as Xander snatched up the phone, wandering back into the kitchen and then out onto the shaded patio, angling the lounge so that his lower body was in sun and the tattoo was carefully in shade.

"And stay out of the bloody sun!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know!"
Spike gulped the blood before it got cold, grimacing at the taste. It was human, and fresh, but nothing like 'alive', and he wondered what Xander would do if he stopped buying blood all together.

*Find out one of these days, I guess,* Spike thought, and then cursed as his avatar was ambushed. *Well, fuck.* He tossed the controller down and rolled onto his back, squinting out at Xander on the patio and reveling in the feeling of the silky pillows in the Nest against his naked skin.

*Needs some lotion on his tattoo. Keeps scratching at it. Maybe when he's done calling...he'll need to relax a bit, I'll bet.* Spike sighed and got up - wandered into the kitchen to put the mug into the sink and to find something else to drink to get the taste of stale blood out of his mouth.

Xander stared at the phone until he was forced to admit that it wasn't going to dial itself and paged through the numbers until he came to Wesley's cell and dialed, stretching his toes to the sun and letting it warm them.
He caught his fingers creeping up to his collarbone again and dropped them forcefully onto the arm of the chair, wriggling a bit to get comfortable instead.

"Wyndam-Pryce."

"Hey, Wesley."

"Xander! Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine, Wes. You don't have to pretend Spike didn't call you two nights ago."

"I - er."

"You watchers and your fancy five dollar words."

Wesley snorted, sounding very much like Spike in that moment. "Quite. How are you?"

"Itchy."

Wesley leaned back in his chair, *Wroth's Guide to*
the Fra-ia momentarily forgotten, along with the rather elaborate ritual they were going to have to perform to make those particular demons amenable to a truce with Angel and company. Rather face Xander, really.

"Xander, I really...must apologize. I don't know what I was thinking -"

"You were thinking that it'd be really fucking awkward if you told me about Cordelia and I cried and snotted all over you in grief."

"I most certainly was not thinking anything of the sort," Wesley said, then sighed at the snicker on the other end. "At least not in those terms."

"Coward," Xander said, but gently. "It's - okay. I get it. Wrong guy for a tough job."

"I am sincerely sorry, Xander."

"I know." Xander sighed, rubbing his finger in a droplet of water from the lawn sprinklers that'd
soaked the chair arm earlier that afternoon. "I'm okay." He closed his eye, folded his arm over his stomach and toyed with the edges of the puckered scar there, feeling the words drain away but the silence wasn't bad.

"I think..." Wesley stopped as well, hearing the faint sounds of wind and the sea from Xander's phone - his own office utterly silent except for the whispery drone of the air conditioning and the faint, distant ringing of phones. Sterile air, sterile sounds. "I think I was simply...afraid. I didn't know what to say, and... It was - she had been in a coma for so long and..." Wesley sighed, tapping a pencil on this desk, imagining Xander sitting on his back patio, the sea just down there, the breeze cool and salt-scented. He hadn't seen it, but Spike had told him and it sounded...nice.

"We thought she'd woken up. We thought she was going to be okay and then...she had died and... It was just - too much. I'm - sor-"

"Okay, apologize one more time, and I'm coming
down there and re-filing all of your books by size, color, and ick factor."

Wesley hesitated, unsure if he wanted to ask this question. "Ick factor?"

"Think about it."

Wesley glanced down at the open Wroth's Guide and its rather elaborate woodcut depiction of the acquisition of certain necessary fluids for the ritual, and chuckled tiredly. "That may well come in useful, actually."

"Made you laugh."

Wesley had to smile. "Yes. Yes, you did. Though I'm sure I don't deserve -"

"You talk too much." Xander slithered further down in the chair until the sun came all the way up to his belly and sighed, letting it bake into him like the rock lizards he'd watched skitter away from him in the Namib.
"Do you think so?" Wesley asked, considering the long silences that passed in his office when he was alone, researching. The silences from Angel when they had a meeting - silences overlaid by Andrew's rambling pontifications and the burble of the young Slayers. The drift-deep, cocooning silence of his apartment, and the silence that descended upon him after each vision as he was momentarily deafened and blinded by the force of them.

"Perhaps I do." He hesitated, and something surfaced from earlier. "Err... Itchy?"

"New tattoo."

"Ah. I see." Wesley thought back to that expanse of scarred, tanned skin, unable to remember anything that had looked like a tattoo, and dear god, Xander wasn't the type to get some sort of ghastly heart with 'Cordelia 4-evah' or some other such mangled phrase in it, was he? "I've...heard they can be quite unpleasant when they're new," he said, deciding that was safe.
"Spike appointed himself its guardian protector. I get lotioned, massaged, and yelled at. It's been a great vacation from sanity." Xander sighed, opening his eye to stare out at the ocean, wishing it was more than a vacation.

"Ah, a holiday..." Wesley said. And then he heard the wistful note in his own voice and straightened abruptly in his chair. "So, you're doing all right then, Xander? No...ill effects?"

"Well, I'm still walking a little funny if you wanna know." Xander laughed hearing Wesley groan on the other end. "I'm...okay, Wes. I'm really okay." He looked out at the ocean, the deeper blue-green where the continental shelf dropped abruptly away. "Spike misses you." It was half truth, because Xander wanted to see Wesley again, too. He could hear the exhaustion in Wes' voice even over the phone. He wondered if Spike would hear himself made into Xander's not-so-graceful excuse.

In the kitchen, gulping down Xander's orange juice
with a grimace, Spike narrowed his eyes, staring out at Xander. *You little liar. Yeah, I miss him, but so do you. Why not just say so? Gonna get you for that.* Spike grinned down at his juice and then shook his head in disbelief - shoved the container away into the fridge. *I need a damn drink. I must be out of my mind - fruit juice.* He grabbed the bottle of all-natural whatever lotion Xander had and slipped outside, glad that half the patio was in shade.

"Need some lotion, pet?" he asked, and was gratified to see Xander jump, just a little.

"Does he? Miss me, I mean? I mean... Well, it has been a while since we've seen each other." Wesley twisted his chair idly back and forth, trying to ignore the little jump of pleasure that came from that casual admission. *Does Xander...also? Oh, enough of that.*

Xander gave Spike a suspicious look, because *nobody* had timing that good on accident, especially not with super vamp hearing powers. But he scooted the lounge back until it was out of the sun
and pulled Spike down onto the warm cushions, wrapping his legs around him. "Yeah. He misses you so much he just came out here with the lotion out of the charity of his heart. Big snoop." Xander rested one sun-warmed hand on Spike's chest, rubbing in small circles. "And okay, I'd like it if you visited too. Can you get away from Captain Broody?"

"Oh, I..." Wesley quelled that little quiver of happy again and leaned forward on his desk, shuffling papers. "I suppose if...hmm, there's a meeting -"

"Just come, for fuck's sake, Wes!" Spike held the phone up high away from Xander, other hand in the middle of Xander's chest, holding him down. "We both miss you and you need a break from Batvamp, yeah?"

"Yeah..." Wes sighed. "I mean, yes. Yes, all right, I - how about...Wednesday?"

"We'll see you then, Wes!" Xander called into the phone, glaring playfully at Spike but stroking his
hands up and down Spike's arms, working his fingers into the muscles and tendons and letting Spike take over with Wesley if he wanted to. "The house reserves the right to implement a no-dress policy." He didn't know if Wesley had heard him, but laughed at the shove Spike gave him for that, catching Spike's hand and bringing it to his lips to bite a finger.

"What did he say? You're wearing a dress?" Wesley asked, scribbling furiously in his day-runner so that he could re-arrange his schedule. And figure out what to tell Angel, because Angel was still pissed that Spike had 'walked out' and Wesley hadn't told him any differently, so far. He wanted to talk to Spike about it first.

"You been thinkin' of me in a dress?" Spike made a face at Xander and held the phone between shoulder and ear - grabbed Xander's hips and pulled him forward, higher onto his lap, pressing hard cock to warm ass and Xander arched up, his mouth opening and his head falling back. Spike swirled his fingertip lazily on Xander's tongue, watching with
glittering eyes.

"I've been - what? No, no, really, Spike - let me talk to Xander again."

"He's a little busy."

Xander shook with silent laughter, closing his lips around Spike's finger, teasing the underside from palm to fingertip with flickering tongue, sucking until Spike shifted involuntarily on the seat. Xander pulled off his finger with a wet pop loud enough for vampire ears. He wriggled closer, feeling Spike harden and nestle along his cleft, teasing his balls with the cool hard length. Rising, and then down, taking Spike in on the left-over morning slick until Spike hissed sharply into the telephone.

_Serves him right for snooping._ Xander chuckled, dropping his head forward onto Spike's shoulder, letting his legs fall open to tease his fingers over the bite mark on his inner thigh with a low moan.

"Already? I - I - oh!" Wesley stuttered at the sound
of the pop, laughing helplessly. "God, do the two of you do anything else?"

"Not if we can help it, mate." Spike got his arm around Xander and pulled him closer, hips moving the tiny bit of up that they could. "You be here Wednesday, Wes, and we'll - talk then, yeah?"

"Of course," Wesley said, and then Spike let the phone slither out of his hand to the end of the lounger somewhere and wrapped both arms around Xander.

"Hold on tight, love," he whispered, and stood. Xander's legs locked around his hips and Spike took the three steps necessary to the picnic table Xander had and lay him down on the smooth wood. He leaned down and ran his mouth up Xander's chest - skipped lightly over his tattoo and then nibbled on his throat, going for the thin skin just under Xander's ear. All the while moving his hips in a slow and teasing rhythm, his hands under Xander's ass, pulling him wide.
"Spike?" Wesley heard a thump, and then Spike's voice, saying something and - was that a moan? Wesley hesitated and then clicked the off button. Probably be hearing more of that than I care to when I visit, he thought, and crushed the something-like-jealousy feeling that surged up.

Xander hitched his knees higher over Spike's ribs, throwing his head back over the edge of the narrow table and staring with wide, upside down and unseeing eye out at the ocean, every thought, every nerve caught up in the push-pull of Spike sliding in and out of him - the nibbling on his throat that felt like it had a direct express line to his cock. The two unoccupied brain cells he had left met and managed a brief spark of coherency. "Weren't we - just talking to Wesley?"

"Mmm...were. Not now," Spike mumbled, nipping and sucking - feeling every tremor and shiver that went through Xander translated through the muscles that gripped Spike and held him - drew him in deeper. Spike let one hand slide up to the bite on Xander's thigh and he scraped a nail over it, gasping
at the full-body shudder that resulted.

"And you were bad, love. Usin' me to get him here."

"Yeah, like - like he'd come all the way up here for me." Xander groaned, pushing his leg up into that scrape that flashed along his nerves with every touch. "Jesus, that is gonna make it hard to think at work." He'd already laid out his loosest khakis to wear on site that night.

"Make it easy to think about me," Spike said, and then stopped everything, staring narrow-eyed down at Xander until he lifted his head, dazed. "Don't do that, Xander. Wes likes you. Don't...do that."

Xander worked a hand around behind Spike's neck, drawing him down to nibble on his lower lip before letting it go. "Wes barely knows me yet, Spike. You're the glue, sweetheart." He dotted kisses along Spike's jaw, nuzzling into the soft skin behind his ear.

Spike pressed into the prickle of Xander's teeth,
then pushed with his arms, getting Xander's legs up over his shoulders.

"Glue? Been called worse, I suppose, but never during sex." Spike thrust in, deep as he could, starting a hard, fast rhythm that made the table rock. "Call me something else, pet."

"H-how about l-love vamp, g-god of buggery and - god!" The force of Spike's thrusts knocked the laughter breathlessly out of Xander along with most of his higher brain functions, every nerve stepping up to dance the jig of 'fuck me harder, Spike!' like microscopic Rockettes.

"That'll do," Spike growled, and bent to his task - that of fucking Xander into incoherency. And then - we go inside and clean up and I fuck him again. Or - climb on top of him and ride him until he begs. Or both. He grinned and gasped and buried his face in Xander's neck, licking and sucking and losing his own ability to say anything more.
Xander kicked his chair back from the desk, rolling the few feet to the back window of the trailer and peeking out over the site. The floods lit all the way from the eastern edge of the crater to the sea, black in the distance like the world had ended beyond Sunnydale's borders, and how ironic was *that*?

He grabbed the site report documentation from the shelf and let the curtain drop, rolling back to his desk and opening his word processing program, beginning to type.

*Official Sick Leave Report, Third Shift, Alexander L. Harris, Grade Three.*

*This weekend, I skivved off work. I don't know what skiv means, but my vampire said it meant something like blowing off. And I like blowing.*

*I did a lot of that this weekend.*
And I got a tattoo too, and went to a place called Shangri La.

And then deleted it all with a sigh, firing up the appropriate template for a real report, complete with 'Why I don't have a doctor's statement in fifty words or less, even though I am an adult and not a third-grader.'.

Xander's hand crept up toward his collar and pressed on the itching skin beneath with a hiss. It felt like a sunburn now, and he was a red-blooded California guy. He'd had sunburns. But he could scratch sunburns. And everyone knew that telling a man not to scratch was going to make that body part itch like fuck.

He settled for unbuttoning his shirt down to his sternum and pushing it back off his shoulders a bit so that only the ends of his hair tickled the healing skin, and got back to work.
Spike was pretty sure that if he'd said something to Xander, he'd have an escort and a big yellow Caterpillar or something, trundling after him through the wreckage of Sunnydale. But he hadn't asked, and he didn't want that. This little excursion was a solo deal.

He liked buying things for Xander - the tattoo, the hotel, the meals that he was starting to get looks over. He liked buying for himself - after almost six years of being dead broke and dependant, he'd laid down cash for this motorcycle with a secret thrill and an arrogant lift of his chin. William the Bloody and Slayer of Slayers - kept vamp no more. And he didn't like being low on dosh, so that was why a 'secret' stroll through the crater.

He knew Xander liked buying stuff, too - liked to surprise him with little things like that brilliant game, and music... But Spike hadn't lived 150-
something years without knowing that money could cause as many problems as solve them, and he wasn't ever going to be *without* it, again.

He climbed laboriously over the jumbled mess of sidewalk and cratered earth, then dropped like a cat through the hole in the church roof that Xander had pulled him out of. He'd lost the Gem of Amara, but he hadn't been daft enough to let the rest of that incredible horde go to the dogs. The last of it was here in the basement, under an old floor of slate that may or may not have once held coffins. There'd been a reason he'd gone to ground *here*, even if he'd forgotten it during his illness.

He sauntered down and down, and pried up the slate with his handy little iron and pulled on a pair of heavy leather gloves. Then he shifted gold and gems and too many jeweled crosses into his hold-all, as well as several rare books and a box of rings which, while not the Gem *did* have a magical taint to them. Something he reckoned Wesley could explore. Finished, he went back out, climbing to the surface the way he'd got in before - up a cracked
wall and out through the bell-tower, the hold-all swinging from his shoulder. As he pulled himself free, he heard the crackle of a radio.

"You wanna put that bag down and turn around slowly, buddy?"

*Oh bloody fucking hell! Had to be this wanker. Xander said don't kill him - wonder if I scare him to death if that'll count?* Spike did turn slowly, and with a calculated grin on his face. *And all Xander's mates think I'm a few bricks shy...this could be fun.*

"Dave? What's going on?" Disembodied voice that Spike casually identified as Russ, Xander's de-facto second in command.

Not taking his eyes off of Spike, and holding his long torch like a weapon, Dave pulled the walkie from his belt. "Got a looter problem down here, Russ. You want to send somebody along?"

"I'm not at the trailer, Dave. Have Alex send someone."
"I want you to send someone, Russ." Dave didn't take his eyes off of Spike, but didn't come closer either.

"Jesus, Dave. Fine. Where are you?"

"By the old church. This guy looks like he could be trouble, so don't send any of the girls." Dave backed slowly away from the entrance, not liking that grin at all.

"I'll send someone in the cart."

"Thanks man." Dave clicked off the radio and put it back on his belt. "Put the bag down."

"Evenin', Dave," Spike said, and pulled his rather squashed cigarette pack out of his jeans-pocket - lit up with a flourish and tucked them away. He let the hold-all down gently at his feet, just in case. Dave - might do something stupid. Please, do something stupid, you git.
"So does Harris know his boyfriend's looting the place?" Dave glanced in the direction of the trailers, relaxing when he saw someone getting into the cart and heading their way.

Spike smoked, staring at Dave, who stared back, sweat beading on his upper lip despite the late-October chill.

"M'not *looting*, Dave. I'm takin' back my property. Felt a little nostalgic, wanted to go for a walk - take in the sights." Spike waved his cigarette in a loose arc, indicating the ruins of the town and saw Dave's eyes go wide.

"*Sightseeing?* You're fuckin' nuts. This place is dangerous."

"That's what makes it *fun,*" Spike murmured, and flicked the cigarette butt away into the dirt.

Dave heard the cart pull in behind him, glancing back to explain the situation. Or maybe just call the cops. Calling the cops would be *fun* but- "Oh jesus.
Come on Russ." Dave muttered and dropped his flashlight into its belt loop, folding his arms. "Okay. Alex, I caught him looting. Are you gonna do something about that or not?"

"Spike? Looting?" Xander stepped out of the cart, hoping that sounded more like 'ha ha! Spike would never be looting' and less like 'ha ha. Of course Spike is looting. What else would he be doing out here?.

Dave pointed to the bag. "Saw him coming up with that big bag of shit."

Xander shrugged. "Our excavators have already been through the church." And he really hoped that Dave didn't catch evasion as well as Willow used to.

"Just recovering some property I left behind," Spike said, and took three sidling steps right into Xander's space - slipped his arm around Xander's waist and pulled him abruptly closer, hip to hip. "Thought we might do lunch, love,"
"Yeah, as soon as I get this straightened out, sweetheart." Xander twisted, laying a kiss on Spike's temple and giving Dave his best 'What can I do?' shrug. "Dave, did you actually see him remove anything from the site?"

Long pause. "No."

"Then there's nothing I can do. You caught him trespassing, but that's all. And he's already got an invite here to visit me."

"Come on, Alex! You wouldn't be doing that if he wasn't your -"

"Boyfriend? Probably not. But I'd still be letting him go." Xander pushed his hand back through his hair, frustrated. "Look, Dave, they don't pay us enough to care about that shit. You know the policy: we find looters, we shoo them off site."

"Shoo? Is that what you're doing, Dave? Shooing me?" Spike slide his hand idly up and down Xander's chest - let it creep lower to rest on Xander's belly.
Dave's eyes followed the movement and Spike watched him blink - flinch - sneer, his lip curling in what might be disgust.

"Is there some...problem, Dave?" Spike asked, keeping his voice nice and low and smooth. He felt Xander tense just a bit, all the same.

_Sweetheart, please do not take this where I know it could go, okay? I want to make it to that lunch._ Xander rested a hand over Spike's hand on his stomach, keeping his expression as professional as he could with a vampire wrapped around him. Wondered if it was Sunnydale or Spike that made this feel so much less wiggy than it _should._

Dave chose to ignore Spike, turning instead to Xander. "I have to do a site report on this, Alex."

"And I have to give it my signature. Have it on my desk by, let's say three?"

"Are you going to _sign_ it?" Dave snapped, and the cobweb-thin restraint on Spike's patience snapped
as well. With a low growl, Spike flung himself forward, fingers snatching up a length of Dave's shirt and twisting it - yanking the man close.

"Is there a bloody problem here, mate? 'Cause if there is, I can make it just that much fuckin' worse." Dave gaped at him and Spike gave him his best 'I will kill you and eat your heart' look. Never failed, that one.

"Spike, cut it out." Xander planted one hand on Spike's chest and one on Dave's, pushing them apart. There was no way in hell he could do it if Spike wouldn't let him, and jesus, he hoped his relief wasn't visible when Spike easily let go, taking a half step back. "And you." He left his hand on Dave's chest, shaking his hair out of his eye. "Do you have a problem with Spike visiting me on site?"

"Does it look like I have a fuckin' problem?"

"Do you have a problem with Mariel visiting Carl on site?"
Dave opened his mouth, then shut it mutinously.

"Then deal. Write up your site report and I'll sign it if you make it accurate. Because all you saw is a guy climbing out of the old church." He glanced at Spike. "The guy in question should have called the Site Supervisor and asked for an escort, but he didn't."

Xander watched his thumb slide over Spike's unbeating heart, and briefly met his eyes. "He will next time."

Dave stepped away in disgust. "God, Alex. Just take it somewhere else, okay?"

Xander saw Spike's lip curling at that - knew something nasty, or provocative, or downright evil was going to come out of Spike's mouth and he hastened to cut him off.

"It's everybody's partner or nobody's." Xander held up a hand. "California law says we can't discriminate on race, sex, disability, gender orientation, or sexual orientation." I wonder if that covers necrophilia.
"Doesn't say I have to turn a blind eye to illegal activities," Dave grumbled, but he was backing off - physically backing up, and Xander let out a long sigh of relief.

"I'm not asking you to. This won't happen again, okay? Dave?" Dave glared at Spike - at Xander - nodded, finally, and looked pointedly at his watch.

"I'll go get started on that report," he said, and turned and marched off.

Spike slid up behind Xander and pulled him back into an embrace, resting his chin on Xander's shoulder and kissing the bit of neck he could reach.

"Wanker. Should have let me pop him one, love."

"Yeah. Right. I let you pop him one, and then I get fired for taking your side in an assault case." Xander sagged back against Spike, feeling the adrenaline drain away in the familiar, safe feeling of Spike pressing up against him. "Dave's okay when he isn't
being a homophobic asshole. And you? Are so fucking suspicious." Xander wormed his way around in Spike's grasp to get an arm around his waist, brushing a smudge of church dust off of Spike's cheek. Dressed in his motorcycle boots, black jeans a black wife-beater, Spike practically screamed 'Criminal'. "What were you doing down there?"

"Just what I said, pet. Getting my property." Spike leaned in for a fast, hard kiss and then he untangled himself and walked over to the hold-all - picked it up. "Remember the Gem of Amara that the Wanker crushed?"

"Yeah," Xander said, eyeing the hold-all.

"It was just one treasure among many. And I did not leave all of that lyin' about for Harmony. Vamp with a plan, me." Spike unzipped the hold-all and tipped it towards Xander, knowing he'd probably only see the glint of metal and jewels, but nothing specific.

"I know some good pawn shops, an some demons who don't ask questions," he finished, shrugging,
and zipped the hold-all closed again - dropped it back to the ground in favor of another clinch with Xander. Warm and sweet-clove-salt, and Spike couldn't resist running his tongue down Xander's neck.

Xander shivered, but at that point, he wasn't sure which was doing more, Spike's tongue or a bag full of probably cursed and definitely spelled treasure. Either way, the hair at the back of his neck was shivering upright. "Um, Spike? The Gem of Amara was pretty heavy duty mojo. Do you know what the rest of that stuff does?"

"Yup. It sells for a pretty penny." Spike lifted his head and looked over Xander's worried features, cool fingers caressing the back and side of his neck, giving him a little shake, then resting their foreheads together. "C'mon, love. If it was gonna do anything to me it would've already, and if it'll make you feel better about it, I was gonna ask Wes to look it over when he visits."

Xander drew in a deep breath; smoke, whiskey, and
leather. Spike was watching him with that hopeful look he couldn't turn down, even when he knew it'd get him into trouble again and again. The problem was, he was kinda liking the trouble it got him into. He smiled, feeling Spike relax immediately. "Okay."

He kissed Spike, so far past caring who watched that a distant wolf whistle only made him smile into Spike's lips. "See? They're not all total dickheads."

Spike shook with a chuckle against him, then abruptly grabbed Xander with both arms, and dipped him back in a dramatic pirate captain and wench kiss to the accompaniment of a distant shout of "Whoo! Go Harris!"

"Depends on what you mean by dickhead, don't it?"

Xander groaned, getting an arm around Spike's neck to kiss him back molasses slow and sweet, tasting some of that church dust that had covered Spike on their first trip home from the site in August. And god it was good to taste that dust on his tongue with Spike strong. "Let me up. I'll tell Russ it was you and we'll take off for lunch."
Spike stood Xander upright, swept up the bag and sauntered over to the golf cart, settling in as if he rode around in one every week. "Gotta say pet, I like your other ride better."

Xander turned the key, easing the golf cart back the way he came. "What? Five horsepower golf carts don't make you horny?"

"You make me horny." Spike's hand casually dropped into Xander's lap, fingers curling around his thigh with cool weight. "And five horsepower is a lot more impressive when there's actual horses. Not that I dealt with the horses much, mind."

"No?"

"Nah. I was a city boy, wasn't I? Horses were more the poof's specialty. I stole my first auto in the days of steam and haven't looked back."

Xander pulled in next to the trailer, looking at Spike in surprise. "Steam cars? You've gotta be kidding
"Not hardly, pet. The first cars were powered by steam. Internal combustion was a wonderful invention." Spike gave Xander's thigh a last squeeze, snatched up his bag and stepped out of the cart with a mighty stretch.

Xander could only sit where he was, staring at that slim body stretching and going on about steam cars as if they'd been yesterday or something. He shook himself and climbed out of the cart, tucking the keys in his pocket as he walked and taking the trailer steps two at a time.

"Taking my lunch break, Russ."

Russ looked up from his desk, then did a double take as Spike followed Xander into the trailer. "Did you take care of Dave's looter?"

"No. But I will be during my lunch hour." Xander looked over at Spike, who was striking a predictable rent boy pose up against the door frame. He could
vaguely remember a time when that pose made him want to pound Spike's face into the pavement. Now, it just made him want to pound into Spike. Life was funny.

"Spike was the looter?" Russ started to laugh. "Now I know why Dave insisted I deal with it instead of you."

"Surprise, surprise. Anyway, Spike wasn't looting. He left some stuff down there before the quake and went back for it." Xander traded his walkie for his cell phone, and his work jacket for the battered brown leather coat that'd seen him through that first winter in southern Africa.

"Did you find it?"

Spike was aware that Russ was watching him now with greater speculation, but there didn't look to be any hostility in it. He smirked back. "Yeah. Right where I left it."

"Good hiding place. The excavators went through
that church like it was Christmas morning." Russ leaned back, grabbing a bulging envelope from the shelf behind him and tossing it at Xander. "That's for you."

Xander caught it as it smacked into his chest, disturbingly thick and heavy. "New manuals?"

"No, this is an evil far greater than new manuals," Russ said in a tone of exaggerated sympathy.

Xander pulled out the top sheet and groaned.

"What? What's that?" Spike pushed away from the wall to read over Xander's shoulder. "Conference?"

"It's our Alexander's turn to represent the site," Russ said proudly, tucking his hands behind his head and swinging back and forth in his chair.

"You're just glad it's not your turn."

"My turn? Why Alex, I'm only an underling! It takes a supervisor to make the right impression." Russ'
smile was pleasantly evil. "In a suit and tie."

"Carl put you up to this, didn't he?"

"I talked him out of video taping it for the company Christmas party."

"Fuck you both." Xander tilted the rest of the paperwork out of the envelope and sighed, flipping through the pages. "Why do I need all of this?"

"That's the company policy you'll be eating, sleeping, schmoozing, and breathing for a glorious weekend in the Windy City."

Spike leaned over Xander's shoulder, watching glossy pages and dense blocks of smudgy type font flip past.

"Chicago's a fun place, love. Lots of things to do there. You'll have fun, trust me."

Xander looked back over his shoulder, eyebrow going up in a move he seemed to have perfected
over the years. "Do you honestly think you're not going to be there? If i have to suffer through two days - no, three counting Friday - of company glad-handing, you're gonna be right there to - uh...glad hand with me." Xander seemed to be thinking that over and Spike did not allow the much-too-goofy grin that was threatening to plaster itself across his face.

_Wants me to come, wants me to come_, chanting in his head like a ten-year-old. Instead he nuzzled into Xander's neck and found a half-healed bite, and teased it for a moment with the tip of his tongue.

"Gonna have to buy me something nice to wear then, love," he murmured, and out of the corner of his eye saw Russ grin and then frown.

"I'm gonna have to buy you?" Xander looked pointedly at the hold-all on the floor, but Spike just grinned.

"Cashmere, I'm thinkin'," Spike said, low, and Xander paused, his gaze going a little distant.
"Just be -" Russ stopped speaking when both Spike and Xander looked at him, one daring him to go on, the other frowning in concern. "I'm not gonna say anything you don't already know, Alex. Just - be careful."

"Careful?" Spike's scarred eyebrow lifted and his fingers dipped into Xander's waistband.

"Discreet."

Xander felt Spike tense, and put a hand back on Spike's hip. "I'm gonna be as discreet as anybody else."

*Fucking humans and their fucking hang-ups,* Spike thought, frowning. And Russ was sweating and the musky-citrus scent that was overlaying the dusty-coffee smell that was 'Russ' was *not* human. And decidedly male. Spike knew the demon-gold flashed for just a moment in his eyes, and Russ nodded at him, one slow and confirming movement of his head.
"What, they gonna give Xander a hard time if he's seen on my arm?" Spike growled, and didn't bother to stop the possessive grip that tightened his arm around Xander's waist, or the growl that underlined his words.

Russ looked from one to the other and raised his hands, a paperclip chain dangling from one thumb. "You guys know what you're doing."

Xander leaned back against Spike, rubbing a hand over the cool arm wrapping his waist, forefinger resting where Spike's pulse wasn't. "We do. But thanks, Russ."

Russ shrugged, attaching another paperclip to the chain. "I like working with you, man." He jerked his head at the door. "Get out of here before I say something mushy and inspiring."

"Perish the thought," Spike muttered, and swung Xander around - propelled him out the door and down the steps, hip bumping ass at every step and
Xander's hair sweet and salty across his lips. "I think we need to go for a little drive, love. I think your truck is lonely."

Xander snorted, fishing his keys out of his pocket and slapping them into Spike's hand. "Remember I've only got an hour, and if you get a speeding ticket, you've got the money to pay for it now." He gave Spike just enough time to look offended before catching him around the waist and kissing him. "And if I'm buying you cashmere, you're finding me a suit that doesn't make me look like a twelve year old going to church."

Spike tossed the key ring and caught it - flashed a fangy grin at Xander. "I'll find you a suit that makes you look like walking sex, love. Trust me." Inside the cab, the cool, leather-tinged air was quickly spiced with a Xander-cocktail of clean sweat and clove and musky arousal, and Spike debated not getting food for a minute or two. But no. Xander needed to eat, and not just him. They bounced over the edge of gravel that separated the site from paved roads, and Spike pushed hard on the gas. He reached over
and ran a hand up Xander's thigh, taking a hard left and letting the truck fish-tail, just a little.

"Greek all right, love, or you want something else?"

Xander slouched down in his seat with a sigh until the edge of Spike's pinky finger brushed his crotch through the denim. "I want something else, but you're gonna make me eat during my lunch hour anyway." He turned his head in time to see Spike snort and opened his leg a bit more in Spike's direction. Because hey, vamp reflexes had to be good for multi-tasking.

And jesus, okay, that was some good multitasking, and I should not be getting this turned on by reckless driving and a hand job. Xander watched in fascination as Spike's fingers flipped open his belt, button, and zipper in three easy motions and Xander was so glad he'd paid extra for tinted windows. "Think - think we can get lunch to go?"

"That Thai place does take-away," Spike said, fingers neatly bypassing cargo pants and boxers to
find the hot, tight flesh of Xander's cock. "Think you can be good in the drive-through lane?" he asked, doing a slow, twisting stroke that had Xander arching up and gasping, hand on Spike's thigh digging in and his knee banging into the gear-shift.

"I'm really good at being quiet the first five minutes after an orgasm," Xander gasped, bracing his feet on that floor and pressing his shoulders into the seatback until it creaked, feeling the last flickers of Spike's blood he'd had before his shift sit up and take notice like that *His Master's Voice* dog in the commercials. He gripped Spike's thigh as Spike flicked his wrist in a move that made Xander's legs shake.

"But can you be quiet now," Spike said, and turned into the parking lot of the restaurant. He got a hand on the inside of Xander's thigh and urged him closer along the seat, then turned to grin at the deliciously pretty girl that was standing in the window, ready to take his order. They didn't have a radio or whatever, just legions of nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts and uncles.
"Evening, love," Spike purred, and gently squeezed Xander's balls. "Let's have us some beef Prik King, Gai Khua, Gang Ped..."

Xander's face warmed with a mixture of arousal and embarrassment and he stared at the ceiling of the truck trying not to groan because it is so fucking wrong that this is making me harder. And he knows it. Bastard. Xander wiggled, muffling a gasp as Spike's fingers tightened and he just went on talking, ordering things Xander'd never heard of and hoped Spike was gonna eat some of because there was no way he was getting all of that down in an hour. Or a week by the sound of it.

"And two iced teas, pet," Spike added, then watched the girl dimple at him and scurry away. He twisted in the seat a little to look over at Xander, taking in the hectic flush of his cheeks, the hitching pant of his chest, and the damp, deep-red tip of his cock. Spike changed his grip and pumped slowly, once, then twice, letting his free hand wander over Xander's chest and up to his neck, to stroke the
healing marks there. "Doing so good, Xan..." he husked, grinning.

"Oh, I'm just - lying back and thinking of England, you know. Or - or maybe Thailand. You ever been to Thailand?" Xander heard himself babbling and wondered distantly what he was talking about as Spike's hand ran up and down, warming up to the flesh it held. **Xander Harris, hand warmer to the vampire stars. Personally endorsed by William the Bloody!** And he was really glad for the tinted glass as he watched a gang of teenagers cross the parking lot.

"Yeah, been to Thailand, love. Been lots of places. There's this thing the little rent boys in Patpong do - " Spike was interrupted by the girl returning with bags and the check. He slid his hand slowly off Xander and turned back to pay - handed over the bags and put the tea in the cup-holders, then took off with a squealing of tires out of the parking lot, heading for a nice bit of beach he knew about.

"You are going to do something about this, aren't
you?" Xander asked when his head cleared enough to gesture to his own obscenely hard dick that swerved with the truck when Spike took a left hard enough to make the tires squeal. "At least tell me what the rent boys in Patpong do so I can do something about it myself!"

Spike spun around a last corner, fielding the sliding food-bags, and stopped the truck with a jerk. He leaned over, demons-eyes glittering, and put his fanged mouth around Xander's cock - slid it slowly down and then slowly back up, merest scrape of the tip of his teeth.

Then he pulled back.

"You're not hungry, love?"

Xander was not going to dignify that with an answer - instead he clamped a hand down on the back of Spike's head so that he couldn't get away. "Basically, the rent boys in Patpong are all vampire cock teases, huh?"
"M'not a tease. Just drawing out the enjoyment." Spike let Xander pull him back down - let Xander twist his fingers in his hair and growl filthy suggestions. Spike wormed one finger past too much clothing and slipped it inside grasping heat, crooking and twisting and clamping his mouth down around Xander with a self-satisfied smirk as Xander arched and moaned and came, panting. Spike occupied himself with a slow tongue-bath of Xander's softening cock until warm hands tugged him up into a kiss.

"You're still a tease," Xander mumbled when he found his breath again, breathing puffs of warm air over Spike's face and nibbling at his lower lip. He slid a hand into Spike's lap, squeezing until Spike hitched in an unnecessary breath then let go. "So what've you got for me to eat?"

Spike growled, pinning Xander hard to the truck-seat and kissing him until Xander was groaning down deep in his chest, hips twitching and hands scrabbling him closer.
"Spicy beef, love, and noodles and this brilliant coconut curry - you'll love it," Spike said, pulling away on a gasp and grinning at Xander's dazed expression. "Gotta keep your strength up for...later," he added, palming the bite on Xander's thigh.

"What happens later?"

"The mall, pet. We've a suit to buy for you before Wes' visit, don't we?" Spike's fingers crawled along Xander's inseam, playing the rough edge over the bite.

Xander groaned, dropping his head back against the seat. "Right. Right. Fuck." Xander sat up straight and Spike glanced.

"What?"

"Do you think Wes would sleep in the Nest? 'Cause I'm pretty sure I don't have any sheets or anything for the guest bed."
"I thought there was -"

"No, no, they were...stained, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Spike sighed. "Linens it is, then."

**Square Eleven**

Wesley turned off the Range Rover's ignition and checked the house number one more time. 115 Paradisio, and he had to shake his head at the utter wrongness of that. Nothing could be further from the truth then the uniform lawns and the puny saplings, grouped haphazardly around cookie-cutter houses with all the charm of a Fyarl demon. He got out and pulled his satchel and his rather full overnight bag from the back seat and went slowly up the walk. As he got closer to the door, he faltered, hearing shouting coming from inside.

*Oh - damn. Are they fighting? Perhaps I should...* He hesitated and suddenly the door was yanked open and Spike stood there, shirtless and barefoot and jeans half undone, his hair a wild nest of moon-white strands and black tips like a Peregrine falcon.
"I bloody well did not, Xander, and you know it! I'm goin' on skill alone! Wes!" Wesley blinked - went slowly up to the door.

"Is everything all right, Spike? Perhaps it would be better if I came back another time -"

"Everything's tip top, pet - want a beer?"

"Er -"

"You say pure skill, but how come I found a link to a Nocturne cheat site on my laptop? Hey, Wes!" Xander came around the corner in a purple and black towel, his hair dripping onto his shoulders Oh! Tattoo!. "Come in."

"Xander, you know you shouldn't invite someone to come into your home this close to the Hellmouth."

"Uh, Wes? I live with Spike. Pretty sure he could take you if you were a vampire." Xander grinned at Wesley, taking the towel from his waist and drying
his hair with it before Spike had even closed the door behind them. Wesley watched with less shock than he felt he should have for the situation. "Grab me a beer too, sweetheart." Xander laid a damp kiss on Spike's cheek, heading to the back of the house presumably to dress.

"Sure, love. C'mon, Wes - kitchen's over here." Spike led the bemused ex-Watcher to the kitchen and patted a stool - rummaged in the 'fridge for a beer for Xander and then opened a cabinet with a flourish to reveal ranks of real beer.

"Oh - is that -? Spike, how did you get that?" Wesley watched with real pleasure and Spike took down two bottles of Old Speckled Hen and opened them - poured them out into tall glasses and carried them over to the counter.

"Oh, a demon connection here, a small bribe there - nothing much," Spike said, grinning. They clinked glasses. "Cheers, mate,"

"Cheers," Wesley echoed, and took a long, delicious
sip, making room for Xander when he reappeared. *Oh dear god, still naked.* This time, the thought had still less shock in it, and considerably more amused affection.

"Don't let me get in the way of you two being English at each other." Xander snatched up his Sam Adams and took a long drink. "But for the record? Warm beer is gross."

"Philistine," Spike said, taking a huge swallow of his beer, and Wesley had to laugh. This sounded like an old, familiar argument between - *Between people who really know each other.* Wesley took another sip and then he couldn't help it - he turned and inspected Xander's tattoo.

"And who drank up the entire *jug* of scrumpy while I was still at work this time, huh?" Xander tipped his beer back, looking pointedly at Spike the whole while.

"That stuff's hard on a human, pet. No telling where you'd wake up after a few pints of that."
"Next to you, where I always do, stupid. And probably sore in a few places too." Xander shivered at the look Spike was giving him and quickly shifted his attention to Wesley. Being naked around company was a *lot* easier when Spike was too sick to give him that *look*.

Wesley looked hastily *away*, and Xander reached out and touched his arm.

"Hey, Wes, it's okay - you're *supposed* to admire tattoos. You are *admiring* it, aren't you?" He was grinning, and Wesley had to grin back. He turned and deliberately studied the stylized leaf-design, in shades of henna and rusty earth. Xander obligingly turned after a minute so Wesley could see the back.


"Thanks. Am I supposed to thank someone when they admire the artwork someone *else* did that I'm
wearing? All I did was lie there and crush every bone in Spike's hand." But Xander couldn't keep the flush of pleasure off his face.

"Sure, pet. Say 'thanks' 'cause you earned it." Spike flexed his hand in Xander's face, with a suggestive sort of look. "And my hand's just fine, thank you."

"So - did you get a tattoo, Spike?" Wesley asked, and Spike made a face.

"Get compared to the Souled Wanker enough, thank you. Don't need that hangin' over my head, too. I think I'm more of a...piercing kind of bloke."

Xander's heart beat a queer double-thump in his chest at the thought of Spike...spiked. Or ringed at least. He watched Spike through his hair, draining the last of his beer.

"Piercings? What, get your ears done?"

"For a start." Spike leaned on the counter, returning Xander's look with an arched eyebrow.
"Okay, and why didn't we have this discussion in Ojai?"

"Because I was takin' care of you, love. No time for that sort of thing. We'll go back, though." Spike leaned back on the counter, posturing a bit. And then he remembered what Xander had said, before Wes got there, and went instead to slump on a stool.

"I just...don't want to throw it in his face, you know? I don't want to hurt his feelings. Okay, sweetheart?" An' that's my boy, all over...

"Can we go back before the conference?" Xander toyed with his empty bottle, putting a foot up onto the rung of his stool. Because that'll give me something to look forward to in Chicago.

"Conference?" Wesley asked, looking from one to the other.

"Yeah. My company's sending me to some kind of
national conference as a representative of the Sunnydale Southwest project. I drew the short straw or something."

"But - surely you're to be congratulated?" Wesley asked, not quite understanding.

Xander shrugged. "It's a weekend spouting corporate bullshit. I'm a working guy, not a speech-giving guy. We'll make the most of it."

"Ah, I see." Wesley drained the last of his beer and set the glass down - patted it fondly. "Thank you so much, Spike, that was wonderful."

"Haven't had any of the scrumpy yet, pet," Spike said, and drained his own glass in a quick gulp.

"Would that be the scrumpy you drank all of, Spike? Or are you holding out on me?"

"That would be the scrumpy I got delivered last night, while you were slaving away at the site. Darkhavens sent it round, hand delivered with -"
Spike bounced up and fished another bottle out of the cabinet. "This! A nice little extra for a good customer she - err - it said."

"Stones!" Wesley took the bottle with a sudden grin. "God, I haven't had proper ginger wine since I left England."

"You're welcome to it, mate. We'll have scrumpy and rotten movies later on."

"At least I won't be the only one getting piss drunk while Spike takes more than his fair share." Xander circled the counter to throw his empty bottle away.

"Well, actually," Wesley began slowly, aware that all eyes were on him, fidgeting nervously.

"Spit it out, Watcher. Don't like movies anymore?" Spike leaned on the counter, close to Wesley - close enough to catch a whiff of his dry, papery, *demony* scent. A little like dead leaves, a little like bay. Nothing like what he'd smelled like before, which had been dust and Earl Grey and whiskey and
despair.

"No, no, it's just... I don't.. Well, I'm afraid alcohol has about the same effect on me as Spike, now.

Wesley seemed to be *apologizing*, and that made Spike...angry. He leaned over and bumped Wes with his shoulder, making the man meet his eyes.

"That just means we get to watch Harris over there get giggly. Bet we can make him dance the Macarena."

"And you have not seen giggly until you've seen me dance the naked Macarena," Xander supplied, leaning his elbows on the counter as well. Wesley realized with a start that Xander wasn't wearing his patch either, and he'd not noticed. "No cameras in the auditorium, please. Spike has enough blackmail material on me already."

Xander watched Wesley begin to smile with relief. It looked like Wesley just didn't *do* that much, anymore. He'd been uber-serious the *first* time Xander had known him, too, but at least he hadn't
seemed so fucking miserable back then.

"I'll do my best not to give Spike any more ammunition. And - ah - if you could tell me where the facilities are?"

"Huh? Oh - oh, yeah. Straight back there, door on the right. We put out guest towels!" Xander grinned and Wesley smiled back, sliding off his stool Spike rolled his eyes.

"We did no such thing. You flitted around like a bloody fairy with guest towels and guest soap and all that shite..." Wesley's smile grew even bigger as he walked up the hall, the good-natured bantering fading.

They're...good together. I'm glad.

Once in the bathroom, Wesley was assaulted by half a dozen colors in the guest towels alone and muffled a laugh, taking a vibrant purple towel from the shelf and setting it next to the sink. The fairy has yet to learn to color coordinate.
After making use of the loo and washing his hands, Wesley let out a deep breath and lifted his face to the mirror. Familiar blue eyes gazed back at him, but now up close, he could see that they were shot through with threads of silver in the whites where once his capillaries had shown pink and red. The irises were crazed with a fine network of black. Already the faint effects of the beer were nothing but a pleasant memory and Wesley found himself hoping the scrumpy was indeed as good as Spike implied.

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Wesley stretched, groaning just a little. He was so...damn...comfortable. He didn't want to move, really, but the scrumpy had taken its toll and he needed to get up. But he lay still for one more minute, savoring the heavy weight of an arm across his waist, and legs tangled with his own. Warmth, companionship - affection. He soaked it up and then slithered reluctantly to his feet, hitching at his
pajama pants. They'd watched several movies and drunk enough to send Xander into a fit of giggles, but the movies and alcohol had been second to the talk. Talk that, after a bit, had flowed and moved effortlessly. The kind of talk he had missed so much after Spike had gone.

Wesley walked quietly down the hall - made a brief detour to the unused guest room to gather some things. In the bath he stripped and showered, going slow. Enjoying the heat and the good water pressure and the fact that he had nowhere to go and nothing to do but...loaf.

Finished, he hung his rainbow-striped towel over the shower-curtain bar and wandered out to the kitchen. The kettle was on the stove - a packet of honest-to-god tea was on the counter, and he set about making a good, strong pot-full. While the water heated he stepped to the sliding door and opened it and took a deep, deep breath. The mid-afternoon air was cool and briny and he could hear gulls, and the *hoosh hoosh* of the distant waves.
God, that's nice. It's so QUIET... Wesley breathed deeply, losing himself in the scent and the coolness and the calm. Almost missing the rising wail of the kettle. He hastily took it off the burner and made his tea - poured a cup and stepped outside, settling into a lounge chair with a sigh of pure contentment.

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Xander groaned and burrowed closer to Spike, rubbing discontentedly at the line of itching around his neck.

"None of that now, pet." Nest-warm fingers closed on Xander's wrist, pinning it down easily.

Xander rubbed against a rough pillow seam instead, yelping when Spike pulled the pillow away impatiently, and kissed him until objecting and scratching weren't at the top of his priorities list any longer. "Sadist."

"Yeah, so?" Spike rubbed at Xander's chest beneath
the fall of leaves, cool and smooth. "Don't want to ruin all that hard work, do you love?"

"Only for the first few minutes after I wake up." Xander slid a leg over Spike's, rolling onto his chest and sliding his hands into Spike's hair, forehead to forehead. "And then you give me better things to think about." He sighed. "Which I so should not be thinking about with Wesley on the patio."

"Can think them all you like, love," Spike said, lift of his hips and stroke of hands that made Xander squirm and sigh. "'Sides, been - four days. You can get in the shower and give it a good scrubbing today. Hands and soap only. Hear?" He stretched up to nip at Xander's lips and then settled back, pulling Xander into a long kiss that tasted of scrumpy and salt and, faintly, bar-b-que.

"Hands and soap only," Xander agreed and moaned a soft sound of pleasure against Spike's lips, as much for the thought of being able to scrub his tattoo as for the kiss. He rocked his hips against Spike, enjoying the waking tingles going through his
balls, skittering down his thighs and into his belly. "I am *thinking* really hard about taking you into the shower and fucking you up against the wall with that honey almond bath oil." He gave Spike a hard, quick kiss, tongue wriggling possessively over Spike's palate. "I am *going* to take a cold shower by myself and play the nice host to Wesley."

"Here now - can be the good host and *still* shag me in the shower," Spike grumped, his hands curving possessively around taut, dense muscle and pulling Xander's groin tighter against himself. "Promise I'll be quiet, love."

Xander groaned, dropping his head against Spike's. "He'll know." Xander rocked against Spike, closing his eyes to savor the slickness of sweat between them and peppered Spike's jaw with soft kisses. "I don't want to make him feel more lonely."

"I know you don't. We could invite him to join us," Spike said, and grinned wickedly when Xander's head came up with a snap. He could *feel* the blush creeping up Xander's shoulders and neck. He could
also feel the pulse and leak of Xander's cock against his hip, and smirked.

"First? That was a dirty trick saying that while I am naked, barely awake, and highly suggestible. And second? I'm - it's -" Xander sighed, not quite having the words for the kind of social awkwardness behind the mechanics of inviting Wesley to have sex with them.

Spike leaned up again and kissed Xander hard, letting his hands slide up to circle around his ribs and hold him tight. "Don't get flustered, pet. Just a joke. Mostly." Spike sighed in contentment as Xander lay his head down again on his shoulder, snuggling close. "He wouldn't right now, anyway. He's too...too bloody miserable for his own good." Spike turned his head so he could nuzzle into the heavy swath of Xander's hair.

"You go on and have your shower and have a nice slow wank, yeah? Wes can't hear you, but I can...make it nice for me, yeah? So I've got a reason to get out of the Nest." Actually, if Wes came inside
Spike was pretty sure he would be able to hear Xander, but Spike wasn't going to mention that.

And if a quick, nasty fuck in the shower was out of the question then at the very least he could take his own shower surrounded by the heady scents of Xander's arousal and pleasure.

Xander kissed Spike once more, hard and fast and dirty, then pushed himself to his knees, shivering as Spike trailed his fingertips up the length of Xander's cock. "Sure you don't want me to join you, pet?"

"Less and less," Xander said with a sigh, pulling away from Spike and giving his fingers a squeeze.

"Remember to give me my show, yeah?" Spike curled his tongue behind his teeth, tucking a hand behind his head and dropping the other hand casually to his lap, giving himself a slow stroke.

"So not a problem." Xander's mouth watered, jaw ached to wrap around Spike's cock and take him in and fuck being the responsible one. Spike's chuckle
followed him down the short hallway and into the master bath where he turned on the shower full blast and stepped under the spray. He gave little Xander a glare that didn't seem to dampen its enthusiasm at all, then sighed, and uncapped the honey almond bath oil.

*Calgon, take me the fuck away.*

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Xander emerged from the bedroom in a cloud of cloves and mint, honey and almonds, and delicious musk that made Spike growl. "Good shower, pet?"

Xander's eye tracked slowly down over Spike's chest to his hand, slick with lube and stroking himself languidly. Drawing in a sharp breath, Xander crouched to brush a kiss against Spike's lips, shaking lemon-spice scented water droplets over Spike's belly and making him shiver. "Good show, sweetheart?"
"I particularly liked how you described every. Single. Thing. You did." Spike pushed himself up onto one arm and took a deep, slow breath, tasting lust and sweet and Xander on his tongue. "I think Wes might be gettin' lonely, love... I'm off to...think of you." Spike stole a fast kiss and then rose and stretched, sauntering down the hall and grinning at the soft 'fuck' from Xander.

Xander made a detour through the kitchen for a bottle of juice, then stepped out onto the back patio to pull up a chair next to Wesley, who sat staring out at the sea with a full and steaming cup of tea, and a look of amusement on his face.

Xander groaned and rolled his eyes. Wes wouldn't be able to hear me but you would, huh sweetheart? "Uh. Good morning."

"It is, isn't it? I find the cries of the native wildlife to be most stimulating."

"That's Watcher talk to tell me you heard every word, isn't it?"
"Only when I came in for more tea. Really, Xander it's all right. It's your home, after all." Wesley laid a hand over Xander's arm, warm enough on Xander's water-cooled skin to make him shiver.

"I'm trying to be more considerate than Spike here, Wes." Xander uncapped his juice and took a long drink, and had to admit he felt too good to feel bad.

"Xander, we're all adults. And..." Wesley took a deep breath - a sort of fortifying breath - and turned a little in his chair. His hand was still on Xander and he marveled for a moment at how easy it was to leave it there. "And I'm not going to... Well, you know about Spike and I and you know - that it ended. I'm not - jealous, if that's what you're thinking." Wesley realized his fingers were making gentle circles on Xander's skin and he slowly drew his hand back. "I don't have any claim on Spike. So please don't be worried on my account."

Xander tilted his head in Wesley's direction, lazy and boneless in the sun and smiled. Slowly, he
reached out and caught Wesley's hand, bringing it back to his arm and resting his hand over Wesley's. "Yeah. But I know how it feels - being around a couple after you've had your heart broken. Even when they care about you."

Wesley felt a little flicker of hurt at that, because that was more blunt than anyone but Spike would have put...this. Situation. But Xander was trying, and his fingers were warm on Wesley's - weightless but so very...reassuring.

"Thank you for that. Although, Spike and I were hardly a couple, and Fred..." Wesley stopped and lifted his cup - took a small sip and sighed. "Fred and I didn't have much time."

"Spike told me about Fred," Xander said with that feeling that he was sliding down a slippery slope with no hand-holds, but some slippery slopes had to be...slud. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, well... Thank you, Xander. Fred - was an extraordinary young woman and... And she didn't
deserve what happened to her." Wesley once again slipped his hand away from Xander and stood up, crossing to the edge of the patio and looking out over the artificially green yard to the distant, turquoise sea.

Xander winced. *Score one for Mr. Tactful.* He watched Wesley for a few seconds then stood and followed, giving him just enough space to not crowd him. "You don't have to say anything, Wes. But you don't have to pretend either. Spike and me - we're not about pretending anymore." He waited until Wesley looked at him, then smiled, squeezing Wes' shoulder. "I'm gonna get something for breakfast before Spike gets out of the shower and orders sushi or something. Take as long as you want out here."

"I...will. Thank you, Xander."

Wesley listened to Xander go back inside - heard him dialing the phone and placing an order for something and he just...breathed. And a memory came to him, of Fred. At the Hyperion, not long
after they'd brought her back from Pylea. Sitting quietly next to him as he'd worked on a translation, and when he'd glanced over she had covered three pages with symbols and math that Wesley had no hope of deciphering. She'd smiled, and he had, and they'd gone on. Comfortable.

And it didn't hurt, to think of that, and Wesley smiled softly and went in, himself.

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Wesley stumbled over loose rock as he followed Spike down the slope from Xander's subdivision and skidded to the bottom, letting out a breath of relief as he crashed into Spike. Strong arms held him up until he found his balance again.

"Thank you, Spike. I - physical reflexes and balance were not part of the demonic package, I'm sorry to say."

"Just a matter of practice, love," Spike said, letting
his hands linger for just a moment on Wes' arms. He was so damn warm - hot, really - and it felt good. "What is part of the package? Did you find out?" Spike turned and started walking, and Wes fell into step beside him, walking down Oasis Boulevard where it became a dirt road down the hill to the beach. They could see the crater floor to the north of them - mostly level there, and about a half a mile away it all spilled out into sand and the sea. "I remember you tellin' me something...but, you know." Spike shrugged, glancing at Wes. They'd both been pretty firmly sunk in the three D's right after the fight. Drink, Denial, and Despair. A lot of that time was fuzzy. Except for the sensation of Wesley's furnace-hot mouth on Spike's skin.

Wesley chuckled, stooping to pick up a fossil that had been blasted in half at some point during the land reclamation project. "Aside from improved hearing, improved vision, and the ability to drink staggering quantities of whiskey without killing myself, there aren't many benefits. I'm not entirely certain that last is a benefit, by the way."
He pulled back his arm, and threw the rock as hard as he could towards the sea, and if both noticed that it went a little further than it would have gone when Wes was still human, neither commented. "My bodily rhythms have all slowed which makes no sense at all when combined with the speed of my metabolism in regard to drugs and alcohol. Honestly Spike - I haven't the faintest notion of what I am."
He paused thoughtfully. "Then, there are the visions, of course."

Spike looked around and found his own rock - took a dancing step forward and hurled it and watched it fly far and high, smirking a little in satisfaction. "They're not like the cheerleader's visions, are they? Or that poor sod Doyle?"

"No. They leave me somewhat dizzy after, but there's no pain. No...damage. And they're disturbingly clear." Wesley picked up another rock, wondering if.... "There is one other remarkable change which I haven't yet fully explored," he offered hesitantly.
"Yeah?" Spike ran an appreciative gaze over Wesley's casually jean-and-worn-oxford-clad frame. "Do tell," he added, grinning at Wes' grin. He picked another rock from the dirt by the road and then studied it for a moment. Another fossil, this one an almost perfect trilobite. He rubbed his thumb across it, smearing dirt away, and then pushed it into his pocket. Xander would like it.

"Yes." Wesley turned the rock over in his hand; a simple piece of quartz, likely from someone's landscaping before the destruction of the Hellmouth. 'Honesty', Xander had said, so Wesley clutched his fist around the rock, tilted his head back, and shivered - felt the bones shift like clockwork, shuddering as they locked into place beneath his skin.

When Wesley lowered his head, lidless slate gray eyes in a feral face - all points and angles - stared back at Spike. A crest of three rows of opalescent spines ran over a hairless scalp from the center of his forehead back to the nape of his neck, three inches tall at their highest point. Wesley glanced
down at the rock he held with an expression Spike couldn't interpret, then pulled back his arm and let it fly again, high and far, disappearing after Spike's.

Spike hesitated for a long moment and then he reached out and gently ran his fingers over Wesley's scalp and traced the tip of a pointed ear. He brushed one of the shimmery spines and Wesley shivered. His skin glowed, paler and sheened with frail color, like the nacreous inner part of a mussel shell. Wesley's hands flexed and Spike lifted one - ran a fingertip over the longer, sharply-curving nails that were like sheets of mica. His skin parted and a drop of blood welled up. He gently let go of Wes and put his finger to his mouth, just looking as he sucked away the blood.

"S'lovely, pet. Lovely."

"You would think so. I've got a demon Mohawk sprouting from my scalp." Wesley gave Spike a small smile, then shivered back into his more familiar form, looking out at the ocean. "I don't photograph properly in that form. I imagine I could lead quite
the life of crime with that particular advantage. If I were that sort of man." He risked a quick glance at Spike - who knew that Wesley could easily be that sort of man if he had a good reason. Had been that sort of man, skirting what was strictly legal.

"Be like Dick Turpin, yeah?" Spike shrugged and started walking again, heading for the beach. He patted himself down and found his cigarettes and lit one - offered the pack to Wes who smiled at him and shook his head. "You...mind showin' Xander? You don't have to," Spike added hastily, but he knew Xander was curious - and would be a little hurt if Wesley felt he had to hide from him.

"Xander, yes. " Wesley thought of Xander thought, of honesty, and knew that he should see. Know. "I haven't shown Angel," he added casually - not quite looking at Spike. Angel seemed the sort of topic of conversation between them that required a tactful lack of eye contact.

"Haven't you?" Spike took a long drag in and let the smoke trickle out, watching his boots crunch over
the ground. "Imagine he'd be used to this sort of thing by now. Why haven't you?"

"I don't want to disturb him unnecessarily. He blames himself for what happened to me." Wesley held up a hand, forestalling any comment from Spike that it was Angel's fault. "But I take full responsibility for my actions. Including the actions that resulted in my death. There's no need to upset Angel further."

Spike puffed hard on his cigarette, scowling. He glared at Wes - he couldn't help it. Wes flinched a little and looked away.

"Dammit, Percy, don't do that! Angel needs upsetting! He's sittin' on his fat arse, directing his little horde of Slayers and playin' cock of the walk - you don't need to pussy-foot around him! You're his seer." Spike flung the cigarette butt away and stomped on, seething.

Wesley stormed after Spike, catching his shoulder and spinning him around. "Angel has a
responsibility to The Powers That Be, and he
doesn't need any more daily reminders of his
failure!"

Spike snarled and grabbed Wes' shirt, yanking him
close. "I thought you took full responsibility, Wes!
But now you're his failure? Which is it?"

Wesley looked away - knocked Spike's hands off of
his shirt but didn't step back. "I am the failure. His
only failure was to put his trust in me time and
again. I don't deserve this chance, but I've taken it."
He turned back to Spike, eyes flashing the color of a
storm at sea. "I won't bugger it up by upsetting
Angel more." Spike's eyes were molten gold and
Wes shivered.

"Fuck that. Don't give me that load of bollocks, Wes,
don't even try." Spike knew he was too close - too
pissed - too loud, but he was angry and he didn't
care. "What exactly is it that you don't deserve? The
dying part? Or the part where your life gets hijacked
by the bloody Powers? Or maybe it was your girl
getting hollowed out like a damn gourd by a bloody
god -!" Spike had to turn away from the anguish in Wes' eyes - turned and roared at the sea, his fists clenched tight enough to drive his nails into his palms.

"Angel's not bloody perfect, Wes. He isn't. He went over to the bloody lawyers - he made it impossible for you to come to him with that prophecy about Connor - he's the one that took away your memories without bloody asking and who knows what you lost, yeah? Might have lost the one thing that could have saved us all, if he hadn't been playing' the fuckin' martyr and king of the hill in one."

Wesley was silent and Spike closed his eyes. Just breathed, and hoped Wes wouldn't...go.

Wesley lifted a hand to Spike's rigid back, but let it fall before they touched, looking to the south and the distant reflected glow of the lights of Santa Barbara in the night sky. He shivered, and this time let his hand rest on Spike's shoulder - light and warm. "I know he's not perfect, Spike. But he's their
chosen one. Their champion." He looked at his hand where it lay on faded blue cotton - Xander's by the size - then stepped up behind Spike, resting both hands on his shoulders. Gently, he began to rub working at the inhuman tension that lay beneath the skin. "I'm only alive because I was useful. Necessary for his quest."

"You only got dead because of that, too."

Spike's voice was tight and the tension in his shoulders didn't lessen. With a shiver, Wesley changed forms - dug more deeply into those tensed muscles, careful to keep his - claws - out of the way. "Regardless - Angel's need is the only reason I still exist."

"Wes..." Spike sighed. Deliberately unclenched his muscles and worked his shoulders under the other man's soothing touch. "Wes, you exist because you're needed. Because you're....special." Spike turned - caught Wes' hands as he tried to pull away and cradled them in his own - looked with affection at the narrow, fox-like face and wide eyes that
shivered and flowed into Wesley's familiar human features. "Angel's holy calling would fall apart without a seer, and you know it. Don't - diminish yourself for his sake, pet. Please?"

"It could have been anyone." Wesley couldn't meet Spike's eyes. "I was only chosen because I was convenient. I was the only one dying."

"It would have been a lot easier for them to pop the visions into someone live instead of makin' a brand new demon out of someone dead. 'Sides, Gunn was dying, too - they didn't pick him, they picked you. You think The Powers toss around that kind of mojo lightly?"

A small smile appeared on Wesley's lips, then just as quickly disappeared. "I don't know. I haven't asked them."

"You should. Bloody hell, pet!" Spike tugged on Wes' hands until he looked around, blue eyes hooded - sad. "All this 'chosen' one and 'destiny' business - that's a load of shite, yeah? You've got
nothing to pay for - you don't need to be redeemed. They chose you 'cause you could do the job the best. And it's a shite job, and one I wouldn't wish on a dog, but it's yours. Don't let Angel make you feel like you were the runner-up, yeah?" Spike wanted to kiss him - wanted to pull him close and stroke his hair. Wished Xander were there to make a joke - to say something worth listening to.

"What's the poof know about destiny, anyway? He was eatin' rats and livin' in garbage - had to drag him kickin' and screamin' into this century and then all he wanted to do was shag the girl. Least you've got class."

"At least he got to shag the girl." Wesley thought of Fred, then looked at the ground. That was hardly fair to her. Hardly fair to either of them. Fred died, and he lived on to make jokes about shagging her. It was appalling, really. "So much for class." He sighed, wrapping his arms around himself - cold comfort.

Spike couldn't stand it - couldn't stand that broken look in Wes' eyes and he just stepped up close and
pulled Wes into his arms - held him and stroked his back and slowly, slowly rubbed his cheek against Wes' dark hair. Hair that had a few silver ones in it. Here and there. *This last year's been so bloody hard on him. Angel doesn't deserve him. Bastard.*

"Wes, it's all right. You had something better than a quick shag, yeah? You were there for her, right to the end, and...you know she loved you, Wes. She did."

"I think she might have, if we had *time.*" Wesley shivered, leaning hard into Spike - the solidity and strength of him. Hadn't realized how much he'd missed *touch* in the years since the Angel Investigations team first began its slow fragmentation. "But we didn't, and life goes on. The *fight* goes on." The words lacked the conviction he felt they should have but lately, they often did.

"'The Fight' isn't all there is, Wes." Spike hugged Wes one more time, hard, then slowly stepped back. He pushed the hair off Wes' forehead and smiled at him, hating to see only a tired, fleeting
smile in return.

"How is Charlie, anyway? Doing all right?"

Wes seemed to hesitate before taking a breath. "Oh, he's still doing physical therapy for his leg three times a week - he gets tired rather faster than before, so he's mostly staying with law-related activities." They both turned and began to walk again, and Spike lit another cigarette, waiting for more. But Wesley seemed to be finished.

"That's all right, then. C'mon, pet, it's nearly Xander's lunch. Let's go get him some sushi, yeah? Good for his blood."

"Are you sure he wouldn't prefer a sandwich?" Wesley asked. He recalled Xander's earlier comment about sushi, and looked at Spike with amused suspicion. "You overheard him when you were in the shower, didn't you?"

"'Course I overheard. But he doesn't take care of himself like he should - not if he's gonna be drinking
my...blood." Spike shot Wesley a look, wondering if there would be any sort of condemnation - disgust, even - but Wesley was only smiling again, a little more genuinely this time. Encouraged, Spike went on, turning Wes gently by the shoulder and leading them back towards the town.

"He thinks he can live on juice and chocolate cereal and Fritos, I ask you!"

"We could tell him that he has to have cod-liver oil every day," Wesley suggested, and laughed aloud at Spike's automatic grimace of disgust. Something they both had in common from their childhoods, apparently.

"M'not sure I'm that evil, Wes," Spike said slowly.

"Yes you are."

"Yes I am." They both spoke at the same time and Wesley threw back his head and laughed. And it felt good.
"My god," Wesley whispered as he followed Spike up onto the crest of the hill and got his first good look at all of the biggest sink hole in California history.

"God didn't have anything to do with this one, mate." Spike shifted the bag of Styrofoam containers against his hip and shaded his eyes against the flood lamps, pointing. "Y'see the big yellow Caterpillar over there, and the blue cherry-picker off that way?"

"Yes."

"That hole, 'bout half way in between, that's the church."

"I'm surprised you were able to get to it in your condition."
Spike shrugged off the words, his recollection of that time already less than perfect. "Wasn't as bad off goin' in as I was comin' out. That's Xander's trailer down there. He's the nighttime Bossman in this quarter."

Wesley squinted in the direction Spike pointed to see Xander walking towards his trailer. "He seems rather busy. Do you think it's wise to come in like this bearing food?"

"Wise? Dunno. But it's what we're gonna do." Spike paused to awkwardly dig cigarettes and lighter out of his pocket. Wesley reached over and took the sushi and Spike grinned his thanks, lighting up and taking a long drag.

"Ta, Wes. Now what?" Down below Xander was pivoting rapidly away from the interior of the trailer - was shutting the door and going down the aluminum steps rather quickly. About ten paces away he stopped and looked back over his shoulder, then shook his head rather like a dog shedding water.
"I couldn't possibly guess. Does he get along well with his co-workers?" Wesley began walking again, relieved that the incline into the crater had been blasted and leveled until it was a long, smooth walk to the bottom down a road he supposed had been cleared for the workers' vehicles.

"Oh, he's right popular, Xander is. With most." Spike snarled suddenly, obviously thinking of someone that Xander did not get along with. "But I dunno what'd make him do that about-face."

"He looks...fine. Perhaps someone was getting a dressing-down, and he didn't want to embarrass them." Wesley looked around again at the halogens, the rumbling herd of machinery and the rubble that still tumbled and slithered everywhere despite the leveling and filling that had been going on for months.

"So - why did you go to a church? That seems..."

"Seems a bit daft, yeah?" Spike finished his
cigarette and flicked it away. "I...had something there I needed."

"Oh?" Wesley kept his eyes on the ground, though he spared a glance for Spike when the sparks of his cigarette flashed by. "It's an odd choice for a vampire, hiding something that important in a church. Although I must admit that there aren't many vampires likely to have the balls to do so."

They walked on in companionable silence, broken at last when Spike chuckled. "Not gonna ask me what it was?"

"I had thought it might be rude."

"You know you're dyin' to."

"Oh all right. What did you hide there, Spike?"

Spike grinned. What's 90% of a Watcher? Curiosity. "Angelus ever tell you about the Gem of Amara?"

Wes frowned, thinking. "He made some mention of
it...said he had smashed it for fear of...Angelus ever getting it."

"*Git,*" Spike muttered. "Yeah. Well, it was in a whole - hoard of other stuff. Gold, gems - books. I didn't get to keep the Gem, but I kept a lot of the rest. My last bit of it was stashed down there. 'Course, once I got really sick, I forgot all about it. Just recovered it the other day."

"I'm surprised that the excavators didn't find it first." Wesley shaded his eyes, squinting at the sprawling open pavilion just beyond the trailer and parked trucks and cars - perhaps the length of a football pitch distant. "They appear to have quite the collection of artifacts."

"They didn't know where to look." Spike looked at the pavilion, too, where the long steel tables were covered in wallets and jewelry and pictures - personal items recovered from the site. There was a tent with the same collection of tables, but those held bones and teeth - shards and shreds. The 'other' side of this reclamation project, and one that
nobody talked about much.

Xander was standing and staring rather blindly into space and didn't react as Spike and Wesley crunched up to him.

"What're you doin' out here, pet? Thought we'd meet at the trailer?"

Inexplicably, Xander blushed and cleared his throat. "The trailer is - um, occupied."

"Occupied? It's your bloody trailer, innit?" Spike stepped easily into Xander's arms, and Wesley looked away as they kissed, resolutely not envying the casual closeness they shared.

"Russ is having a -" Xander tilted his head back, staring at the sky. "- private meeting."

"A private -" Spike stared hard at Xander - turned his head suddenly, listening, and then he grinned. "Oh. A private meeting. Kinda like - our 'private meeting' the other night. The one he interrupted."
Xander was flushing, slow and delicious rise of heat and blood-scent. The dry spice-scent that was Wes suddenly strengthened as well and Spike looked over at the other Englishman. Wesley was staring at the trailer, his eyes wide and the sushi bag dangling, forgotten, from his hand.

"Sounds like a good time's bein' had by all," Spike said, and snickered at the look of shock that flashed across Wes' face.

"Uh huh. So we are not gonna walk in on him and his sweetie." Xander took a firm grip on Spike's elbow and steered him towards the parking lot where his truck was parked. "We're gonna have a nice lunch of -" Xander looked at the unmarked bag Wesley carried. "- whatever weird food you picked up tonight." He unlatched the gate of his truck bed and hopped up. "What's for dinner, honey?"

Spike hopped up beside Xander, feet dangling, and Wesley settled on the other side, opening the bag and fishing inside.
"Oh - tuna, yellow tail, octopus..." Spike reeled off a list of food and Xander's eyes narrowed.

"You got sushi."

"S'good for you, pet," Spike said brightly, ignoring the way Xander was staring at him. Wes had a small stack of containers next to him and he held out a paper slipcover with chopsticks inside.

"It all seems fresh, and very well prepared," he said, but his eyes had an evil glint that made Spike grin that much harder.

"Octopus?"

Spike held up a piece of white and pink flesh, holding it out to Xander. "S' chewy. C'mon. Take a bite."

Xander looked at the offering doubtfully, but to Wesley's surprise, he closed his eyes and took it. He watched Xander chew, and realized that Spike was watching him with a smirk.
Wesley had to grin back. He got his own chopsticks out and picked up a chunk of red and white shell-fish. 'Got lots of protein, that one,' Spike had said. He savored the light, sweet flavor and delicate texture. *Oh, very fresh*, he though in satisfaction.

"This is quite delicious. And, Xander - your octopus?"

"Chewy." Xander swallowed, chasing down a stray lump with his tongue. "But pretty good. That wasn't raw was it?"

"Nah. Cooked proper. Here." Spike fed Xander another piece, this one a deep ruby red and translucent, watching with satisfaction as he chewed. "That one's raw."

Xander looked for a moment as if he might spit, but then he swallowed and gave Spike a hard glare.

"I am *not* going to be nice to you later if you don't knock it off." Spike affected a look of wounded
surprise.

Wesley rolled his eyes, taking a piece of tuna roll for himself. He remembered Cordelia taking them all out for sushi years ago, recalled Gunn's surprising taste for yellow tail which had ended up costing her so much more on the tab than she'd expected.

"Love - it's to build your blood up! Can't have you gettin' all sick like you did before." Spike ate his own bit of raw fatty tuna, and leaned in closer. "The more fit you are, love, the more blood you can take, yeah? And more often." Spike darted the tips of the chopsticks out - merest brush over a bite-mark and Xander's eye darkened with arousal.

Xander's breath stuttered and he swayed toward Spike, lips parted. "The tuna wasn't too bad."

"Gonna love the salmon." Spike plucked a piece of translucently red-pink salmon from the box, and eased it between Xander's lips, nipping the bottom one with the tips of his chopsticks. "S' smoked."
Wesley ate a piece of salmon himself. The firm smoky flesh went down smoothly - made him wish for a cup of hot sake to chase it down. Watching Xander, the part of his mind that retained its Watcher training noted the signs of vampire thrall - the rest of him simply saw a man absolutely besotted with his lover.

And happy.

Besotted. Not a very...nice word. Almost as bad as thrall, really. Wesley slowly ate a piece of radish roll and then some yellow-tail, scanning his gaze over the crater. It was both awesome and horrific. One of the biggest mass graves in the world, I'm sure. I wonder what the final count was? From what Andrew has said, many residents fled, but... They can't all have left. Not after so many years of blindness to what was going on. Wesley tried to imagine homes covering the tumbled landscape. Homes and parks and shops and oh god schools. It was, in reality, a fairly gruesome thought. I wonder how they're going to get the 'town sucked into a pit, everyone died' part of this to...go away.
"Surely...surely no one would actually want to live here."

"Hey, Wes?" Wesley blinked - looked up from his chopsticks with a rather stricken expression. "Wes, you okay?" Xander asked. He reached out and rubbed Wes' shoulder for a moment, and the ex-Watcher blinked and then smiled faintly.

"Oh, yes, I'm - I'm fine, Xander. I was just...thinking that..." Wesley looked at Xander - then at Spike, and nodded his head a tiny bit, as if coming to some decision. "Just thinking that this has to be one of the most horrible places I could imagine living in."

Xander stared at the man in surprise and then, slowly, nodded. "You know - you're right. It's...pretty awful." Xander slid to his feet and brushed halfheartedly at the seat of his jeans. "And I'm thirsty. I'm gonna run over to the First Aid tent and grab something to drink. They've got juice and water - what can I get ya, Wes?"

"Water would be fine, thank you," Wesley said, and
Xander nodded and smiled over at Spike and strode off.

"You're thinkin' more than that, mate." Spike set his chopsticks down on the edge of one of the Styrofoam containers. "Xan and I botherin' you?"

"No," Wesley said quickly - too quickly. He sighed and scooped a small lump of wasabi from its container and mixed it into a plastic cup of soy sauce. "Well no more than you'd expect, I suppose."

Spike watched Wes stir - watched him pick at eel and octopus, not lifting his head. Damn it, Wes...don't do that. He put his own food down - scooted over until his leg bumped Wesley's thigh and the man had to stop his fidgeting and look up.

"You know... When we first started up - back in L.A.... I was so damn lonely I thought I'd die," Spike said softly. "And not bein' able to touch anything for so long - that made it...a lot worse, yeah?" Wesley nodded, looking unhappy. "You're lonely too, Wes. Or still, I guess. I want..." Spike trailed off, and just
looked at Wes - at his downcast expression and the thinness of his face - the way his nails were chewed and his hair longer than he usually let it get. "I really want...to make you happy, pet. Somehow."

Wesley closed his eyes, feeling the slow thump and release of his changed heart, or perhaps not so changed. "I'm not - ready for that yet, Spike."

"If it's about Xander -"

Wesley shook his head and looked at Spike, an earnest expression on his face - smiled apologetically. "No. I won't pretend that it is, though that might make things less complicated if I did." He rested a hand on Spike's thigh. "But I'm not ready - yet."

"And when you are?"

"I'll come to you both."

"All right, Wes. Just - don't make yourself wait too long, yeah? You've nothing to...pay for." For the
second time that night Spike hugged the man to him, and he felt the awful brittleness of the shell that kept Wesley upright shatter, just a bit. Let us help, love. However we can.

Then he could hear footsteps, and knew Xander was coming. He slowly let go, and Wesley sighed and picked up his chopsticks again, and Xander strolled up to the truck, drinks in his hands.

"You don't have to let go of Spike on my account, Wes." Xander handed him a bottle of water, passed one to Spike with a kiss, and uncapped his own bottle of juice with a virtuous smile at Spike. "Alicia said orange juice is a good drink after donating blood." When Spike didn't quip, Xander looked from vampire to demon. "Okay, and what happened while I was gone?"

"Oh, nothing, I -" Wesley blurted out and then stopped, because Spike was looking at him, and Xander's 'honesty' was in his head, and he just couldn't lie. "Spike...was telling me..." Wesley stopped again, because really - he had no idea what
to say. None at all.

"I told Wes he didn't need to be so lonely, is all, pet. Told him - we're here for him." Spike held out his hand, urging Xander to sit again and Xander did - bracketing Wesley between them. It made Wesley shiver, just a little, to have both of them pressed so close.

"He's still being stupid, huh?" Xander grinned back at Wesley's look of shock and bumped him with his shoulder. "There's a lot of stupid going around. I hear it's even worse in L.A."

Wesley felt himself relax, relieved that Xander wasn't going to dig, but still appeared to accept - him. "Thank you."

"Come on Wes - I insulted you! Get with the appropriate response."

Wesley lifted an eyebrow, and raised two fingers.

"God, Spike. You're corrupting Watchers
everywhere you go."

"Got a reputation to maintain, don't I?"

Sushi, Xander thought, was actually pretty good. Not that he'd tell Spike. He was on the fence about wasabi, though he did like how the horseradish concoction made Spike's kisses tingly and hot.

Dave had walked by sometime towards the end of lunch, his face showing the disgust he felt and Spike had caught him in the back of the head with a piece of leftover tuna. Xander had snickered into his juice before he could stop himself and Dave had glared at them all before stomping away. Ah, the life of the socially challenged. And being with Spike, it doesn't get better, just more fun. They'd thrown away the trash and cleaned up at the hand-wash station at the personal affects tent, and just as Wes and Spike were going to leave, the trailer door had opened.

"Alex! Um, and Spike and - who're you?" Russ leaned in the doorway of the trailer, blocking most
of the light with his bulk, but Xander could see him tensing.

"Oh, uh - this is Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. The specialist we went to see in L.A. - and a good friend. Wes, this is Russell Fenwick, my Assistant Supervisor."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Wesley stepped forward and held out his hand to Russ, then smiled - eyes focused behind Russ for a moment. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Russ looked more than surprised - he looked kinda freaked out, but Xander wasn't sure why. "Hey, Russ, umm - have a nice lunch?" Xander said, not sure why Russ was so freaked. He felt Spike sidle up behind him and slip an arm around his waist - then whisper in his ear.

"Russ' shadow in there is a demon, pet. I think he's a bit...nervous, like."

"Naiades," Wesley murmured, offering his hand to
the man standing behind Russ. "Wesley Wyndam-Pryce."

"Sol," the demon flicked amber-ringened black eyes to Russ and back to Wesley, folding Wes' hand in long webbed fingers covered with a fine layer of gleaming fur. "Sol Fenwick."

Xander slid his arm around Spike's waist, leaning into him and whispering back. "Does Russ know about you?"

"Yeah, he knows," Spike murmured back, looking up at the slim, pelted figure that stood beside Russ. Dark, white-less eyes and large mobile ears, and a tail that, Spike noticed, was curled around Russ' calf. "Desert hardly seems the place for a Naiades," he said, and the demon made a sort of shrugging motion, webbed hand resting lightly on Russ' arm.

"We make accommodation. Very niice." Sol's teeth were small and sharp and very white and Spike had to grin back, the cloud of spent sex and pheromones and lust wafting from the trailer
making him a little...bouncy.

"I'll bet. Think we need a signal, Xan? Like - put a hanger on the door or something when the trailer's...in use?" Beside him, Wesley snorted, moment of uncontrolled laughter and Russ finally relaxed and leaned into Sol, just a little.

"Yeah, might be a good idea - what'dya think, Alex?"

"I think we need lunch hours that never overlap." Xander flashed Russ a grin and held out a hand to Sol. "I'm Alexander Harris, the night supervisor." The hand that wrapped around his was warm and sleek, bones delicate under their covering of skin and short fur.

"Not told you were with Spike." Sol glanced down at Xander's throat, sniffing the air delicately then chuckling. "So with Spike. With this demon, too? Mr. Wyndam-Pry-ss?" His gaze switched with curiosity to Wesley.
"You're a demon?" Russ cocked his head, *looking* at Wes.

"I - well - I certainly -"

"Say yes, pet." Spike smirked at Sol, holding out a hand. "Don't believe we've met."

"No, have not." Sol took his hand hesitantly, and shook. "Chip...yess? In-itia-tive."

Spike couldn't help the small growl that rattled his chest and the Naiades' chin went up, teeth bared. Automatic. "Out an' all," he said shortly, and Sol nodded, his tail uncurling from Russ' calf and whipping a little, like a disturbed cat.

"That's good. But...something else, too. Yes? Something - else," the demon said softly, gesturing at his own chest and Spike sighed. *If Anya could see it, half the damn world probably can.*

"Yeah, something else. Well! We've had lunch, you've had - lunch with extras - time for all good
demons and demon-shagging humans to get back to work, yeah?"

"Yes," Russ agreed, though he had the look of a man who would be asking Sol for details later, which Spike wasn't certain he liked.

Xander chuckled, catching Spike's shoulders and attention by stepping close to him for an orange-sweet kiss, tangling a leg around Spike's the way Sol's tail had curled around Russ. "My sweetheart, demon celebrity."

Spike smirked, and ignored the hissing laughter from Sol. "Me and Wes'll just go on back, then - leave you two to do - whatever you do." He let his arm go from waist to arse and gave Xander a squeeze - backed off and pulled out a cigarette before he was tempted to do more. Wesley looked as if he wanted to ask Sol about a hundred questions and Spike nudged him with an elbow. "Plenty of time for that later, Wes, yeah? Things to do, books to study..." He raised an eyebrow and Wes took a deep breath - let it out on a sigh.
"Yes, you're right. Well - a pleasure to meet the both of you," he said, and seemed gratified when Sol reached out and took his hand again, fleeting contact.

Russ' handshake was more solid. "You too, uh - Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. Xander said you worked a miracle, getting Spike better."

"Oh, no miracle. Just solid science and a bit of standard magic. But - yes - it did work quite well, thank you."

"Meet the most modest man in California." Xander gave Wesley's shoulder a squeeze on his way past. "See you guys after work." He left Wesley stammering that he wasn't modest and stepped into his office before he could give in to the urge to go back home with them. Russ and Sol slipped out to have their own good-byes elsewhere.

Minutes later Russ joined him again, foregoing his work to lean against Xander's desk. "Children of the
Hellmouth, huh?"

"I shouldn't be surprised, should I?" Xander slid his keyboard under the desk and leaned back in his chair, swinging. "How long have you known about Spike?"

"That he was a vampire? Since last weekend - that's not a barbeque fork injury on your neck, man."

"Hey, how do you know?"

"Alex, you don't cook. You don't even own a barbeque."

"How do you - oh. 'Cause you've been to my house." Xander swiveled his chair back and forth a little, frowning, and then sighed.

"This isn't going to be a problem, is it? I mean - vampire, grrrrrr, draining the populace. Except he's not. Not really. Not - often." Christ. Way to reassure the man, Harris. Russ just looked at him and then finally sighed himself, propping one hip on the desk
and running his hand back through his hair. His very tousled and sweaty hair. Oh, right. They were just having sex. In here. We need to get the couch cleaned.

"Alex - I saw him. When you pulled him out of the church. Saw him at your house. He was half out of his head and - he never did anything... Basically - no problem. I mean - how could there be? I've got Sol, you've got Spike and then - your friend Wesley... Russ shrugged - smiled. "No problems."

"No problems," Xander repeated, then laughed. "God, some day the suits are gonna come while one of us is occupied in here and we're both gonna get fired for having kinky demon sex. And then it won't be this funny."

Russ shook his head. "Never happen."

"How do you know?"

"Demon hearing. It's one of the advantages of a relationship with the fangs, scales, and fur set."
Spike bent over the remains of the crucifix, carefully prying a really *nice* ruby loose of its setting. Home from the site, he and Wes had examined his haul and Wes had de-activated a couple of nasty spells and then very kindly twisted the icons into something that more closely resembled Buddhist swastikas. So, free of eye-searing 'holy light', Spike was methodically reducing the pieces to their more manageable components. One of the books had been a curiosity - not worth much, but rare in its own right - and Spike had told Wesley to take it.

Another one had made Wes go still, and Spike had seen the way his fingers had gently stroked the tooled leather of the binding before telling him it was worth several thousand dollars. Spike was going to make sure that book ended up in Wes' luggage.

Spike glanced up, grinning, at a loud whoop from
outside, followed immediately by a tremendous splash. A week old and Spike had deemed the tattoo healed enough for Xander to get back into the water he so dearly missed. *Having my blood in him helped that, too. I think. Have to ask Wes. Both men were outside, soaking up afternoon sunshine and Spike sighed happily, thinking of the warm, golden skin he'd get to feel very soon. Nothing quite as wonderful as Xander all hot and salty-sweet and happy.*

The phone rang and Spike growled but got up - peeled off his just-in-case leather gloves and hopped up onto the counter, turning the phone on.

"Harris is busy," he snapped, and heard a sharp intake of breathe from the other end. "Talk or hang up, for fuck's sake!" *God,* but he hated phones.

"S-spike?" *Tiny* voice - familiar voice - and Spike's swinging feet froze in mid-motion. *Oh...*god. *Oh bloody* hell!

"Niblet?"
"Spike? Is that really you? Oh my god, Spike! You're alive!" Spike held the phone away from his ear in alarm at a piercing girl-shriek of happiness. "What are you doing answering Xander's phone? Are you like living with him? And he didn't tell me? Wait, you didn't eat him and take over his life, did you?"

"Course I didn't eat him! Well not... He's swimming. And - I told him not to tell you." Spike waited, then, for - anger, he supposed. For the cold fury that had gripped Dawn in the last days of Sunnydale to rise and - heh - bite him again. All he heard was a ragged, hoarse breath, sharply indrawn. "Bit?"

"You - you jerk! How do you think I felt hearing from Andrew that you'd been in Rome and didn't even see us? And then that you went and got yourself killed by a dragon and now you're alive with Xander?" Spike could hear her muffle a snuffle and throw herself into a seat.

Ladylike as ever. "What? I wasn't killed by a dragon! What a load of shite! Bit -"
"And it's like you're not there or anywhere. Both of you! Nobody ever tells me anything about you unless you're dead again or Xander's leaving."

"Niblet, listen, I..." Spike leaned back against the cabinet with a little thump, wondering what to say, exactly. "Listen, I'm sorry I... Look, want me to just - tell you? The short version, mind."

"I want the real version," Dawn huffed, and Spike smiled - so easy to picture her folding an arm over her waist impatiently.

"Real as me, pet. Right... You know I died - here, right? Burned up, an' all."

"Yeah.."

"Well, that piece of costume jewelry brought me back, right in the middle of the poof's office at Wolfram and Hart. They're evil lawyers."

"I heard about them. Giles didn't like them."
"Rupert was right not to. They tried to take us all out. We fought and - there was a dragon, but we killed it. Now Angelus - er, Angel - he's runnin' some new sort of 'Watcher Headquarters West' down in L.A. with Andrew and whatever Slayers they send over." Spike stopped and took a long breath - wondered where his cigarettes were. "I got - hurt, in the fight, and I came up here to Sunnydale and - Xander helped me out and... I've been stayin' here." Seeing his smokes on the other counter where his treasure was, he slid to his feet and got them, lighting up with a sigh. "You still there, pet?"

"Yes," Dawn said, voice tiny. "But Xander didn't say anything, and - okay, Xander never says much. I get that he can't in letters and that's why he sent the phone card and oh my god! Are you the news he had to tell me about?"

"I dunno, Niblet. I asked him not to -"

"Why?" Dawn's voice was sharp and angry, but there was an underlying hurt there - edge of
hoarseness that could only mean tears. Spike climbed up onto the stool that he'd been sitting on before and leaned over the treasure, staring sightlessly, the massed horde nothing but a blur of color and sparkles.

"Think about...those last months here, Dawn. We weren't friends anymore. And when I came back - it just didn't seem like... Well, I didn't want to upset you again, yeah? You or Buffy. You've got - nice lives now. Seeing Europe and going places - all grown up now, aren't you? Don't need me in your life, makin' you...angry all the time."

"Buffy makes me angry all the time. But she's not leaving me alone. Everybody gets to see you but me. It's not *fair*! And it's not like my life is *perfect* now either. I'm in school all the time, and nobody speaks English here - which is *cool* but sometimes I wanna speak *English* and talk to somebody who doesn't still treat me like a little kid." Dawn's chatter stopped, and Spike heard another snuffle on her end. "I miss you, stupid. You and Xander both."
"Yeah? You do?" And there's no going back from that - no way Spike could erase the pleased tone or the undiluted shock and he was pretty sure he heard Dawn giggle. *Fuck it. Honesty, he says.* "I miss you too, Dawn. I'm...sorry, yeah? Sorry I didn't tell you I was back. Things were pretty crazy down in L.A., I just - I wasn't..." *Wasn't sane, half the time. Not like the basement but... Not right.*

"I'm back now, yeah? And...I'm glad you know, Niblet. Hated hiding from you." And that's true. Of all of them, he'd missed Dawn the most - regretted what had happened between them the most. *Maybe I can fix it, now. Maybe.*

"No more hiding?" Spike hated the hesitance in Dawn's voice, and the sniffling she couldn't hide from vamp hearing even half the world away.

"Not from you, pet."

She sighed. "You're still avoiding Buffy, aren't you? Xander is too. It's why he sent me the phone card, so that I could call him and he wouldn't have to talk
Spike thought about that, because was it true? Xander didn't want contact with his old gang, that much was clear, but the why - had never really been discussed, before. *Guess we've got a new topic for the dinner hour.* "You'll have to ask him, Dawn. And I'm not - hiding from Buffy. I just... I don't need to see her, you know? She doesn't need me in her life and I don't... need her in mine. It's just - better this way."

And there wasn't even any lingering hurt, when he said that, and he knew he was right. Utterly right.

"Fine. But *no* avoiding *me.*" Dawn sighed again, the petulant kind of sigh only a teenager could do *right.* "Because hello, I am *not* Buffy! And I do so need you in my life. Who else is going to tell me stories of bloody mayhem now that I'm old enough to hear them?"

"Rupert might, if you get him good and drunk." Spike had to smile, though, and he got up and got a
bottle of Old Speckled out of the cabinet and opened it, drinking straight from the bottle this time. "I won't avoid you any more, love. You want to say hello to Xander?" He'd missed Dawn, but it was...still awkward. And he needed a little time to process the thought that she wasn't still pissed at him - didn't still hate him.

"I called Xander, Spike." Dawn paused, and Spike could hear her shuffling something around on her end. "But I'm really glad you answered. Can I - talk to you again some time? I mean, are you going to stay there, with Xander?"

"Yeah, I'm stayin' here. Getting quite posh, really, with the silk sheets an' all."

"You got the silk sheets? Is that why he wanted more?"

"They're lovely, Bit," Spike answered, not really answering, because he was not going to get into a discussion about why or how or what happens next with Dawn Summers. No. Bloody. Way.
"Hmph. You're hiding something. You're always hiding something," Dawn complained, little girl that she was creeping back into her voice.

"Gotta have my secrets, pet," Spike said gently, remembering that little girl so lost behind big sis' destiny. "I'm gonna go get Xander for you, yeah?"

"Okay, fine." Dawn sighed.

"And I'll know if you try to pry anything out of him, bit," Spike warned, smiling a bit at the indignant sound on the other end of the line.

"Like I could!"

"Don't want you trying," he said. Last thing Xan needs is the last old friend he's got prying into him.

"Fine! I won't try to pry anything out of Xander. God, overprotective much, Spike?"

"No. It's just - don't push him, is all." Spike went
over to the sliding door and pushed it open, squinting out at Xander and Wesley. Xander was floating on the surface of the water, his hair fanned out around him, his skin glistening like amber and topaz and old, rich gold. Wesley was sitting on the edge, his feet and shins in the water, his hair dripping down his back. English-pale, a scar down his ribs. *Both look...so good.* And somehow, Xander had convinced Wesley that in California, swimming in the nude was the norm, so Wesley had bravely stripped down.

"Hey, Xander! Phone for you!"

Xander flipped upright in the water with a splash, treading evenly. "Who is it?"

"Dawn."

As Wesley watched, Xander's face drained of all color and he splashed his way out of the pool, grabbing a towel as he went and drying quickly as the wind off the ocean raised goose bumps on his skin. "She got the letter?"
"Sounds like she did, pet." By the time Xander reached Spike, he was shivering, but his lips were warm and tasted of sunshine and chlorine.

"Thanks, sweetheart." Xander gripped the phone, looking at it like it might bite him - leaned into Spike's touch with a grateful smile.

"Pay me later," Spike murmured, and stepped away with a swift glance over Xander's naked body. Then he ducked back into the gloom of the house and Xander tucked the phone between ear and shoulder so he could knot his towel around his waist.

"Hello? Dawn?" He settled into a lounger and looked around for the sun-block - looked up as Wes made a low whistle.

"Hi Xander! How are you! How long has Spike been living with you?" Xander caught the tube of sun-block Wes tossed to him and opened it, squeezing some onto his fingers. Oh, right. Wonder what Spike said?
"A couple of months. Listen Dawnie, I'm sorry I didn't tell you -"

"Xander, nobody tells me things. I get it. And anyway, I already yelled at Spike. But I don't have to yell at you 'cause you're gonna tell me more now, right?"

Xander groaned and closed his eyes - felt the smile on his face as he heard her so clearly, eager to know 'the dirt'. But Spike hadn't seemed upset. In fact, he'd had a bit of a - glow to him that Xander didn't see nearly often enough. "Yes, but don't yell at Spike anymore, okay?"

"Oh. My. God. You like him. You like Spike! And he likes you. You're both so - mother hen! Oh my god." Xander could practically feel Dawn bouncing on the other end of the line and he was pretty sure that Wes heard her, especially since he had to take the phone away from his ear.

"Well - yeah - sure I do, Dawn, I mean..." Honesty!
Fuck, it's hard. Wesley wasn't looking at him, but Xander could see the little smile at the corner of his mouth. "Right. Okay. Yeah. I like Spike." No. Lie. I love him. I love Spike. I'm just terrified of telling the people that used to be...my whole world.

"Xander?" He could hear the worry in her voice - couldn't not answer.

"Yeah?"

"Breathe, okay? I can hear you hyperventilating."

"I am not -" Xander sat upright and swayed gently as the world spun. "Okay, so maybe I was. God - this is hard, Dawnie."

"What, admitting that you have a thing for Spike? I mean my god you two hated each other!" He heard the laughter in her voice, let it make him smile too.

"Admitting that I love Spike is the easy part." Xander closed his eyes, felt a swell of warmth in his chest just saying those words, hoping Spike was
listening in.

A sharp intake of breath from Dawn, and then: "So what's the hard part?"

Xander leaned back against the recliner, rubbing the sun-block into his tattoo before it could all drip off his hand - found that there was no hard part left. "The part where you yell at me for not telling you any of this in my letters?"

"You love him." Dawn's voice was a little wobbly - a little breathless. He heard her sniff, and felt instant guilt.

"Dawn, I'm sorry -"

"Xander. You don't apologize for being in love, you dork. I... I wish you could have told me sooner."

"I didn't really know, that much sooner. It's...been a surprising couple of months." Xander closed his eyes and leaned back, feeling relief wash over him. Relief and affection for his 'little sister' who'd
always listened - who'd always seen, right along with him. "It's been a really - good couple of months."

"Yeah. Listen, Xander - I want pictures. And I want details. Got it?"

"What kind of details?" Xander stuttered out the question before realizing that he did not want to know the answer.

"Duh! The juicy kind!" That answer.

He groaned, dragging his fingers through his hair. "Jesus. When did you become such a little pervert?"

"Hello! Spike was my favorite baby sitter in my formative years." Dawn sounded way too smug for eighteen.

"Uh -uh." Xander closed his eye again to see that mischievous grin in his mind. "No way are you going to convince me that Spike let you look at gay porn when he was watching you."
"Who said he let me?"

"I did not let her look at porn! She snooped!" Spike yelled from the doorway, and Xander groaned, toppling over sideways in the chair and becoming aware that Wesley was snickering into his towel.

"Jesus! I'm surrounded by people with super-senses and no morals and - and a pervert for a little sister. Why am I the only normal guy?"

"You're dating a vampire, Xander - so not normal. Who else is there? Do you have friends over?"

"What? No. Yes. I mean - yes, a friend and Spike and they can hear you Dawn!" Xander watched Wesley go to the door and accept a beer from Spike and lift it in salute toward him. "And I don't care if you're eighteen and I don't care if you've read - Hustler. No juicy details."

"Call me later, Bit!" Spike yelled, and Xander groaned again.
Dawn giggled. "Hi Spike! I'll call you back when Xander's at work on Monday, so you'd better have lots of stuff to tell me by then!"

"Dawn!"

Wesley turned away from Xander's agonized groan of embarrassment and went inside, chuckling. The beer was heavenly, sliding down his throat and he stood for a moment savoring it. Then with a small start he realized he was standing nude in Xander's kitchen and he put his beer down so he could wrap his towel around his waist.

The stools are terribly splintery. And...brace up, now. Spike's bound to say something. Wesley finished tucking the towel-end in and turned to face the vampire, expecting some sort of leering remark or, at the very least, a look. But Spike was leaning against the counter, a beer held loosely in his hand. Smiling to himself. A soft, pleased sort of smile - an expression that Wesley had, quite frankly, never seen on the vampire's face.
"Now I wonder...what brought that on? Oh... Xander, outside. On the phone. Telling Dawn he was in love. That must have been the first time... Wesley smiled himself, pleased for Spike - for Xander. Pleased and a tiny bit jealous.

"Just going to take a shower, then," he murmured, and slipped out. Spike didn't seem to notice.

Xander clicked the phone off and grinned. A long talk with Dawn was work, but it was worth it. She claimed nobody told her anything, but she always had Council gossip and little tidbits about Willow and Buffy and even Giles. He shivered. The sun was lower now, and he was in shade and he'd gotten chilled, sitting in nothing but a towel. Shivering, he got up and made his way inside, where the ever-burning fire kept his house warmer than your average SoCal home. Spike was bent over his treasure, prying at what looked like an oversized pearl, but when Xander scooted in he looked up and smiled. Soft, sweet, blindingly beautiful smile that made Xander's mouth go dry and his heart beat
double-time. Spike put his loot down and stripped off the gloves - stood up slowly and stretched.

_Ooh...naked vampire in my kitchen..._

"All done with the Bit, then?"

"All d-done," Xander stuttered. Spike's eyes roamed over Xander's body and then he frowned a little.

"You're all over gooseflesh, love. Catch a chill?"

Xander watched Spike stalk towards him and he had enough presence of mind to fumble the cell phone down onto the counter. To save it from hitting the floor.

"Yeah, I - it got - chilly."

"Soon warm you up, love," Spike breathed, and a moment later Xander was draped in a Spike-blanket that felt like velvet over oiled steel and tasted like beer and peppermint.
"It is so wrong to be wrapped up in toasty vampire." Xander murmured, pressed against warmed flesh. He tucked cold fingers between them and found Spike's nipples, covering them with cool palms and muffling Spike's hiss with his lips.

"Not gonna be toasty for long. God - you're frozen."

"Think Wes would mind if we joined him in the shower?" Xander slid a hand over the silken skin, felt the fine raised lines of Spike's scars and ducked his head, nipping at Spike's throat. *What does it take to mark a vampire?*

"Probably would, pet." A rich groan shuddered up from Spike's chest. He was so hard against Xander's hip, tangled his fingers in Xander's hair with a growl. Spike rose onto the balls of his feet, sliding his body over Xander's chilled skin. Xander's balls were just starting to think it might be a good idea to come out of hiding when Spike stepped away with an evil glance. "Mind you don't get me started, love. Be a shame to break your vow of celibacy this close to the end of his visit."
Xander's breath whooshed out of him and he glared at Spike. "Cocktease."

"Think so? What d'you think of this, then?" Spike put his hands on Xander's shoulders and turned him - slid his hands slowly down from shoulder to ribs to belly. With a flick of his wrist he loosened the towel and let it drop, then he snuggled Xander up tight against him, making sure his cock slid between Xander's thighs. Groin tight against Xander's ass, tip of his cock pushing and rubbing at Xander's balls. Spike let his hands wander, from belly to nipples to hipbones - let his mouth wander, lazily licking and nipping at each tiny mark his fangs had left on Xander's skin. Salt and chlorine, cloves and sweet - heady mix of scents and Xander's body tight against his from shins to collarbones.

"I - I think Wesley had better take a long shower." Each nip of Spike's teeth shuddered through him and the skin Spike wasn't touching ached for him. He dropped his head back against Spike's shoulder - lips drunkenly sought lips and he reached down to
slide a hand over Spike's flank shakily. "I - I mean - God, Spike. How can Wes not want this?"

"Dunno, pet. Mmm...my vampiric powers of seduction not workin' right, I suppose," Spike murmured, biting gently at Xander's throat - shuddering with Xander's own shivers. "God - Xan..." Spike did a fast push pull - push Xander away, spin him around, pull him back. Lips and teeth, tongue driving into Xander's mouth, one hand palming a handful of taut muscle, the other catching both of their cocks together and starting a fast, twisting stroking, pre-come and sweat slicking his palm. Xander pushed into him - bit at his mouth - used both his hands on Spike's ass to pull him closer.

Fuck teasing, want this...god, feels good.

"Fuck - fuck - fuck Spike! Gotta do this fast." Xander mumbled into Spike's lips, arousal spiraling fast and hot through him - burning because jacking off in the shower was nothing - nothing like Spike's hands, Spike's skin, taste of Spike on his tongue - muscles
like iron under silk flexing under his hands. They hit the edge of the counter with a thump and Xander banged his knee against one of the stools, clattering it to the floor - thrust into Spike's grip and bit - buried his face in Spike's neck and sucked hard, blood firing through him like liquid need.

Spike gasped softly as Xander's teeth cut into him - drew blood. Xander's hips thrust and thrust, hard and then harder and then Spike's hand was slicking with come and the brine-musky scent was thick between them. As Xander panted against him, shaking in little, separate aftershocks, Spike let the demon emerge and licked Xander's neck - nicked him with one fang. Just enough to get a taste, just enough to get that spice-salt nectar over his tongue and send him over the edge.

Xander crowded tight against him as Spike's orgasm spasmed through him, and then they were both limp, panting - collapsing onto one another in a tangle of sweaty, sticky skin and shaking limbs.

"Wes has just finished, love - we'd best make
ourselves presentable, yeah?" Spike muttered, and kissed the sluggishly bleeding scrape on Xander's neck. Sooo good, god. Love this. Love him...

"Pet - you told Dawn you love me," Spike said, memory kicking in, and Xander twitched in his arms and lifted his head.

Xander darted close, pressed his lips against Spike's - shared flavor between them all light and smoke and salt-copper musk - grinned as brightly as the sun rising. "I did, didn't I?"

"You did, love." Spike smiled back - tipped his head a little to one side, studying the happy, beautiful face that was so close to his own. "Thank you for that. I was..." He looked away then, and shrugged. "I didn't... Tell her, I mean."

"Does it bother you that I did?" Xander felt his heart clench when Spike looked away, rubbed his hands up and down Spike's back slow and soft. "Sweetheart - I don't want to hide you like a dirty secret."
"No! No, it doesn't, I just...wish I'd said it, too."
Spike looked back at Xander - reached up to push back strands of damp hair - to trace a finger down cheek and jaw and follow the intricate line of his tattoo. "I do, you know. Love you."

Xander blinked quickly and trapped Spike's hand against his collarbone. "Would Wes notice if we took a quick shower together? I - just want to touch you for a while."

Spike pressed a soft kiss to Xander's lips - pushed him back far enough to get off the counter's edge and tugged him towards the master bath. "We'll be quick, love."

Wesley leaned against the door of the guest bathroom - eyes closed, listened to Spike and Xander make their slow way down the hall with soft touches, softer kisses. It still - hurt - not to have that. It hurt less that these two men he cared for had it together but it left him once again revolving
like a helpless satellite around two people madly in love.

~*~*~*~*~

"'Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels' ended, and Spike heaved a sigh of satisfaction. *Bloody good movie, that.* He drifted for a moment, soothed by the low light from the fireplace and the cluster of fat candles on the side table - the over-sink light from the kitchen. Bright enough not to spill beer or snacks, low enough to simulate the theatre on Xander's big TV.

"Now, tell me that wasn't brilliant, mate," Spike said, poking Wesley in the shoulder.

"I'm not certain if I'd call it *brilliant*, Spike - but it was quite good." Wesley found himself smiling up into Spike's indignant face, wanting to draw it down to his and taste the laughter on his lips - then Xander's. It had felt so *good* to laugh that hard - even when he was absolutely horrified by what he
was laughing at.

"You laughed as hard as we did," Xander pointed out, throwing a leg over Wesley's for balance - snatching a handful of popcorn from the bowl Spike had been hoarding since the middle of the movie.

"Well, that's so, but - " Wesley shook his head, leaning infinitesimally forward so that Xander's arm brushed against him as he pulled back, triumphant, with popcorn.

"No 'buts', pet," Spike said, slapping after Xander's hands and deliberately missing - whapping Wesley's thigh, instead, and leaving his hand there. "It's was bloody brilliant." Wes was so warm - Spike couldn't resist it. He pushed the popcorn bowl protectively away from Xander and curled up into the delicious heat, letting his hand slide up and then rest on Wesley's ribs, letting his knee come over Wesley's knee and dip down between. Letting his head settle on Wes' shoulder, where the dusty-bay, demon smell was overlaid by salt and butter and verbena and citrus.
"I know better than to argue with you, Spike." Wesley rolled his eyes, let his hand come to rest on Spike's back - surprisingly easy to hold him even after all of this time. Oddly comfortable. Natural.

"Move over, you leech." Xander shoved at Spike - settled himself into Wesley's other side, muttering. "Stop trying to bogart the warm Englishman."

Spike whapped at Xander again and Wesley surprised himself utterly by saying: "Now, boys, enough to go around." Then bit his lip in total humiliation. He cringed just slightly, but then relaxed when Spike only burrowed closer, and Xander's fingers started a slow stoke along his collarbone.

"Mmmm...plenty," Spike mumbled, pressing a cool nose into Wesley's neck - letting his thigh come up over Wesley's thigh and jostle Xander's leg. "Smell good, too. Perfect," Spike said. And then he jerked up, looking a little dazed. "Speaking of - Wes, pet... Would you -" Spike seemed to actually be a little
embarrassed, and Wesley couldn't begin to imagine the scenario that would make that possible.

"Would I what, Spike?"

"Would you...show Xander...what you showed me?"

Xander looked Wesley over playfully from head to toe. "You mean there's something I haven't seen?" But Wesley wasn't laughing. "Wes?"

"I - yes, there is." Wesley cast a quick nervous glance at Spike - let his head fall back and shivered.

Wesley's skin shimmered and rippled beneath Xander and Spike, muscles stretched and hardened - familiar planes of Wesley's face changed and Xander caught his breath. "Still the demon magnet."

Spike watched Wesley, and watched Xander - watched Xander lean up and examine the sharp planes and angles of Wes' new face - watched him delicately brush over the shimmering spines and explore a pointed ear before slowly sweeping a
hand down Wes' chest.

"You're - wow, Wes, what can I say? So...beautiful. Really just...beautiful. And - you have Spock ears."

"If you ask me to say 'fascinating' or call you 'Captain' I shan't." Wesley shivered back into his human form, looked down at Xander's hand where it still lay on his chest. And as he watched, Spike slid his hand over Xander's and pressed, and Wesley closed his eyes, counting his heartbeats against the pressure on his ribs.

"What about 'live long and prosper'?"

Wesley twitched, but smiled. "No."

"Will you say 'We shield it with ritual and custom shrouded in antiquity. You humans have no conception. It strips our minds from us. It brings a madness which rips away the veneer of civilization. It is the 'pon farr' - the time of mating'?"

Wesley and Spike stared at Xander, speechless.
Xander blushed. "You jack off to an episode enough times in your formative years - you remember things."

Square Twelve

The days leading up to the conference passed in a blur, for Xander. They said goodbye to Wesley on Sunday with long hugs and even a soft kiss each - not pushing, just *wanting*, and promising. Wesley seemed...happy about it. That next weekend they made the drive up to Ojai again - this time without truck-stop sex. Spike pouted about *that* for hours, but Xander was proud of his resolve - even if he did grab Spike and slam him into the first convenient surface the second they got into their hotel room. The new piercings - three 10 gage stainless rings in his left ear, one in his right - itched still. Spike had
encouraged him and instead of plain stainless balls Xander had picked out something a little fancier, and now little orbs of densely-gold tigers-eye winked at him every time he looked in the mirror. He liked the weight of them - shook his head, from time to time, just to feel them. Russ liked them, too. Dave, of course, sneered.

Three days before they were scheduled to leave Xander had a mild panic attack. How was Spike going to get on the plane? You had to have ID - a passport - *something*. Spike had kissed him breathless and then calmly produced a California Driver's license and a passport all up to date, all listing him as 'William Rothesay', naturalized citizen of the US. Xander was amazed, but Spike just said that money talked, and he had plenty, now. He refused to say how much, but every time he thought of it he got a hedonistic twinkle in his eye, and Xander was pretty sure that egg-sized emeralds and diamonds enough to fill up a sandwich baggie went for more than loose change on the black market.
He'd managed to stagger out of bed and down to the site for a couple of hours on Thursday - Spike was 'wearing him out' so he could sleep 'day-shift' hours and cope better with the conference's schedule. Being worn out by Spike was no joke - he was dedicated, creative, and tireless. Xander felt so sex-addled he was lucky he didn't run his truck into a light-pole coming home. Spike was waiting when he got back, wearing nothing but a grin, holding a beer in one hand and a bright blue vibrator in the other. Xander had hysterical giggles for twenty minutes.

Finally, around seven - bare minutes after the sun had dipped below the horizon - they tossed their bags into the back of the truck and climbed in. Spike was driving - Xander had insisted his legs were too weak to operate the truck and Spike had smirked in triumph and hit highway 101 doing 110. Xander just turned on the CD player and made sure his seat-belt was secure.

Once in L.A. - and after Xander and Spike had abandoned Xander's truck to the tender mercies of
the LAX parking demons - Xander had another brief moment of panic when the metal detector beeped at Spike and a security guard who reminded Xander way too much of Andrew asked Spike to step to one side and hold out his arms.

And god he hoped he was the only person who noticed Spike's eyes flicker gold and the way he smirked when the wand came too close to his crotch.

*Please don't make a scene. And please god no strip searching the vampire.* Because Xander wasn't the only one who'd gotten a piercing in Ojai.

"Sir? Sir, step through the scanner."

Xander jumped - hurried through the scanner and grabbed his bag, pasted on his best 'big harmless Xander' smile and silently prayed he wouldn't have to explain to the LAPD or FAA or whoever paid these goons now why Spike had whatever disturbing and conspicuous item had made the scanner go off.
"Let's go pet."

Xander jumped again. "We can go?"

"Don't have to look so surprised, love. Left a penny in my pocket, that's all." Spike smirked. "And glad-hands over there's got a light touch - reckon I should tip him?"

"Let's not find out." God, he shouldn't be so nervous - shaky. Jumpy.

"C'mon, love," Spike said, pulling him close, arm around his waist. Xander's heart was going a mile a minute and he was jumping at every blat of the PA and touch of random body in the crowded concourse. "Let's go get a drink, yeah? Somethin' to settle your nerves." Xander nodded dazedly and Spike guided him away, ignoring, for once, any odd or sneering or hostile looks that go thrown their way.

Halfway down the endless concourse Spike abruptly
turned and pushed through the blue-painted door of a men's room. Xander started to protest and Spike just kept pushing - right into the big handicapped stall at the end. He hung their bags on the hook on the door, shoved Xander into the wall and kissed him, hard.

"Spike, what the fuck -"

"You're too tense, love," Spike said. He slid into a crouch - got Xander's jeans open and halfway down in seconds flat and a moment later had the soft flesh of Xander's cock in his mouth. Clove-citrus-mint. Salt-sweet. Rising musk. Spike ran his left hand back between Xander's legs - his right up under Xander's shirt. Bent all his talents on one objective and ten minutes later he was pushing himself slowly up Xander's limp body, nipping soft kisses over his throat and mouth and smiling to himself when Xander kissed him, tongue searching for traces of his own come in Spike's mouth.

"Think you can sit on the plane now?"
"Yeah but I'm not so sure I can walk. God." Xander let his head fall back, and Spike's hand was there to keep it from hitting the wall - made him smile and slide a hand up under Spike's shirt, thumbing a nipple - enjoying the rock of Spike's hips. He closed his eye and sighed, pulled his hands out and smoothed Spike's shirt. "Better get out of here before a group of businessmen come swinging in and turn out to be going to the same convention."

"We could wait 'em out," Spike said, pushing into Xander's thigh - nuzzling into his hair and throat and kissing him again, because over the harsh antiseptic smell was the rich, clean, spicy smell of Xander, and he didn't want to move away, just yet.

"We'll come out together all rumpled with our lips swollen and our shirts untucked and make them question their sexuality." Xander mumbled against Spike's lips, didn't want to let them go once he'd found them - smiled and felt them smiling too.

"You could make the Pope question his sexuality, love. No - wait." Spike kissed the tip of Xander's
nose, grinning. "Pope's probably already been bent over a pew sometime, that's too easy - how 'bout -" The door crashed open and at least three people came in - loud and excited and youngish, and Xander jumped and then relaxed again. And sighed.

"We really need to go check in. Takes longer now, you know."

"I know." Spike sighed too - took the bags down off the hook and handed Xander his - slung his own over his shoulder and opened the door. Three heads - two dirty-blond, one red - were at the urinals and swiveled in his direction and he gave them a Johnny Rotten sort of death-glare and grabbed Xander's hand.

"Let's go get that drink too, yeah? I fancy a Bloody Mary."

"Okay, that's way too easy. I'm not taking that one." Xander watched Spike snicker out of the corner of his eye, leaned into him when a leather-clad arm wound around his waist - closed his eye. "Jesus I
need coffee."

"Irish coffee, do you up right, pet," Spike murmured, then shot an 'I will kill you' glare at the surfer-boys gawping with their dicks in their hands. "All mine, boys, so fuck right off," he said, and kicked the restroom door open.

Irish coffee, Bloody Mary and an oversized blueberry muffin that cost more than the drinks together and they were at their gate, handing over their tickets and ID and Xander was looking more his usual self. This lasted until they reached their seats on the plane - narrow and cramped but together, and Xander shoved the arm rest up out of the way and slumped against Spike. "Doin' all right, pet?"

"How about you wake me up and ask me that again in Chicago?" Xander rolled his head on Spike's shoulder, looked over him and out across the tarmac where the luggage movers were zipping back and forth.
"Sure, love." Spike got Xander's hand in his - got his cheek on Xander's hair and closed his eyes. "You sleep, I'll be here," Xander nodded into him, sighing out a huge breath, and when the pretty little stewardess tucked the blanket around him fifteen minutes later he didn't so much as twitch. Spike just snuggled him closer - watched the stars revolve past the window, and the clouds go from damp, black velvet to iced silver as the moon pushed slowly above them. *I'll be here*, he thought, and Xander's hand closed a little tighter on his own.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander stepped out of the hotel shower cubicle with a luxuriant groan - wriggled his toes in the cheap bath mat that *he*, Xander Harris, did not have to pick up or launder. A guy had to find his jollies somewhere after all, and the hotel towels were a joke. He tossed the towel after the bath mat and prowled back into the room on a cloud of steam, stalking the lump beneath the covers with the single-minded purpose of a man who knows he has
three hours before he's required to make an appearance at the first function.

"Sweetheart," he singsonged, crawling over the covers, Spike's body hard and angular beneath him - dropped kisses over elbow, shoulder, and ear - nibbled at the lobe. He could hear his earrings clicking together when he moved his head and shook, spraying Spike with a fine layer of water droplets.

"S'fuckin' cold!" Spike yelped, but he didn't actually move - couldn't move. Sunk in lassitude and blissful heat - he'd packed his own electric blanket, thank you very much - and as delicious as Xander smelled he just wanted one. More. Hour.

Xander laughed, licked a drop of lemon and spice scented water from Spike's cheek always bring your own soap and shampoo! and fed it to him with a lazy-sweet sweep of his tongue between Spike's lips. He got a sleep-laden response then slid off the bed to sit on the floor. Flipped through the convention binder. Friday night casual buffet meet
and greet. Thank god for casual.

Spike cracked an eye open and saw the top of a tousled head - reached out and began to work his fingers through the long strands of shower-damp hair. "Xaan-derr..." he purred, and let his fingers slip down to stroke the side of Xander's throat. Because his mouth tasted sweet still, from Xander's kiss, and his lips were tingling and fuck sleep, he wanted more of that.

Xander chuckled and arched his neck against the bed, turned his head until he could get his lips against Spike's inner wrist. He mouthed the soft skin, kissing down to Spike's palm - nibbled. "I thought you wanted to sleep."

"Can sleep when I'm dead." Spike let his fingers curl around Xander's jaw - stroked razor-smoothed skin and then let his fingers trail over Xander's lips, breathing in softly when Xander lipped at his fingertips. "Want this whenever I can get it."

Xander lifted the blankets and slithered back into
the bed - rolled over and molded himself against Spike's side and slid a leg down between his. "You could have had me in the shower. All that hot water and slippery soap and the conditioner you like because it tastes like eggnog with my shampoo."

"Didn't want to get up. Got you here now...and I'll bet you taste like eggnog..." Spike wriggled his arm free and got it around Xander's back - pulled him close and began a slow and methodical licking over every bit of neck and shoulder and collarbone he could reach. Lick, nibble, suck, kiss... Xander tasted of eggnog and citrus and salt and Spike 'hmmmm'd in his throat, fingers kneading the small of Xander's back.

The kneading felt so good - made Xander stretch until he felt his spine pop and he sighed into Spike's lips, tongue, teeth. "You taste like smoke...and pennies." He wormed an arm under Spike's head, scratched his fingernails through silky white curls and fluff.

"Worth more than that," Spike muttered, then he
lifted his head fractionally, looking at Xander. "Want me to go brush?"

"Nah. I like it. Tastes like you." Xander flexed his fingers - the curve of Spike's skull fit perfectly against his hand and curls tickled between his fingers. "Tastes like your blood."

"Good. Didn't want to get up." Spike snuggled back down happily, in truth feeling almost too lazy to do much more. Just want to lie here with him. Bugger the meet'n'greet an' all the suits tryin' to relax over Swedish meatballs and martinis. Just want my Xan...

"Stay here," he murmured, his head on Xander's chest, now - legs tangled and Xander's hand slow and gentle in his hair. "Tell 'em you ate poisoned fettuccini on the plane and you can't stop throwing up."

"That? Is so tempting, sweetheart. But I am resisting. See me resist." Xander slid his hand down Spike's spine - warm from the blanket, smooth from the cosmic unfairness of vampires who had perfect skin and perfect hair and a perfect ass - Xander
groaned in his throat, smiled. "And any vote by Little Xander doesn't count."

Little Xander voted enthusiastically 'yes'.

"Does so," Spike muttered. He squirmed until he was on his elbows over Xander, arch of hip to cup of pelvic bone. He started doing a slow grind with his hips. "Votes yes - I can feel it - big, emphatic yes."

"Big, huh?" Xander slid his hands between them - placed his palms against Spike's chest, lifted him until he could look down their bodies - see the hard-slick slide of cock against cock and the wink of metal peeking up at him from Spike's. He shivered. "No - no, that is way too easy."

"Sayin' I'm easy?" Spike said, bracing up on his knees a little and pressing down - doing something close to a full-body push up, but it involved much more flesh on flesh.

"You first." Xander ran his palms down from Spike's shoulder blades to the curve of his buttocks, spread
his legs and pulled Spike against him in a way that made sparks flash behind his eyelids. "Are you saying I'm big?"

Spike closed his eyes, holding his chest inches from Xander - feeling the heat from him rise up in a ticklish wave. Feeling the hard press of Xander's cock against his, and the belly that panted up against his own. Xander's knees brushing against Spike's biceps and Xander's heels in the backs of his thighs.

"You're lovely and big, pet, perfect size to fill me right up - perfect size to make me mad for it, love..." He dipped down and kissed Xander, hard and bruising kiss - thrust up - and someone pounded on the door. They both jumped. Spike opened his eyes.

"Don't. Move." he ordered, and slithered fast out of the bed.

Xander tilted his head back, laughed helplessly because wasn't he supposed to be resisting seduction? Not holding his legs high and wide in a
room that was a *lot* colder with the blankets thrown off. He glared down at his cock. "Traitor."

He could just make out the sound of Spike opening the door and greeting someone - if *What the fuck took you so long?* could be called a greeting. He crawled to the end of the bed to get a look at whoever or whatever it was and why they weren't hurrying up and letting Spike get back to fucking him.

*Right. There. Take the money. Take. The money. Good fucking god! Take the damn money!* Spike glared at the garrulous demon that was piling a menu, business cards, and a fridge magnet on top of his mini-cooler of blood, chatting about delivery times and the 'specials'.

"I'm about to get my dinner straight from the tap, you git," he finally growled, and the demon jumped, turned and lumbered off. Spike kicked the door shut - put on the chain - and stalked the five steps to the desk. He dropped the cooler and looked over at the bed, where Xander was on his belly, feet up behind
"You - were not - supposed to move," Spike said, in a low and growly sort of voice. He almost grinned when Xander's eye went wide. He sauntered to the bed - and stepped up the single riser that it was elevated on. Xander scrambled back to the on-his-back position.

"Ummmm - oops?"

"Oops, pet?" Spike crawled up the bed, watching Xander's cock jump with his breathing - watching Xander's hands clutch the sheets in anticipation. "Gonna have to punish you." Spike straddled Xander's hips and reached behind himself, getting Xander's cock in his hand. Xander had showered - he had not - and he slid, slow as he could, down and down, gliding on the remains of last nights lube. Not...quite...enough, and Spike let his head fall back in pure pleasure. "Mmmm..."

"This is punishment - how?" Xander asked, hands grasping his hips.
"Got three hours 'til your - thing. I'm gonna make this last...at least two," Spike purred.

"Still not grasping the *punishment* concept here." Xander slid shaking hands up Spike's thighs - and if this was punishment, lying on his back like a really turned on sloth while Spike *rode* him for two hours, bring on the punishment! Punish away! Xander was - was -

*Okay, not doing so well with the *thinking*. Because Spike was still *warm* inside, tight and just slick enough to be rough and dirty the way he threw back his head and groaned like the walls were soundproof.*

The window faced east, so the curtain were wide open and the diffuse pinks of sunset gilded Spike's skin, Spike looked - *Fucking edible*.

"Feel so good inside, Xan. Feel every bump and ridge. Gonna get metal in this for me some day, yeah? Nice thick ring at the top like mine?" Spike
jacked himself slowly slick on pre-come - dull blue-gray metallic bead, hidden then revealed by Spike's foreskin on every stroke.

"That - should really not be making me harder." Xander reached out to trace the smooth metal wave of Spike's ring, thick enough to make Xander shudder - feel it banging and dragging in him, over him, against him - solid, heavy and good.

"Course it should, love - you felt me, last night - you made the prettiest sounds..." Spike pulled up - nearly off - slid back down again, slow as molasses on a winter day, muscles clamping tight so he could feel every inch of Xander's cock - so Xander could feel every inch of him. He paused to run his fingers over the head of his own cock - held them out to Xander's mouth. "Want a taste, pet?"

Xander caught Spike's wrist, drew it down - watched the haze come over Spike's eyes as he curled his tongue over the first finger, second - took them in warm and slow as Spike sliding down on him and fought to keep his eye open. The taste of metal was
stronger now in the salt-musk flavor, changed - with a bright tang of the piercing that reminded him of tequila with salt and lime. He felt Spike's finger slide over the pad of his tongue - sliding out, trapped it with his teeth and growled. Gonna make you breathe, sweetheart.

Spike dropped his chin to his chest, watching Xander watch him. Xander's mouth was hot - his teeth prickling tight over Spike's knuckles. Spike wiggled them, just a bit - slowly slid his fingers back inside, letting Xander suck - lick - wanting him to. He ran his other hand up Xander's ribs and brushed over his nipples; light pressure, the edge of a nail, then his palm, soothing.

Xander sucked in a breath around Spike's fingers - twisted his tongue up between into the sensitive web - let his head fall back, let go - cool trail of damp fingers down his jaw, over his throat, over the bite that never had time to heal and made him shudder under every touch. This? Was sex without Spike's blood in him, without the fiery passenger in Xander's veins making everything hotter - faster -
more intense.

He dropped his hands to the delicate bones of Spike's ankles, felt them shift, tendons flex under his fingers, slid up strong calves, bony knees - touch.

"Love when you do that, love your hands on me like that, just touching..." Spike put his hands over Xander's - let them move where Xander's hands moved, then slid his own down and off - bent slowly, with his hands sliding into the thick hair at the back of Xander's head. He brought his mouth to Xander's and just hovered there a moment, lips barely touching. Love you...love this... "Xan...love..."

Xander stretched - slid his hands up the cooling expanse of Spike's back and into his hair, resting - holding. "Say it again." His eye fluttered closed - open - Spike so close he could only see one blue eye looking back at him, dark as the sky outside the window. He could feel the slightly chapped skin of his lower lip catch on Spike's smoothness, tongue darted out to taste - just a taste - smoke and metal.
"Love. Xander, love, love you..." Xander's tongue on his lips, soft flutter like a bird's wing and Spike pressed closer, licking a slow line along Xander's lower lip - tracing his upper lip - dipping fractionally inside, humming-bird kiss. *Sweet and mint and spice...*

"Love you - sweetheart..." Spoken into the kiss, shared on lips and tongues - breathed in - *good.*

~**~*~*~*~*

"Is there a bar?" Spike asked, digging out a cigarette and lighting up. The room beyond was brightly lit - too bright, really. Dozens of round tables with name-cards, a long buffet table with - yes - Swedish meatballs somewhere. He could *smell* them. The woman at the desk was trying to stick a name-tag on him and he batted irritably at her hand.

"Leave off, ducks."

"Alexander Harris. I'm with Sunnydale Southwest."
Xander accepted his clip-on laminated name-tag with better grace from the woman's companion and took a blankly cheerful 'Hello! My name is:' sticker from her - scrawled on it and slapped it on Spike's chest. Arm possessively - proudly - around Spike's waist, he gave the women at the desk a plastic smile before hustling them into the hall. "You can take it off as soon as she's not watching us," he muttered.

Spike got his own arm around Xander - around the softness of the cashmere jumper he'd nudged him into buying. With his other hand he immediately plucked at the name-tag and peeled it off, glancing at what Xander had written. 'Companion of Alexander Harris'. He snorted, crumpling it and letting it fall.

"Companion my arse," he muttered into Xander's ear. "Fuckin' love of your life, yeah?" Louder, he continued: "Christ, love - what a turn out. There's the bar." Need a drink, then another drink, then...oh! Wings. Thank god. And - more drinks. More zombies in here than any Sunnydale cemetery."
Xander processed it all. Companion. Bar. Turnout. Loud turnout. Love of his life - and smiled. "And there's the line for the bar." Spike's shirt was soft and heavy beneath his palm, and he didn't want to let go yet. Unfortunately his choice was either letting go or joining Spike in his bee-line to the bar. Spike was the one familiar point in a sea of faces - faces he'd have to...face. Like the first day of High School again only without the skateboard - and with booze.

Lots of booze.

And a long line at the bar.

And funny how the thought of a room full of drunken adults still made his stomach flip over. "Is it too late for the poisoned fettuccini?"

"You want to go, love? We'll go." Spike came to a stop, turning to look at Xander. The man's heartbeat was vibrating through his body, too hard and fast for a simple buffet - his scent held a faint
trace of...fear? "Love - what is it?" he said, softly - pulled Xander a little closer and cupped his cheek, hating the stupid patch that marred the lines of Xander's face. The elastic was rough under his fingers and Spike smoothed the skin around it.

Xander pushed into Spike's touch, too tense to let his eye close - relax. "Can't go. I have to do this." Reluctant answer to both questions at once. "I'm a responsible adult with a company's future and profits riding on my professional presentation of myself at a conference of my peers. And god, who wrote that stuff in the company packet, a former High School guidance counselor?" He pushed a smile to the forefront, grabbed Spike's hand and aimed for the bar.

Spike let himself be towed along, frowning just a little. They joined the queue and Spike got behind Xander, wrapping his arms around him and resting his chin on Xander's shoulder - rubbing against cashmere and silken hair, just a little. Whispered in Xander's ear. "Don't have to be responsible, love. I've got plenty
of money, you know. We can just bugger off back home if you like." Knowing Xander probably wouldn't, but he wanted him to know he could. If he wanted to.

Xander didn't answer - couldn't yet because he was pretty sure his answer would be something he'd regret on Monday when he was getting fired. Because - well, because in every crap job he'd had - every job that'd demeaned him, humiliated him, kicked his ass - he'd never been fired because of something he couldn't do. "I'm gonna do this." He tilted his head against Spike's hair - ignored the eyes watching them, brushed his hands over Spike's arms.

"Anything you say, love. I'm right here." Spike kissed what he could reach and settled then, skull to skull with a small sigh. Just lending his solidity - just being there. Seeing every look that was coming their way and ignoring it, because he wasn't going to start a fight at Xander's conference and if he noticed... He'd have to do something.
"You're the sexiest guy here," he added, tiny push of groin to ass, and Xander pushed back, just a little. *Won't make you...a spectacle, love. Trust me.*

"Too bad I'm taken, huh?" Xander swayed into Spike's grasp, caught glimpses of other couples standing close - holding hands, brushing shoulders. It felt good to *be* one of them.

"Yup, taken." Xander twisted around to grin at him. *All. Mine.*

~*~*~*~*~

As the booze flowed, the room relaxed - got louder, happier, more *friendly*. And Xander got more tense - more friendly with a planter in the corner where he could wait for Spike to come back from the bar - again - and thank *god* nobody wanted to talk to the weird guy hiding behind a plant in the corner. *Hurry up, sweetheart. The plant? Not a great conversationalist.*
Spike eeled his way across the room, the last of his whiskey going down his throat in a lovely warm burn. Heading for Xander, dodging the half-drunk crowd and looking around with an offended snarl when some *person* put a hand on his ass. *Fuck off, human. Taken.*

"Xander, love - we are *leaving,*" he said, and plucked Xander's glass out of his white-knuckled hand. Xander had gotten more quiet - more tense - as the party had heated up and he looked utterly miserable and ready to snap. Spike grabbed his hand - ditched the glass in the planter Xander was practically hiding behind - and tugged him close.

"I'm going out of my bloody mind, pet. Walk me upstairs, yeah?" Making it about *him,* and not about Xander, and not about... Not about whatever it is *that's making him so damn nervous.* Xander blinked at him for a moment and then they were walking, fast. Across the room, out the door, and if Spike growled more than once, well - they were drunk. They wouldn't remember.
Spike wound around Xander in the elevator, nose buried in the soft sweater. Xander dropped his head onto Spike's shoulder - tired, tired - god, like all his words were sucked out of him in the first five minutes of business small talk. *Don't want to be that. Don't want to turn into that. God.* "I thought I *liked* talking."

Spike snorted, wormed his arms between Xander's back and the wall of the elevator. "Nobody likes talking about that boring shite, pet."

"The guy from Texas got pretty worked up over the new Caterpillar catalog."

"Texas - that the bloke who kept pounding you on the back?"

Xander couldn't see Spike's face, but he *knew* those blue eyes were narrowing dangerously - same as they had when that big friendly hand had punctuated every lame joke with a smack against Xander's spine that had knocked the breath out of him. "Yeah. Um. Roy. Little Roy. I'd hate to meet Big
"Little Roy better keep his hands to himself or he's gonna regret it," Spike growled, and pinned Xander to the elevator wall, kissing him as if he were drowning and Xander were oxygen. "Christ...hated not touching you...wanted to kiss you for the last hour...fuckin' people..." Spike got one hand under Xander's jumper - got the other in his hair and irritably snatched the damn *patch* off, glimpsing red, angry flesh where the elastic had dug in. "Taste fuckin' good..."

Xander's arms had nowhere to go but around Spike - where they should've been all *evening*. Arms full of Spike, mouth full of a Spike still tingly from the hot wings. He groaned, getting a leg around Spike - wanted to get *both* around him because Xander had *never* claimed not to deal with tension through sex. Lots of sex. Lots and lots of -

He threw his head back against the wall, sucking in breath when he got too dizzy. "Sex," he croaked.
"What about it, love?" Spike asked, going straight for the newly-bared skin of Xander's throat and sucking, licking, nibbling. God, he'd needed this all night. "You sayin' you want some, pet? Need some? Always need you..." Spike got his hand under Xander's thigh and onto his ass and thrust into him, groaning just a little as Xander, seemingly, tried to crawl under his skin.

"Sex good." Xander squeezed his eye shut - complex shift of muscles trying to push Spike away and pull him closer at the same time. "Sex in elevator with camera - bad." He caught Spike's head between his hands, tugged to look into dark blue eyes, sweep tanned thumbs across the hollows of Spike's cheeks. "Business dinners very bad. I've gotta get out of here, sweetheart."

"Got just the thing..." Spike overpowered Xander's half-hearted attempts to push him off and kissed him breathless - pulled him out of the elevator when the doors slid open, walking backwards, trusting his reflexes to keep them from hitting walls.
Teeth and tongue and lips, hands under his clothes and finally the door - the room - the key slotting in and turning with a heavy click. Before they had even reached the bed, Spike had Xander's jeans open, and was working on his own.

"So okay with this." Fast and frantic, hard and good - shirts shoved up, pants shoved down and then Spike's palm bitten open, rich and bloody against Xander's mouth and he was drinking - coming with the bright crackles and starbursts of the blood blooming in him - making everything better - right.

Got a leg lazily between Spike's, bellies slick with Xander's come - and Spike was still moving, sinuous like the blood sliding down Xander's tongue, into his throat - and god, he could be embarrassed coming so fast - if it didn't make Spike look so hungry.

Spike pulled his hand off Xander's mouth - drove hard and fast into the hollow of Xander's hip, the still-firm length of Xander's cock dragging against him, his strokes lubricated on Xander's come. The heavy, salt-spice scent was delicious and Spike
buried his face in Xander's neck - mouthed the old bite-mark there and then changed - scraped with his fangs. Then he bit, delicately, sucking in the thin spurt of blood into his mouth, the heat and iron-salt-sweet of it rushing over him - champagne-tingle down the back of his throat, his spine and his cock and he arched hard, coming, panting. "God - Xan...damn good, love," he mumbled, and just shut his eyes for a moment.

Xander lay there, eye closed to the gently spinning room and listened to his pulse beat in time with the bite on his throat; floated with Spike in the post-orgasmic lassitude. "Don't change back yet sweetheart." Barely a whisper.

He nudged at Spike's hair with his cheek until he lifted his head - ran his fingers over the ridges and bumps of the other face. "Want this." He brushed his lips over Spike's, tongue darted out to taste the obsidian-sharp teeth. "Never thought this was beautiful before." Inside-the-head words slithering their way outside but it was okay. Because a guy couldn't be blamed for saying stupid sweet things
after a great orgasm, could he?

"Beautiful now?" Spike whispered, and Xander nodded mutely, lips still touching Spike's. "You're beautiful. You're so beautiful. Xander, you..." Spike couldn't really talk, just yet, even though he wanted to - wanted to tell Xander poetry and lilting prose - wanted to give him words as transcendent - as burning - as the emotion that surged in him. But he couldn't get them out - couldn't string them together the way they were in his head, so he settled for kissing Xander breathless - whimpering, hoping his mouth and his hands said what his tongue couldn't.

"So beautiful." Xander moaned under the touches, smiled into lips and teeth that were being gentle with him. "You..." The whimpering made his chest hurt, made him want to protect Spike which wasn't any more logical than his insane drive to protect Buffy who he - really didn't want to think about just then, in bed with Spike. "Again." Whispered word, gentle hands drew Spike back to his throat. Needed that...closeness after the forced distance through
Spike moaned softly - let Xander draw his head down, into his neck again - lapped his tongue over and over the mark, gleaning every drop of blood that still welled there.

His cock was hardening and filling again and he wanted - wanted in. "Xan - love, help me -" He kicked at his boots, getting them off - wormed out of his jeans one-handed while he yanked at Xander's boots and Xander struggled dazedly with his own jeans. Naked from the waist down Spike groped along the headboard and found the lube - got a hasty dollop onto his palm. Xander was watching him, his eye nearly black, his mouth open and panting. "Love how you feel around me," Spike breathed, getting between Xander's legs - pushing them up and open.

He caressed the backs of sensitive thighs then leaned over Xander, guiding himself and sinking slowly, slowly in. Xander arched under him and Spike pushed to the hilt - waited for one long
moment, his own gaze locked with Xander's. Then he moved - thrust - deep, long push and pull into exquisite heat and pressure. Xander's head was back - his hands on Spike's ribs and Spike bent over him and kissed him. Then he let his mouth slide down and down, and let his fangs slip in. Xander stiffened, gasping, and Spike put his hand back to Xander's mouth, to give him the last few drops that still clung there.

"Slow," Xander mumbled into Spike's palm, dazed - taste of coppery salt giving way to the clean lemon-musk flavor of Spike's skin. He was still soft, shuddered with the erotic *feeling* of being so full - of Spike. Spike's blood, Spike's cock, Spike's fangs and tongue - hot where cool flesh breached him and cool fangs dipped beneath his skin and cold everywhere Spike *wasn't* touching.

"Could do this all night - uh, if you keep doing all the work. So willing to let you keep - *god!* - doing all the work." He felt Spike chuckle against him, smiled and slid his legs down Spike's - trapped and tangled and closed his eye.
Spike knew Xander was awake - felt him do that little cat-stretch thing he did; fingers and toes and then full-body arch that looked like heaven on the cream silk sheets at home. Here, the upward curve and arabesque of tanned limbs was muffled under sheets and blankets and duvet. Spike grinned to himself and turned up the volume on the TV.

"Time is it?" Xander mumbled, and Spike leaned over on one elbow, brushing back a curtain of hair.

"Just after eleven, love."

"Mmphf. Starving...eleven?" Xander sat bolt upright and Spike twitched away, narrowly missing having his nose solidly whacked by Xander's forehead.

"Eleven pee em. Middle of the night, love." Xander stared at him and then slumped back into the bed.
"Jesus. Thought I'd slept through - whatever - day one... That'd be kinda cool. Only, not." Xander mumbled, giving Spike a sleep-muddled stare.

"Want to get some food?" Spike hoped he'd say yes - he was *bored*, and energized from sex and Xander's blood. *My blood's gonna hit him any second now. Now he's all - rested up.*

Xander rubbed his hands over his stomach, digging into the emptiness with his palms and stretched again. "God, yes. Why did I ever think buffets were *filling*?"

Spike snorted. "You'd have to *eat* at one for it to fill you up, pet. Not pick at a plate for an hour and call it done."

Xander groaned again but this time it had nothing to do with the sensual all over ache and tingling in his veins. "Tasted like shit, sweetheart. Probably bad for me too," he mumbled against Spike's skin - let Spike draw him up, lips to lips - scrambled onto his knees on the mattress and pressed Spike down
onto his back in search of that rich red Spike taste that was better than - okay, better than pretty much everything.

Spike let Xander pin him and kiss him until the man was breathless and had to pull back. "Hello, love," he murmured, and Xander grinned down at him.

"Hello. Food? Should we call room service? Is there room service? Maybe we should go out. I wonder if there's some sort of guide - " Xander bounced off the bed and started rifling the desk and Spike slithered after him - grabbed him tight around the waist.

"I think we should go out. Take a walk down to the pier - it's not far. Sure to be places open. Sound good?" Spike buried his face in Xander's hair, still damp at the roots and smelling of sweet shampoo.

"You had me at 'it's not far'." Xander slid his hands behind himself, up over Spike's hips with a backwards wriggle that woke up the rest of him nicely. "I feel like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde - unless it
was Mr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde."

Spike chuckled, a warm vibration against the nape of Xander's neck that made him shiver. "How's that then, pet?"

"Dr. Alex and Mr. Xander. Dr. Alex is the responsible guy they hired to come here - give presentations and not grope his boyfriend in the conference hall."

"And Mr. Xander?" Spike mouthed over the tattoo, nibbled the point of Xander's shoulder.

"Mr. Xander is a Spike addict who has sex in elevators and wakes up at midnight to a sexy vampire in his bed."

"Mmmm...Mr. Xander - let's go eat and grope each other on the pier." Spike slid his hands up into Xander's hair and turned his head so he could lick into Xander's mouth and Xander responded eagerly, twisting half around, hips bumping. Then his stomach rumbled and he broke away, laughing.
"Dr. Alex, Mr. Xander, and my stomach as The Blob which is going to escape and eat us alive." Spike cleared his throat and Xander grinned. "Or dead."

They threw on clothes, Xander grumbling a protest when Spike insisted on layers for warmth but giving in quickly once Spike opened the window to a blast of chill wind off of Lake Michigan and an idle comment of 'Looks like an early snow, pet'.

At the doors of the hotel Spike turned and tugged at Xander's jacket-collar - made sure it was buttoned up all the way. The soft merino wool of Xander's scarf was dyed in dark, dark browns, golds, and greens, and made Xander's eye gleam as richly as the tiger's eye in his earrings. "Ready then?"

"It's not the Arctic Circle, Spike," Xander said, but he smiled, and Spike tucked Xander's arm into his - pushed the doors open, and walked out. The wind that hit them was edged with ice and Xander took a deep, deep breath of it - and then let it out in a loud whoop.
"Damn! Cold! I like it!" he laughed, and Spike laughed with him.

"Right then - we're going north." Spike turned them and they strode briskly up the street, laughing into the wind.

Xander shivered, felt his socket and teeth ache with the cold wind but couldn't not grin into it as he jogged with Spike across the street and into a park. There was frost on the grass, crunching underfoot and the trees were all but empty of leaves stark and gray against the city night sky. Already California seemed like an impossible dream - the cool evening wind of Ojai like a summer breeze.

"Where is it?" He had to raise his voice above the wind, staggered into Spike when a gust through the trees caught him by surprise.

"There's the Ferris wheel, love -" Spike said, pointing, and Xander's face lit up at the huge arch of neon and twinkling light. Navy Pier was closed for the night, but the lights gleamed softly in the
darkness, and beyond were the tell-tale flicker of buoy lights and the running lights of ships and private boats, all twinkling and sparkling like a reverse star field.

"Oh - cool -" Xander's walk slowed and they strolled, strong scents of lake-water and wet wood, and the faint underlying spice of dead leaves and pines from the park. Clouds scudded overhead, alternately revealing and hiding a rising moon that was slowly polishing itself from dull copper to gleaming silver on a wind that seemed to come straight off a glacier.

The lights reflected, sparkled in Xander's eye, caught and kept there as he looked everywhere - turned in a laughing circle to take it all in once they broke through the trees to the lakefront itself. One more couple, arm in arm in the night. Xander bumped into Spike, leaned close and relished the vampire's shiver at the brush of warm breath over his ear. "I smell hotdogs. And popcorn."

"Long gone, pet. We'll find you something better."
"No sushi this time."

"Thought you liked the sushi, love. You ate your share."

"In California. Where it is a lot warmer than this."

"Then we'll just have to find something to warm you up from the inside, won't we?" Spike's eyes flicked to Xander's neck in a way that made him shiver - grin.

"Had some of that before we left."

Spike chuckled. "Something that fills your stomach too this time."

The city rose along the far shore of the lake, gleaming gold and white and red. Soft lap of water along rocks and down under the pier itself - a hollow sort of noise in the echoing space. The went west after a bit, into a more pedestrian area of the city, with convenience stores and bars, traffic
rushing past on damp streets. "Look there, Xander - that looks good," Spike said, nodding to a dark entry and a crowd of taxis.

"How can you tell?" Xander hurried after Spike once the light turned green, dodged puddles in the sidewalk and hopped the gutter onto the curb.

"Look at all the taxies, love! They always know. Ahhh - smell that - curry. I could murder a good curry."

"My sweetheart the pathological killer, ladies and gentlemen. Even the food isn't safe."

Spike couldn't help laughing. Xander's face was flushed with the cold, his hair like dark feathers around his cheeks and throat. Eye sparkling, step buoyant - he looked every bit as edible as the curry smelled. Spike dove in for a fast, hard kiss. "Curry makes me...hot," he added, and pushed the open the door of the Baba Palace.

"Sweetheart, saying hello makes you hot." But
Spike's words - hard press of Spike's lips - made the tingling tendrils of Spike's blood in him rush to his groin, made the room feel warm - very warm and Xander felt himself break out into a sweat. "And it's totally possible that curry makes me hot too. Or again, that could just be your basic effect of Spike on Xander."

"Or Xander on Spike," Spike murmured in his ear, pushing up against him one brief moment, press of hard flesh to Xander's thigh. "Oh, lovely - c'mon, I see a spot." Spike guided them deftly through the crowd and settled them at the long counter. There were rows of plates covered in cling-film, and Spike pointed them out to Xander. "What'll you have, pet?"

The smell at the hot line was wonderful, warm and fragrant with spices Xander didn't even have names for - made his nose itch and his mouth water. "One of everything." He grinned at Spike, turned to slide a leg between Spike's under cover of the duster - whispered in his ear. "Can I come back for seconds?"
"Thirs, even," Spike whispered back, then a thin, dark man in an apron and a hair-net was standing there, waiting to take their order, and Spike pointed out four - five - six things. Different things, for Xander to try. And one good, _hot_ curry for himself. "Gonna love this, Xander."

"Yeah well tell me which one will peel a layer off my tongue _before_ I take a bite of it this time." Xander pressed up against Spike's back, reached around him to grab bottled drinks with names he'd never heard of instead of the usual selection of Snapples, Cokes, and bottled water.

It took minutes for the food to arrive and Xander fell to it with gusto, his scarf and jacket draped over the back of his chair, his hair in his eyes and his fingers greasy - his mouth grinning around samosas with yogurt dip, korma and torn off pieces of naan.

Their feet tangled together under the table and Spike fed him bits of his own fiery order, watching him taste with a closed eye and pursed mouth and
then dive for his bottle of Limca. *Didn't look like this at that damn buffet supper. Looks like a kid - looks...so happy. Want you to be happy, love. Damn conference - wish i could keep you out of it.*

Xander's eye still darted restlessly under the influence of Spike's blood too, but he seemed better able to control it - better able to focus for a few precious seconds at a time and Spike followed his gaze, smirked. Two darkly stubbled faces bent over a shared plate of samosas - bodies hip to hip, thigh to thigh, knee to knee. A subtle tension drained out of Xander and he chewed the last bite of his bread with slow consideration - licked a drop of creamy korma from the ball of his thumb and slid his eye back to Spike.

"How much blood can I handle without putting myself in the Emergency Room?"

Spike stopped chewing for a second, and then reached for his own Limca. "I dunno, love. If you took a big hit - it might damage your heart. But...little sips, now and then...like, every few
hours... I think you'd be okay." Spike took a long swallow of the tangy soda and then grinned over at Xander. "Just what are you thinking, pet?"

"I want this." Xander gestured between them, to the restaurant, and to the night outside.

"You have it, pet."

Xander held up a hand. "But I have to play the company monkey all day tomorrow."

"Already told you I can take care of you love. If you want to leave the company, you just say the word."

"What if I don't?" Xander hurried on before the circular logic could catch up to him and bite him in the ass. "I want this and I want to do the job that's paying for this, too. I don't want to let the guys down but - " Xander's eye shone, reflected all the brilliant colors of the Baba Palace and its patrons. "I spent most of my life missing out on stuff like this. And I'm done missing out, Spike."
Spike ate a little more rice, thoughtfully. "So - basically... What you're saying is... What are you saying, Xander?"

"I'm saying I want to be 'Round-The-Clock Man while we're here. I'm saying I don't want to waste my Spike-time in Chicago sleeping." Xander caught Spike's wrist, drew it across the table to kiss, then bite, the heel of his thumb where the blood flowed earlier that night.

The bite was nothing - barely a scrape of tooth on flesh - but it was enough to make Spike shudder - to grab Xander's hand and pull it back - up to his mouth. "You sure, Xander? 'Cause you have to be sure." Spike knew that despite what his mouth was saying, his face - his body - was saying 'fucking yes!' And the demon... The demon was ready to pounce.

Xander licked his lip, tasted the trace of Spike lingering there - wished the movement looked as seductive on him as it did on Spike. But it'd do because Spike's eyes flickered gold and for a moment, his teeth were very sharp. "I am so sure,
sweetheart." Xander ghosted his thumb over Spike's bottom lip, watched the tip disappear inside.

Because while three days in Chicago with business associates and pressed suits were his ides of the first level of corporate hell, two nights in Chicago with Spike made his heart race and little Xander sit up and beg.

*God. He tastes good, smells good... He's sure... Have to keep an eye on him, though. He's doesn't really know and...neither do I. "Christ but you're beautiful,"* Spike murmured, reluctantly letting Xander's thumb slide away. "I'm gonna watch you like a hawk, you hear me? If I think you're acting - wrong - or if *anything* is wrong - it's done and we ... Well, fuck, we panic and call Wes. Okay?"

Xander smiled, brushed his fingertips over Spike's lips in a kiss and brought them back to his silverware, took another bite of korma. "Okay." He watched Spike watch him, eloquent eyebrow hovering between skepticism and suspicion that Xander agreed so easily and added: "I trust you."
"Do you, love? Even though -" Even though I just admitted to knowing basically...nothing? And I will, too. Watch you. And call Wes if we have to. God... "Love you, Xander..."

A warm hand slid over his knee beneath the table and Xander smiled at him through his hair in a way that made his stomach flip.

Xander's taste was on his lips, still, and Spike wanted more. "'Bout done here, yeah?"

Xander looked down at the devastation of the seven dishes on the table, laughed. "Unless you want to watch me eat the salt shaker, yeah." He pushed away from the table, fumbled with the unfamiliar scarf and extra layers that hadn't seemed as awkward to put on back on in the hotel room - and then Spike was there, hands knowing what to do, where to go and Xander just - stood and let him. Watched.

Spike tugged and buttoned and tucked - smoothed
the front of Xander's jacket down and wished they'd thought of gloves. "Let's go then, pet. Want to walk? Or - fancy a ride?" Lift of an eyebrow and a little curl of the lip, but they were surrounded by taxi-drivers, and Spike wasn't going to make Xander walk in the cold if he didn't want to.

Xander laughed, got his fingers through Spike's belt loops and tugged him close enough to whisper into his ear. "After seeing the amount of beer some of these guys put away with dinner, I suddenly want to walk everywhere." He drew back to Spike's lips, the kiss spicy and brief and the lime-salt flavor of their drinks was a cool counterpoint to the fire of Spike's curry.

Spike nipped at Xander's lower lip - snuggled him under his arm and steered them both towards the door. Relaxed atmosphere or no, Xander wasn't anybody's peep-show, and he wasn't going to get anything started in the middle of the restaurant. The cold hit like a bucket of ice-water and they both instinctively cringed for a moment, then Spike was striding out briskly, taking a huge lungful of the air
that tasted of tin and petrol. Snow by morning, he was sure.

Xander's walking bravado had lasted up until that first gust of air and he chattered after Spike, laughing. "Too late to change my mind?" He caught Spike's sharp look - flicker of uncertainty in his eyes - leaned in. "About the cab. Or are you gonna give me something to warm me up. Maybe over there?" Xander nodded with his head to a dark patch up ahead where one street lamp had burnt out, leaving a recessed doorway in darkness. Don't want to waste a fucking minute with you, sweetheart.

"Oh, is that why we're walking? So I can give you blow-job up against a wall?" Spike pulled Xander close with a jerk and kissed him - hard. Bit and sucked and fucked his tongue into Xander's mouth, because if that was how it was going to be, Spike was all for it - was ready. Because Xander was sugar-cube sex dipped in absinthe and Spike wanted it - right now.

"We're walking so I can give you a blow job up
against a wall." And Jesus Christ was that his voice all growl and sex and predatory intent?

Because Xander was pretty certain it wasn't the cold wind off the lake making Spike shiver. "Think about it - my mouth all hot around your cock - so hot because the wind's so cold. But I'm not - your blood in me, I'm so fuckin' warm inside." The words rolled over his tongue - maybe didn't make sense but god they felt good. Almost as good as the way Spike's hands tightened on his ass and a taxi driver honked at them - gave them a wolf-whistle, not a curse.

"Gonna let me fuck your mouth, pretty? Won't hurt you, but I want to just...push in as far as I can go, Xander... Push into all that heat..." Spike walked them backwards as he talked - walked and watched Xander's gaze darken - narrow - take on that feral look that meant he was so turned on. Kept one hand knotted in the scarf and pressed the other to Xander's crotch - palmed the hot, swollen flesh there, rolling his knuckles across and then cupping and rubbing. The wall almost knocked the breath out of him when he hit it.
"Yeah...gonna let you use me," Xander breathed, lips parted so close to Spike he could taste him on the air, and he swayed, dizzy with want. Not sure which of them was predator in this, which prey. "Shut me up the way you wished you could back in Sunnydale. Before." He closed his fingers over Spike's hips, wedged a knee between the vampire's with his full weight - cock so hard, full, it hurt. "Back room of the Magic Box. I've been a fucking prick - giving you shit all night. Everybody's out front when you catch me back there - could walk in on us any time." He stopped. Pulled his head back to catch the glitter in Spike's eyes. "Want that?"

Spike felt the demon flashing up to the surface - didn't care, because this was Xander and... not. This was fuckin' Harris, fuckin' loudmouth - wasp in his honey and fuck yeah he wanted it.

"Harr-isss..." he hissed, and Xander twitched, and his body absolutely poured out the pheromones. Fast as he could Spike unwound most of the scarf from Xander's neck - held the long ends in his hand
and pushed. Down. "Get me out. Gonna fuck into that pretty, pretty mouth until it's too full to make one fuckin' sound..." The brick was like ice behind him, the air full of knives but Xander was hot, so damn hot, and Spike bit his own lip, hard. Waiting.

Xander's knees cracked against the chilled pavement - hard landing that jarred his teeth, made his dick ache. He rolled his head against the pull of the scarf, felt it tighten - leash and noose and god the Harris family raised a sick little boy.. Pressed the hell of one palm against his zipper, breathed.

"Hurry it up boy." Spike's voice, rich and deep and just right to make Xander jump, fumble with the buttons of Spike's fly - groan at the right and wrong of being on his knees before the big bad and remembered - watched Spike the way he used to, wanting to fight him or fuck him and not caring which.

The scarf tightened slowly and Xander let Spike in, cold flesh and colder metal that clacked against his teeth - surged forward with a moan, too much need
to keep up any pretense of hate.

Ice-edged wind, soaking right into his bones and Spike groaned and thrust, Xander's mouth a sink of heat and suction, his body trembling all over. Spike twisted the scarf in his fist a little - felt the surge go through Xander like a wave. Oh, is that how that is? Oh...yeah...

"C'mon, boy, take me all the way - do it right, I might let you come..." Spike dropped his other hand to Xander's hair - tugged and twisted it - let his fingers feel the working of jaw and throat. Feel the socket of bone move in the flesh as Xander mouthed him. He started to thrust - not too hard. Just a slow rock that he could build on. "Good boy..." he murmured.

Another moan worked its way up Xander's throat at the praise and he clutched Spike's hips - rode that slow rock that stretched his jaw, made his mouth water for more. Keep talking and that will so not be a problem. God! If he tilted his head - a little - he could make out Spike's face, tongue sliding between
sharp demon teeth and eyes glittering gold in shadow. They fluttered closed when he drew back and sucked and the hand on his jaw shook, scarf tugged. And oh yeah, I am in no way hard-wired to be anyone's bitch.

If he spread his legs - just so - the hard line of his fly dug unto his cock just right, hard and rough and god, he wondered if his heartbeat was as loud to Spike as it was to him.

A car - a taxi - sped by, flickering headlights hitting them full for a moment and Xander's eye was closed, his mouth so wet and red and perfect. Spike fisted his hair - tugged it, pulling Xander closer - thrusting a little harder. He lifted one booted foot and rubbed it along the crotch of Xander's jeans - buckles and straps catching on the seam. Xander made a groaning kind of noise, and Spike twisted the scarf again. "Mind on your work, Harris - gonna be down there a while if you don't pay attention." Little push of his thumb at Xander's jaw. God - so fucking good...
There were worse things to Xander's mind than being down here a while. The heavy ring of Spike's PA dragged over his tongue and he lapped at it, tang of metal and blood on its way to his throat and Spike bucked - incomprehensible hiss and Xander wanted to grin - groan - something that he couldn't do with a throatful of Spikey goodness.

He shut down all higher centers of his brain and gave in, sucking and licking, rutting against Spike's boot like an animal with a fist in his hair and a leash on his throat and quiet, wet eager sounds that took the express route from his ears to his cock.

Couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't think - just want.

Spike let his head thump back into the brick behind him - felt the rising frisson of his coming orgasm and started to thrust his hips in earnest. Xander was practically crawling up his leg, his mouth tight around Spike and his hands digging into Spike's hips. Little whimpers and moans trickling out past Spike's cock, and his whole body pushing into - pulling
away at the same moment and Spike got that.

"Like that around your neck, huh? Like it when I pull on it - when I remind you? Fuckin' down on your knees, vampire's cock down your throat - damn - practically a dog on a leash... My dog - my fuckin' leash - fuck yeah -" Spike arched and thrust, lightning crackle over his body, tingles down his spine, white-hot voltage and yeah, yeah fuck yeah.

Yeah, yeah! Xander's inner voice mindlessly agreed, desperately agreed, ears ringing, head exploding and Xander felt like he was fucking electrocuted. Don't stop don't stop don't - - Xander swallowed, choked for lack of air lots of Spike, came hard - like every nerve in his body came to the party.

Fell back on his heels - tasted salt and musk, hot rich blood where he'd bit his tongue, hoped it was only his tongue - cold tang of the air burning his lungs as he whooped in breath and stared at Spike who glowed in the reflected Oh fuck, fuck, God! streetlights.
"Fuck," he croaked, coughed hard - laughed - couldn't get the grin off his face. "That'd be," he panted, "yes."

Spike hauled Xander upright by the lapels of his jacket, wrapping the scarf around his throat - wrapping him up. He could already feel the shivers kicking in and he thought for a second and then bit, hard - splitting his tongue. Got his hands on either side of Xander's face and shoved his tongue past swollen, friction-warmed lips. Tasted blood - Xander's blood - that zinged through his body straight to his cock. Xander was lax for a moment - dazed - and then his mouth fastened down and he was kissing back - sucking Spike's tongue like he'd sucked Spike's cock. Getting what he could and slamming Spike back into the wall.

Xander wondered for a dazed moment if this was what it was like being turned - the craving that hit with the first mouthful of blood that should be ew! not God, yes please more suck you dry then fuck you hard!. His lips ached in the way that screamed naughty things have happened here and the
thought he'd be showing up for his presentations that day with the mother of all vampire hickeys under his tie if he was *lucky* only made him tingle in all the good places and - damn. "Heals too fast," he muttered against Spike's lips, around tongue of Spike.

"You've got teeth," Spike muttered, and then laughed as Xander shoved Spike's head back and attacked his throat with nips and hard sucks. He could feel himself getting hard again and he wanted the *room* - wanted the bed and warm and - fuck - couldn't think straight.

"Wanna fuck me? Want me to fuck you? Jesus - Xander - let's get back -" He fumbled at his jeans so he could tuck himself back inside, Xander's hands helping and *not* helping and he started to laugh - shook the demon away and kissed Xander again, taste of himself, of blood, of him. *Christ, want him*....

Xander pulled back, too warm to feel the cold - could still feel Spike's laughter against his chest.
"Yeah." Lost somewhere on Chicago Avenue: one collection of higher brain functions. If found, please return to Xander Harris, care of the bleached blond punk on the corner. "Uh huh."

He worked his hand into Spike's - dead flesh freezing now and he wrapped Spike's arm around his waist, tucked both hands into his jacket pocket for warmth and began to walk.

They strode along for a minute or so, silent, and Spike got a cigarette out and lit one-handed. Smoked for another minute, just walking. Then he couldn't help it anymore, and he looked over at Xander.

"You ever really feel that way? About me, I mean... About...us..." At Xander's blank look, Spike sucked in a huge lungful of smoke and blew it out, hard. "What you said about the Magic Box and...your friends not knowin' you an' me were back there... You ever really...?"

Xander looked over at Spike, the shuttered
expression back on his face. "Sometimes - when I was drinking enough to be honest. Mostly, I fantasized about beating the shit out of you in front of Buffy." He sucked in a sharp breath and let it out - let it go. "Draw your own conclusions."

Spike could see the guarded look on Xander's face - knew, or thought he knew, what was going through Xander's head. *Thinks he's gonna hurt me. But...that *doesn't* hurt.*

"Yeah. Same for me, yeah? I wanted to - to be the hero too, didn't I? Wanted to play the gallant knight, and win the lady fair." Spike smoked for a moment, then tossed the butt away, and bumped Xander a little with his hip. "You wanted to make her see you, love. We all did."

Xander stumbled to a stop, had to smile when he looked - really *looked* at Spike - *his* Spike absolutely different from the Spike who cringed against the wall of the Magic Box with no fight left in him to give. "She did see me. Right at my worst, she finally saw me and I saw her and she was so *human*. I
almost didn't forgive her for that."

Spike was pretty sure he knew exactly 'when' Xander was talking about. The moment Buffy had tumbled off her pedestal and straight into the mud - right alongside an 'evil, soulless thing'. Not soulless, anymore, but it hardly matters....Funny how what I wanted most - the truth about me and Buffy coming out to her friends - was the beginning of the end. But, still an' all... I would never take those things back...they made me - made us. It's...what is. "Is that why... Xander - what happened? Even after all that, you were still - friends. Now you're not."

"We're still friends. And nothing happened."

Wasn't that the answer?

"I don't understand, pet."

"It's awkward." Xander started walking again - slowly and with his arm tight around Spike's waist for the contact, comfort. "When Buffy and Willow started college, all that kept us together was living
in Sunnydale and fighting the forces of darkness.
Once Sunnydale was - gone - I stopped pretending.
After a while, they did too."

Spike thought about that - thought about telling
Xander that the girls had said he should join the
Army - and Xander believing him. Believing him
and...being so damn hurt. *But they all believed me.
Children who thought the world revolved around
them...didn't know how to cope with anything real.
Monsters and Slayers? That's not real. Full-copper-
repipe, that's real.*

He leaned his head over enough to touch Xander's -
rubbed forehead to hair for a moment. "Are you
sorry, love?" he asked, quiet. Because... *that* Xander
- had been.

"Sometimes," Xander said from that place where
honesty seemed to bubble up in unlimited supply
these days - leaned his head into Spike's touch and
closed his eye. "It's amazing what facing death *and*
finals together does for buddy bonding. But we've
been living in different worlds for a long time. I get
that." He ran his thumb over Spike's. "I accept that."

"But - you still talk to Dawn. You - told her about us. What makes her so different?"

An unexpected grin blossomed over Xander's face. "She sees me."

"Bit's always been - special that way." Spike grinned back, and hugged Xander close. "She's got more insight into some things than the whole pack of you combined ever did." Dawn had always made Spike obscurely proud. Rising *above*, that girl - making her own way.

"She had enough insight into you and me. She's got a filthy mind."

"Raised her right, we did."

~~*~~*~~*~~*~~

Spike stretched hard, every muscle going long and
tight. Then with a sigh he relaxed and curled again. *Warm*, but not as cozy as the Nest. And no Xander, even though his spice-sweet scent lingered in the sheets, overpowering hotel bleach and harsh soap. Another long sigh, and then he poked his head up and looked at the clock. 12.30. He was meeting Xander at one for lunch, for a quickie in the elevator maybe - for a little dose of blood. *If he's doing all right. If he's not feeling good then it stops.* Spike slithered out of the bed and lit a cigarette - stared out the window. The sun was heading west already but the sky was thick with dull-pewter clouds. Snow coming. He finished his cigarette and dressed with an eye to 'corporate' Xander.

*Needs something nice waiting for him... Nothing ratty...* Tight black jeans - the new ones that didn't have any holes. And the jumper Xander had picked out - a thin chenille that felt like heaven on his skin. A dark cherry-red with a rolled neck that showed just a bit of Spike's shoulders - showed the edge of the bite Xander had put there. Spike grinned at that - touched the mark fleetingly and then slid rings on - made sure his hair was evenly tousled and not
squashed by the pillows into some strange shape. He contemplated eye-liner but it was really too early in the day. *I'm a ponce. But I'm Xander's ponce.* Grinning, he shoved the key into his pocket, and a wad of cash into the other and sauntered downstairs.

The closer he got to the conference rooms, the more tourists gave way to men and women in business suits. *Lookin' about as happy to be wearin' business suits on a Saturday as Xander did.* A middle-aged woman in a pantsuit and fuchsia shirt that didn't suit her gave him a tired smile in the corridor when he paused to get his bearings. Three rooms overflowed with professional booths and the drone of conversation, too much cologne and bad off-the-rack fashions.

"Excuse me, are you part of the conference?" A young man in an obnoxious green polo shirt chased him down with a clip-board, too harried to quail under Spike's *look*.

"Do I *look* like I'm part of that lot to you?"
"Um, no. It's a private conference, so I'm very sorry but you'll -"

"Spouses and partners allowed in there to collect their other halves?"

"Excuse me?"

Spike gestured to the hall, a small thrill going through him when he heard Xander's laugh rise above the drone - clear to a vampire's hearing. *God he sounds...good. Sounds good.* He shifted his attention back to the clipboard-toting...*Andrew* and spoke very slowly, enunciated. "Spouse. Partner. Mate. *Significant other.* You savvy? Mine's in there, and I'm here to fetch him *out.*"

"W-what company is he with?"

"Sunnydale somethin' or other. You got a list there?" Without waiting, Spike snatched the clipboard from his hands and scanned down it. "Where's booth three-seventy-two?"
"Windsor room, second row about half way down. Go past the ladies' room and turn right." He grabbed the clipboard back and gave Spike a falsely pleasant smile before turning away and muttering under his breath. "Asshole."

Spike took two fast steps right into Kelly-green-polo-shirt, pinning him to the wall. The clipboard seemed to be digging painfully into the man's diaphragm and Spike leaned a little harder, one hand on the wall *Good thing I touched up my nails - that looks good* - and one hand digging into the man's neck as if he were a stray cat about to be tossed. "Best keep a civil tongue in your head, you tosser, or I'll take it out and feed it to you. *Savvy?*

"O-o-okay! Ok-kay!" the man whimpered, and Spike pushed away from him - from the wall - and sauntered down the hall, heading for Xander. *Fuckin' gobshite. Wonder if Xan can leave for lunch - take a couple hours...*

The Windsor Room was over-full - hot - reeking of
too many bodies, too many products, too much gum and coffee that frustrated smokers were forced to fall back on in the aggressively non-smoking hall. Spike pulled out his cigarettes and lit one, ignoring the equal share of nasty and longing looks he was getting from the Corp-rats.

*Xander, Xander...I can hear you - can just smell you in here...* Spike stalked forward, as alert as a hunting cat, intent on tracking down Xander and getting the hell out. One row - two - there, banner with Sunnydale on it - and there. Xander. In his tailored suit that he'd let Spike talk him into - his hair like polished mahogany and his tan, beautiful face creased in a smile. His hands moved, gesturing - pointing out something in the huge scale model of the site that was on the table before him. Spike felt a flash of utter love - utter pride, and he edged closer. Joined the crowd of suits listening to him talk - firing questions at him, questions that might've been in Farsi for all the sense they made to Spike and Xander answered every one.

Didn't falter for a moment 'till he caught Spike's eye
and halted in mid-sentence to give Spike a smile that would have stopped his breath if he'd had any. "Almost done, sweetheart."

A few of the group turned to Spike - raised eyebrows and startled looks - second glances at Xander who shifted right back into that smooth patter that Spike let wash over him. The sound of his Xander's voice.

He stepped up to the table, up to the scale models of the reclamation project in its various stages. Sunnydale of old made Spike shiver; everything reproduced right down to his old crypt in the cemetery. *Bloody macabre makin' the boy slave over this all weekend.* He resisted the urge to cover it up - *bury* it. 'Cause some things ought to fuckin' stay buried.

"We've projected that the final stages of the reclamation will be underway in less than two years. That means -" Xander's voice washed over him and Spike stared at the model, a sort of creeping tide of unease washing over him. He was
familiar enough with sympathetic magic to feel that this...thing was projecting a vibe. It made his hackles rise and he traced the contours of the crater burned to ash, dead and buried, but here I am in the world again and who's to say...who's to say other things don't get up and walk in the night?

Xander seemed to be finishing up - there were people crowding around, asking questions, and Spike searched the 'current stage' site model, feeling that chill again when he saw the small the hole that was where the church rested.

*Must have taken aerial photos. Jesus. The 'new' Sunnydale was even worse - a perfect grid of streets and lawns - green parks and white fences and nothing at all of the horrors that lay beneath - of the sweat and blood, tears and lives that stained every inch of that ground. *Wes was right - it's really fuckin'...awful.* Xander was shaking hands - nodding - handing out business cards and brochures and Spike gave into instinct and reached out - plucked his crypt from the cemetery and crushed it in his fingers, letting the dust and shards patter to the
carpet behind his leg. He looked up and found some corp-rat biddy staring at him.

"Just wanted a souvenir of my old place," he said, unthinking, and suddenly Xander was there, taking his hand in his. Smiling.

"I'm starving - ready to go?"

"Fuckin' past ready, love," Spike said, and leaned over for a kiss. Xander's hand curled in his and his other hand rested on his shoulder as they kissed for a moment, the model between them. The weird -vibe- was gone.

Xander pulled back with a smile on his lips and in his eye, tasting like lemon jelly donuts and Spike smirked, catching a glimpse of a Krispy Kreme box poorly hidden in a half empty crate of brochures and business cards. Half listened to Xander give directions to the tarted up bint behind the table with him and then Xander was there, warm arms around him, hot lips against his ear. "You've got forty-five minutes to debauch the star of the
Sunnydale Southwest Show sweetheart. Feel like a quickie?"

Square Thirteen

Icy cold.

Icy *fucking* cold.

*Mother*fucking calm.

So fucking calm his *hands* were goddamned *vibrating* with the calm.

Because Xander?

*Was Mister Fucking Calm.*

He *watched* his hand close on the kitchen door and
wrench the knob like a *neck*.

Then fucking *spun* and *calmly* put his *fist* through the *wall*.

And then *calmly* bled.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike rubbed the towel through his hair, drying it half-heartedly. He slung the towel around his shoulders and bent to pick up his jeans, feeling the pleasant little ache that was a left-over of pre-work sex. Or maybe that was post-nap sex. One of those. Whichever, it felt *good*. Spike pulled his jeans on and fastened the first three buttons - slung the towel haphazardly over the rail and went into the bedroom, contemplating shirts and listening to a vehicle roaring up the street. Unusual, really, for this street - this time of night. He opened a dresser drawer and stared down. Black. Or black. Or one of Xander's over shirts, washed all soft... Or... he'd planned on doing a little weapon cleaning and
sharpening tonight so yeah, an old flannel...

The vehicle roared up to the house but instead of passing, it slowed - and the garage door was opening - and that was Xander. *What the fuck? He's barely been gone an hour - somebody got hurt, maybe? Blasting went wrong or something...* Spike turned and strode toward the kitchen, hearing the slam of the truck door, and then the kitchen door, crashing open hard, hitting the wall. *Bloody hell - something bad* - Another noise - solid *thud* and Spike ran - hallway, living room - *blood* smell in the air, Xander's blood, Jesus *Christ* - and he was there, right by the garage door - up to his forearm in drywall.

"Xander? Bloody hell -"

Xander sucked in an unsteady breath; breath that caught on every heartbeat and *pulsed* in his split knuckles. Felt the *shaking* set in, working its way up his arm and into his shoulders - *burn* in eye *and* socket.
"I am fine," he breathed. "I am so fine I could be a cover boy for Fine Magazine..."

"What?" Spike didn't know what the fuck Xander was talking about, but he was shaking, his heart was thundering in his chest like a fucking trip-hammer and he was absolutely white, except for patches of high, intense color at his cheekbones. And he was bleeding, god damn-it. Spike reached out and touched Xander's arm and the skin was cold.

"Xander? Fuck's sake -" He curled his fingers around Xander's forearm - around muscles gone hard as iron and vibrating. Tendons standing out like bow-strings on Xander's neck and Jesus Christ, what was going on. "Let me -" Spike carefully eased Xander's arm backwards, out of the hole he'd made in the wall. Saw plaster dust and wood-splinters and blood - already-swelling knuckles and a hand that was shaking, shaking. Bloody hell.

Xander's fingers twitched in Spike's grasp, colder than the vampire's skin, but he didn't pull away - couldn't. He drew breath until his lungs ached with
it but no words came out. Tried again and shook his head, clutching his fingers around Spike's until the blood slicked down over Spike's skin too. Felt the tendrils of *humiliation* creep up from his belly - wind around his heart and *squeeze*.

"I am on - suspension. And review." When his voice came, it was someone else's - distant and absolutely flat. "Until the results of my - *drug test* come in."

*Drug test? Oh fuck.* "Xan - love, I'm sorry - wasn't thinking, was I? Course those tossers would think - god *damn*-it - Xander, I -"

Xander raised his hand - sharply. Cut Spike off and *glared* at him. "I am not. On. Drugs. I am their *best* fucking representative. And *they* made me *piss* in a fucking *cup*."

Spike stared at Xander for one long moment then tugged gently on his arm, making him walk one and then two stiff-legged strides to the kitchen sink. Turned the water on and waited a moment for it to get warm. "No, love, you're not on drugs. You're on
my blood. And it looks - to those bloody corp-rats - it looks like junk, maybe. Or that crack shite." Spike pushed Xander's wrist into the stream of water and watched plaster-dust and blood sluice away over Xander's knuckles - held him against the little automatic twitch away. "Looks like some kind of shite, doesn't it? Bastards."

Xander licked his lips, ears still buzzing with that nameless electricity in his head. In his body that crackled along nerve endings - made everything look flicker-flash like an old silent movie. "And yet - I won them a fucking award in Chicago. That's pretty good for a junkie!" Xander jerked his hand away - hissed when it stripped his knuckles against Spike's palm - stuck one in his mouth and sucked, running his tongue over and over that coppery, salty patch.

Spike leaned back against the sink - turned the water off and crossed his arms over his chest. Water on his hand cold against his ribs and the sweet-salt of Xander's blood in his nostrils. "How long, then? Until they know - you're fine."
"Wednesday." Xander muttered around his knuckles; flexed his fingers until they *throbbed* and his skin turned absolutely white. Drew his clenched fist away from his mouth and watched it *bleed*. "I have a review that afternoon with the district supervisor who will be evaluating my - performance - at the conference."

*Performance. That's the fucking operative word right there, isn't it? Bloody performance is what he put on for them, only their little trained monkey didn't quite follow form.* "So you're home, then - until Wednesday." Xander's look off that was flat and deadly-angry and Spike watched the blood trickle over the split knuckles and drip onto the lino - one, two, threefour. "Let's go kill something then, yeah?"

Xander shook his hand off, thin splatter of blood over the floor. "Yeah - because humiliation at work *always* calls for getting my ass kicked by the demon of the week." What kind of *moron* had he been to come back to *Sunnydale*? He yanked the garage door open again, kicking a stack of two-by-fours out
of the way and hauling a rock pick from the garage cabinet, giving it a swing. "Right."

Spike ducked under the pick and put his hand on Xander's face - deliberately on the blind side, stroking his skin and the line where the patch had dug in in the hour or so he'd worn it at work.

"Haven't had your ass kicked in a while, love." Xander stilled for a moment, looking back at him, but his face was still vastly unhappy - unconvinced - and Spike plucked a long-hafted axe from the cabinet and nodded to himself. "I'll just get my boots."

"Right," Xander said again and this time his voice caught in his throat. He felt Spike leave; ache like something inside stretched too thin. Left him shaking, walking like a marionette back through the house, past the new window his fist had made between the kitchen and entry way. Threw the front door open and breathed.

Spike got on boots and an old black tee in under a
minute - contemplated his duster and then left it. He just wanted to be unencumbered, tonight. Xander was standing in the front door-way, head back and eye closed, still shaking and suddenly Spike caught a whiff of something off of him. Subtle burning-blood smell, edge of rusted iron. *Coming down off the blood, too. Fuck. Get the poisons out - wear him out - make him sleep. He'll feel better.*

Xander wondered if it was because of the blood or because of the demon magnetism that he could feel Spike - wanted to ask but didn't want to *know*. Instead, he walked out the front door, let Spike close it behind them and let himself really *feel* Sunnydale crawl through his veins. "So where does a guy go to have a good time in this town these days?"

*Something* was up. Xander looked - less than grounded, and there was something flickering in his gaze - jumping under his skin. More than the coming-down shakes and heebie-jeebies. "South, mostly. Got some places there - right nice dust-up, most nights." Spike lit a cigarette and drew hard on
it - shouldered his axe and made a 'come on' gesture with his head, and they started walking.

"A suspicious guy would notice that the demons never show up on site. A suspicious guy would notice that getting rid of the cemeteries didn't get rid of the demons." He flicked a glance at Spike. "A guy with at least one working eye would notice his honey coming home with vamp-dust on him and wonder why they're still here."

"Good thing you're not a suspicious guy."

Xander snorted; felt each impact of the pavement all the way up his leg and knew he had to loosen up or he would be in a world of 'pain' in the morning. Afternoon - whatever. "So what're we looking at? Vamps? Demons? Hells Angels?"

"Little of this, little of that," Spike looked over at Xander and drew on his smoke - blew it in a plume straight up, watching Xander stride. Deadly intent and manic focus, and Xander was a bit scary, tonight. The thought made Spike's cock twitch - start to rise. Xander was fucking lovely like that. "No
human-hunting tonight, pet. And the site -" Spike flicked the smoked-down butt away and thought for a moment. "The Hellmouth always had a vibe. Still has it. It's just...not as controlled now. It's - uncomfortable."

"Yeah well - you didn't go to school on top of that vibe for thirteen years," Xander muttered - wondered why. Felt bitter about being a child of the Hellmouth for the first time in years and that made him angry too. Born on the magical version of Three Mile Island. "I'm pretty fucking immune."

"Are you?" Spike wondered if he was - he didn't seem to be - not tonight. "I think you're feelin' it pretty good tonight."

A muscle in Xander's cheek twitched at that but he didn't answer.

The work-site was a low glare off to their right, the sea ahead of them and Spike touched Xander's shoulder - ducked down a side street, heading for a maze of warehouses, storage units and the
terminus of the railroad tracks. Plenty of stuff underground there, and plenty of little niches for demons who liked to set up something like a floating craps/poker/blackjack game. Drugs and liquor and spells on the side - semi-organized fights that served the needs of clans and Houses and just plain mean bastards. And whores, and pushers, and junkies. But all non-human, tonight.

Xander was feeling it - whatever that skin-crawly it really was, and dropped down through a manhole after Spike - found himself blinking in torchlight that illuminated tunnels way too much like the underground where he'd first seen Jesse's other face. "This doesn't look new."

"It isn't." Spike glanced back at him. "Used to be the tunnel out of town, this one."

"Great."

They walked maybe a half-mile, and the sounds of commerce and pleasure and anger got louder until it was pretty much like walking into a club. Music -
human and not - shouting, laughter, conversation. Spike eased his shoulders to a more arrogant posture - stopped and turned to Xander. "Everybody knows me, here. A lot know you. I dunno if they'll try anything or not. If you want to fight, you've got your pick - but don't walk away from me, yeah?" He held Xander's gaze, trying to impart the seriousness of it on one pissed-off human who was in the midst of the DT's.

Xander snorted, shifted his grip on the rock pick and flicked a glance at the wickedly curved tip. "They're gonna be surprised if they still expect the Zeppo Scooby."

Spike looked narrowly at Xander, a little twitch of unease going through him. "This isn't about Scoobies, pet. It's about...power. You and me, we're a power here." Xander opened his mouth and Spike reached and lay a finger on his lips. "We, pet. Don't argue. Power they don't like much." And really, they didn't. Spike's 'hands off' to the demon community was a challenge, and the fact that half the site employees were demons or dated demons meant
that the community was pretty evenly divided. Any sort of testing of him - or Xander - could mean war, and that made a lot of the demons uneasy - or angry. Or trigger-happy. "Ready, love?"

Xander's tongue darted out - flickered over Spike's forefinger and retreated behind a smile too wide beneath an eye too bright. "I am so ready." His muscles jumping under his skin just pissed him off the way they made him shake - felt like too much energy inside that needed a place to go.

"Right then, love." Spike grinned - let the demon up and out and then turned and began a slow and steady saunter down the tunnel. A moment later it opened out - partly storm-drain concrete, partly a natural cavern that had been enlarged and shored up by generations of demons. It was loud, and the sound hit them like a wave: noise, and scent, and images - cooking smells and demon smells and magic smells, and the color and texture of other-worldly things lit by electric torches and organic ones. Xander was stalking like a hunting hound beside him, his eye alight with manic energy and
Spike guided them towards a bar. Drunk and stupid would fit the bill just fine, and that was always easy to find down here.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander leaned heavily on Spike, head down in a way that turned his hair into a dark sheet over his eye. Breathing came in quiet pants between parted lips and his body jerked lightly every time Spike passed soap-slicked hands over the gash in his forearm. Or the wound in his thigh. Wished he could stop - giggling. Wished he could explain the joke better than 'It looked like Herbert. Mascot - Herbert. Piggy -' when he thought about the demon who'd given the wounds to him.

Until he'd ripped its warty throat out and gagged - it hadn't tasted like pig. "W-what?"

"I said - you're a daft git, bitin' that fuckin' tosser. Never know what demon-blood'll do to you, love." Spike finished washing Xander off and directed the
shower-spray over him, sluicing off soap and trying to ignore the little twitches and tics. Xander was coming down hard, the fight-endorphins not cushioning him at all. *Get some food in him - cake or something - get him to bed. Let him sleep it out.* Spike got the soap and did his own quick wash-up, one eye on Xander who slumped against the wall, giggling quietly. *Looked like a damn berserker, goin' in there. Got three - no four - without a bit of help.*

"You were brilliant, pet," Spike said, and got the water off and Xander up, off the wall. Wrestled him out onto the bathmat and started to dry him off, careful of his hurts.

Xander pushed into the towel - remembered the Feldmans' dog doing the same thing after a bath. God, that dog had loved water - loved being *dried* even better. Rough towel, cold air, hot skin - crackling sensory echoes firing through his nerves and making his hand twitch like it was still holding the pick. "D-don't remember much of it." Xander's teeth were chattering - it had *felt* fucking fantastic. He tipped - grabbed at Spike's shoulder and leaned
hard on him - flexed his fingers on the firm flesh and bone, dug in. "I get it now."

"Do you?" Spike pushed Xander into the wall - held him with hip and thigh and scrubbed the towel through his hair - more carefully dried Xander's face and the socket, gentle dabs with the corner. "A good fight's as good as a fuck, most nights. Both in one night - that's the best." Spike tossed the towel down and surveyed the man. Eye half shut, skin pinked from the shower, limbs like limp rags. "Now - you hungry, pet? Want a little something?"

"Wanna fuck. Both in one night." Xander's tongue itched from being bitten by chattering teeth - burned on one side where he hadn't been able to spit out the demon's blood quickly enough. He swayed drunkenly into Spike when the world tilted to the side and threatened to drop him on his ass. "Wanna sleep more," he admitted - finally in that warm and foggy place where there was so much going on inside his head it all blended together, became a cozy jumble of images he'd be wigged out by later.
Spike caught Xander in his arms - pressed close and kissed slowly down his jaw and onto his mouth. Felt the uncoordinated sweep of Xander's hands at his back - felt the hands drop away, limp. "C'mon to bed then," he murmured, and got his shoulder under Xander's arm - got him pointed toward the door and down the hall to the bedroom. Curled him into the Nest and spooned up behind him; warm body, soft pillows - fading fizz of adrenalin and a belly-full of blood from a mostly-human brawler. "Love you," he murmured, his palm flat to Xander's belly.

Xander mumbled - curled his fingers over Spike's and burrowed *back* against him, all warm and smelling of sweet and spices. "Crazy vampire guy."

Spike hugged closer - breathed in and sighed out a great, gusting breath. Xander's own chest rose and fell, slower and slower as he slipped rapidly into sleep. *Crazy human.*
Impossible to wake up cold in a Nest - but a Nest wasn't a Nest without a vampire in it. Several floundering minutes of closed-eye groping confirmed to Xander that the Nest was vampire-less.

And the room was dark.

And Xander really needed to piss.

Five staggering minutes and a trip to the bathroom later Xander stumbled into the living room on aching limbs and collapsed onto Nest and vampire in a confused muddle. "Still dark."

Spike tracked Xander's loose-limbed progression across the living room floor - managed to avoid a knee in the bollocks when Xander flopped down on top of him. "Hold on a minute, mate," he said into the phone - turned and pushed at the tangled mop
of hair until he found Xander's face - eye closed, forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"You slept the clock 'round, love - sun's just down this past half-hour. Feelin' all right?"

Xander muttered something about sleeping around a bigger clock - and burrowed down onto Spike, living blanket.

"Spike, if the two of you are going to initiate another round of enthusiastic copulation, please give me advance warning this time so I may hang up the telephone before I'm treated to free phone sex." Wesley's accent may have been clipped and proper, but Spike could hear the laughter in it.

"No worries, Wesley - we won't assault your delicate sensibilities with our crass rutting." Xander snickered into his chest, limp and heavy, and Spike curled his free arm around him, stroking his hand down the warm, soft skin of Xander's back. "So - anything? It's startin' to feel like it did when the First was here. Things are bein' - stirred up, and I
don't like it."

"No - nothing at all that I'm aware of. In fact, things have been quiet here in Los Angeles." Spike listened to Wesley with half an ear, listening to Xander's steady normal again, thank god heartbeat with the other half. Xander stretched like a cat in the sun under Spike's hand and Spike could feel the lazy smile against his shoulder - shifted up to let Xander get an arm behind his neck and make himself more comfortable. "What sort of things have been stirred up?"

Spike could hear the tell-tale scratch of pen on paper. "Nothing...tangible. Just that - feeling."

"Feeling?" Wesley's voice sounded doubtful, and Spike sighed.

"Boding. Sort of. Damn it, Wes - you'd know what I meant if you came up here again! It just feels...bad. Edgy." Spike pushed his hand up into Xander's hair and raked through it, nails scratching gently over his scalp and Xander all but purred, pushing into the
caress. "People are gettin' jumpy. S'like it was. Somebody - something - is messing with the energy here. Just 'cause the Hellmouth is closed doesn't mean there isn't still some...output." Wesley sighed, sounding tired again. So bloody tired again already.

"I don't doubt your instincts, Spike. But do keep in mind that there was an enormous disaster there last year. Hundreds died and were buried beneath the rubble that the reclamation project is disturbing."

"You sayin' it's all the restless dead?"

"It's more likely the restless living. People must come out of their shock eventually, Spike. They may be realizing at last that they are living and working on the largest mass grave in California."

Spike thought about that. Thought about Watchers, and what they did. It made sense, but... "Not sayin' you're wrong or anything... But I dunno, Wes. Doesn't feel like that. Feels - different." Fuck! This is impossible. How do you describe a scent to someone
who can't actually smell anything? He's never really felt the Hellmouth...needs to come back. Needs to come for a rest.

"Well...I'll look into it. I'll see if I can discover anything - unusual." A long pause, and Spike could hear the sound of liquid being poured out - of Wesley drinking, and he was pretty sure it wasn't tea. "I'll call you if I find anything."

"Call anyway, Wes." Xander's mouth was on his throat, not doing anything in particular but promising to do something, and Spike rubbed his hand down Xander's neck, fingers tangled in the long hair. "Think about coming up, yeah? We miss you."

"I..." Wesley hesitated as if not certain how to finish his own sentence and Spike listened to him drink - then refill. "I miss the two of you as well."

*Well, what do you know? Progress can be made.* Spike worked the fingers of his left hand into the thickness of Xander's hair and scratched at his scalp,
producing a rusty creak of contentment. "Always welcome here, pet."

"Thank you, Spike. And Xander. I'll call the moment I hear anything - or the moment I can abandon my work and drive up for a visit." Wesley murmured the usual pleasantries and hung up.

"Wes gonna visit?" Xander mumbled into Spike's throat, buzzed words against and beneath the skin.

"He's certainly thinking about it." Spike tossed the phone aside and devoted two hands to rubbing and lightly scratching over Xander's back and neck - closing his eyes and breathing in the sweet-spice scent of him. "Hungry, pet? Or are you gonna sleep some more?"

For an answer, Xander bit at Spike's neck - didn't break the skin but he could taste the coppery musk of Spike's blood beneath the surface - feel the Pavlovian hardening against Spike's thigh. "This'd be a bad idea, huh?"
Spike moved *sideways*, just a little - enough so he could see Xander's face. See the flush that was in his cheeks, and the glint in his eye. "That it would, pet. You need a rest from it, love - it doesn't heal you like it does me."

"Too bad." Xander blinked so, *so* slowly, dragging his hand over Spike's chest and down to tug at the bead in Spike's piercing. "Think of all the fun we could have if I healed as fast as you did."

"Only one way to have that, pet," Spike breathed, watching Xander's hand on his cock - watching the lazy play of fingers over him. Xander's heart was slow and steady in his chest - his breath even and easy. *Got to remember not to let him get so run down, next time.* Because there *would* be a next time, he was sure. Xander...had the taste for it. It wasn't an easy thing to put aside, a rush like that. And Spike wouldn't deny him, except to be sure he wasn't hurting himself. Wouldn't deny him anything, really - right up to turning him someday, if he wanted.
But for now, his little infusions of magic-laden blood were enough.

For now.

"Better pour some juice into me then, sweetheart." Xander shifted lazily against him, lifted his head and pressed warm lips to cool and shared the taste of cinnamon toothpaste. As he woke - as parts of his body that ached and sang woke with him - flashes and pieces of the night before came crawling out of the mental shadows. "God...did I really take a bite out of a pig demon last night?"

"Yup. You did. And you were giggling about it, too. Who's Herbert?"

Xander groaned - tried to block out the memory against Spike's shoulder. "Herbert was our school mascot. Piglet."

Spike looked down at the tangled mane of hair and tugged a little, getting Xander to lift his head. "And - how, exactly, would you know what the school
mascot tasted like? Did you - bar-be-que him?"

Xander propped himself on his elbow - looked down into Spike's face and remembered piggy death squeals and crunchy bones - chewy tendons and organs that burst on his tongue; prime eating for the pack leader. "Not exactly. And buddy, Montezuma's Revenge is nothing compared to Herbert's Revenge."

Spike wrinkled his nose in disgust and Xander laughed. "Now what are you on about? This some dark Scooby secret? You know you can tell me, love," Spike wheedled, grinning. "Spill."

"All right. All right. There's a - reason I picked Africa. When Giles gave us all our assignment choices." Xander hooked a leg over Spike's - need for contact too long unsatisfied. "A few months after I met Buffy we had a school field trip at the zoo. Most of the class got sunburns. I got possessed by a hyena spirit."

"Yeah?" Spike studied the man next to him -
thought about it for a moment. "Some of it's still there, isn't it?"

Xander thought about the night before - remembered the feel of the hysterical laughter bubbling up through his chest and the urge to riptearbite. "Uh-huh. Genuine Sunnydale souvenir. And the proof? Woke up with pig-demon morning breath and I am still hungry."

"Then we'd better get you fed, love," Spike said. He pulled Xander down to him for a long kiss. "Don't taste like pig-demon," he mumbled. Thank god.

Xander laughed into the kiss, mumbled into Spike's lips and tongue that tasted reassuringly like whiskey and smoke - lobbed his question back at him. "And how exactly would you know what pig-demon tasted like?"

"I'll try anything once, pet," Spike purred, and then rolled Xander over in the Nest, happily pinning him down and nibbling a line of love-bites down his chest. Breakfast could wait.
Xander shut off the truck's engine - and waited. Soon enough, he'd be joined by a curious vampire making his way into the garage but until then he needed to...sit.

He tipped his head back against the seat, loosened his tie and - thought.

It'd felt weird going back to the site. Like being pulled out of class to see the principal - felt like everyone was watching him. The only difference had been that the guys had the decency to talk behind his back if they were talking at all. He wasn't sure they were. Everyone but Dave had been business as usual.

He unbuttoned both shirt-sleeves and rolled them up - rubbed at his arms where they ached from clenching his fingers on the arms of his chair and carefully scratched at the healing reminder not to
piss off pig demons even if he was high on vampire blood.

Xander snorted.

*Irregularities in your blood work.* Spike would get a kick out of being an irregularity.

No drugs - but no *apology* either. The three suits had sat at *his* desk and informed him that his blood work and urine test had come back clean but there were some matters of 'company policy' to discuss.

A veiled order to be certain his *'guest'* reflected positively on the company next time had also been made somewhere in the middle of the discussion.

Xander rolled his head against the seat, picking up the crumpled copy of their report. And the company grooming policy stapled to it with lines highlighted in manly orange.
Spike heard the truck come into the garage - waited for a couple of minutes. But - nothing. Not another sound. *Well, fuck. Wonder what the tosser's said to him...?* Spike got up and grabbed his smokes and lighter - shoved them into his jeans-pocket and stomped across the kitchen and out the door. Pissed because Xander probably was. *Might have to teach some corp-rats some manners,* he thought, and opened the passenger door. Climbed in, and tried a smile.

"Hey, love - what're you doing?"

"Lying in wait for a sexy blond vampire." Xander slid his hand over the back of Spike's neck - tugged him across the gap between the seats and said 'hello' with a syrupy-slow kiss. "Have you seen one?" He mumbled into Spike's lips - click of teeth on teeth when he grinned.

"The sexiest," Spike mumbled back and got his hands up and into Xander's hair, kissing slow and deep, his fingers flexing and stroking over scalp and
muscle. "Pales in comparison to this sexy brunet bloke I know," he added, and went in for another kiss. Xander was tense against him, though, and after a moment Spike pulled reluctantly away. "Now tell me what's going on, yeah?"

Xander hit the power locks and sat up, stretched. "We're going to Ojai." A quick glance over Spike to be sure he was dressed for Ojai and Xander put the truck in gear, raised the garage door again. "Is anything burning in there?"

"Fire's still going, but the damper's mostly closed - it'll be fine." Spike got out a cigarette and lit up - opened his window as they pulled out of the garage. "So - why Ojai?"

"Because that's where Seb is. We're celebrating my success in Chicago with the nipple piercings that are directly against company policy. Here." Xander passed the review to Spike, checked his rear view, and pulled back onto the road. "The first three paragraphs are glowing praise about my work in Chicago and on the site. The back page is my blood
work and urine sample. And somewhere in the middle is a harassment complaint from Dave."

Spike flipped through the scant pages of text - nodded over the 'good' part of the review and raised an eyebrow over the rest, particularly the harassment complaint. "So - since we're going to Ojai - I guess you won't mind if I keep bringing you lunch? And - sorry, love, but Dave must die." Spike flicked ash out the window and shoved the papers into the crack of the seat for safekeeping.

Xander snorted, slid a hand up Spike's thigh and down to his knee. "I won't mind you bringing me lunch. Russ won't mind. Carl says you'd better visit the site some morning when he's there. Dave's an asshole but that's still not illegal in California so I can't fire him for it."

"Won't have to fire him, pet - they'll find him strangled on his own goolies one fine morning." Spike plucked the papers back up again and studied the 'Company Policy re: Grooming' page. "You cut your hair, love and you'll be very, very sorry," Spike
muttered, reaching to tug gently at the long, wind-whipped strands.

"I care a lot more about keeping you happy than keeping them happy." Xander chuckled, fingers flexing on Spike's leg then sliding off and back to the steering wheel. "I've got positive reviews from Carl, Russ, and Matt - and Carl has a Navajo guy working his shift with a braid down to his waist who they don't have a problem with. So once it gets long enough, I'll braid my hair for work. I am - taking a lesson from Buffy."

"What, hair-braiding lessons? Thought you got your fill of that with the Niblet, pet." Spike edged closer along the seat and let his own hand wander, sliding over the fine cotton of Xander's dress-pants; kneading the muscles underneath and inching slowly higher.

"No grabbing the goods while I'm driving, sweetheart." Xander ran his palm along Spike's wrist and forearm, stopping him before he could slide higher, grinning. "For that, I'll pull over." He
slid his thumb around Spike's hand, rubbed it against his palm. "Buffy told the Council that if they didn't like the way she slayed, they could wait for the next Slayer to be called. She didn't stop being the Slayer or stop slaying - and eventually they realized that they pretty much didn't have any choice about Buffy. Now, Sunnydale Southwest has a choice about me but they're gonna have a fun time finding a guy who'll work third shift, knows Sunnydale, deals with demons and knows what he's doing like I do."

"Did they say they were letting you go, then? Threaten it, I mean?" Spike curled his hand around Xander's and just held it, content for the moment to simply be skin to skin. "Council never knew what they had in Buffy - bunch of bastards so old they probably farted dust, trying to tell little girls how to live and die..." Spike grinned at Xander's lifted eyebrow. No matter his feelings about Buffy - hate, love, indifference - he'd always respected her.

"Not much different from guys in suits and Italian leather shoes that've never seen mud trying to tell
me how to do my job. Which I still have, by the way. I'm on a probationary period now. I've got until after the winter site shutdown to clean up my act. When the crews come back to work in the spring, they'll review me again and decide whether they want to renew my contract for another year.

"Clean up your act..." Spike consulted the papers again and snorted - thought about tossing them out the window, but hesitated. Xander might want the good part of the review. Instead he leaned over and shoved them into the glove box. "I like your definition of 'clean up', love. Gonna get another tattoo, too?"

"Maybe. Carl suggested an arm band - something I can show off in the spring when the site warms up." Xander laughed - felt Spike's fingers tighten on his and sobered. "Carl and Russ and Matt aren't bad guys, Spike. We run a good site together and I don't want to change that. Corporate can either accept me or fire me for something other than doing a bad job."
"You're bloody brilliant, Xander," Spike murmured, and lay his head down on Xander's shoulder - pressed into the warm hollow of Xander's neck and breathed deeply of the spicy-sweet scent that never failed to make him feel safe, happy, and horny.

Xander let his eye close briefly, savoring the ticklish nuzzle and freeing his hand from Spike's. He wrapped his arm around Spike's shoulders. And he could get why the cowboys drove like that with an arm around their girls - didn't quite stop his laugh before it got out.

"What's so funny?"

"You're a cowgirl," Xander informed him.

"I'm a what?" Spike didn't mean for his voice to jump quite like that, but he'd never been accused of being a cowgirl before.

"You're a cowgirl cuddling up to her man behind the wheel of a great big ole pickup. If there was a dog in the back and we'd be every country-western video
ever made." Xander knew he was grinning - didn't care. He was becoming a master of the not caring.

"Pull over, Xan, and you'll get an education about what sort of cowgirl I am," Spike growled, creeping his hand into Xander's lap again and making a grab for 'the goods'. He let his teeth graze over Xander's neck, tongue fluttering behind them.

Xander kept the truck on the road through sheer stubborn force of will and rubbed his palm over Spike's ribs - licked his lips. "Are you a horny vampire cowgirl?"

"I'm gonna fuck you so hard you can't walk for a week if you call me cowgirl again, pet," Spike purred and bit, just hard enough - lapped the miniscule drops of blood that formed.

Xander pulled the truck off the highway so fast it skidded a full half circle before coming to a stop in a cloud of dust. His hand shook on the wheel and he grabbed Spike's hair with the other, yanked his head back far enough to look into golden eyes,
breathing hard. "Never seen such a purdy cowgirl in my life."

Spike let the demon come all the way out, snarling, and pulled Xander to him - kissed him with the dexterity of over a century's practice, drawing only tiny drops of blood. "You asked for it, love," he said, and slithered backwards, fumbling for the door-handle.

Xander made a futile grab for his door handle but Spike was faster - much faster - and he yelped when Spike dragged him from the truck and slammed him against the hood, knocking the air from his lungs until he shook with silent laughter that felt good.

"I'm a thoroughbred, that's what she said, in the back of my truck bed," Xander gasped more than sang - wiggled back against Spike.

Spike stared at the back of Xander's head for a moment, his brain temporarily short-circuited by the off-key warble that was Xander attempting to sing. Bloody hell. That's - deranged. But - cure's
coming up... In a few quick motions he had Xander's pants around his ankles - his own open enough to give a little relief to his erection. "Hold on tight, pet," he said, and slid down Xander's body.

"Fuck!" Xander lurched forward against the truck - engine-warm against erect flesh as a cool, cool tongue wasted no time in wriggling up behind - left Xander trying to crawl up onto the hood and shove back against Spike's mouth all at once as somewhere in the short-circuiting nexus of his brain, abandoned thoughts ran circles and squeaked about 'indecent exposure!' and 'naked on the highway!'.

Musk, salt, whiff of alarm as Xander's brain finally registered 'side of the road' and Spike almost laughed. Instead he palmed the sleek muscles of Xander's ass and pulled at them, giving himself more access, plunging mouth and tongue deeper into the crevice between. Lapping, pushing, opening - making Xander ready. *Fuckin' ready - yeah - brace yourself, pet* - Spike stood up and nicked his palm with a fang. Blood was an indifferent lubricant, but
better than nothing to ease the first push. *Probably something in the glove-box*, Spike thought, but dismissed that as too far away - too much effort. He stroked himself, slicking the blood down his shaft - over the head that was already slick with pre-come.

Spike pushed against Xander, steadily - slowly - increasing the pressure. Licked the traces of blood off his palm and brought that hand around to Xander's cock, taking it in a tight grip. He leaned up close, lips brushing Xander's ear.

"You ready for me, pet? Hope you're ready..." He *pushed* - and slid in, hitching glide to the hilt, not giving Xander a chance to move - breathe. *Oh god, god, that's so fucking good* -

The push and stretch of entry *burned* and Xander felt every *millimeter* of it - rose onto his toes against the hood of the truck, breathing *hard* - rubbed his cheek against the cooling metal. *Good good good* His inner voice chanted Spike's praise to the sky while his outer voice produced a 'fuck me now' moan that he could feel all the way down in his
guts. He licked his lips and reached back to feel the flex of hard, cool muscle under Spike's skin; rubbed a warm and shaking palm over Spike's hip.

A tiny Xander part of his brain made a quip about whether he was being fucked by his cowgirl or the horse but it died unsaid when Spike started to move.

Spike pulled back and then in again, hard, fast rhythm that suited the roar of trucks and cars speeding past - the swirl of hot-cold air, scents of dust and petrol and sweat. He jacked Xander's cock, pull and twist, and nuzzled closer into his throat - nipped and licked, sucked the skin up in bruising kisses. Xander was moaning - arching his back and pushing himself onto Spike, legs as wide as he could get them.

"Fuckin' hot, Xan, fuckin' tight and hot and...good, good..." Spike twisted his hips - sped up - sank his fangs deep into Xander's throat. No finesse, no build-up, and Xander cried out hoarsely, his body locking tight into a hard bow, come slicking Spike's
fist. Spike thrust *hard*, one, then two times and came as well, crowding Xander up on his toes - into the truck. Swallowing the blood that was like spiced wine in his mouth.

Xander shuddered and the world rushed back in - roar of semi trucks barreling past, pound of his heart like it was trying to bang a path out of his chest; harsh breath, burning throb of friction-hot skin around cooler flesh and Spike's weight against his back, lips against his throat - the breeze colder yet. And Xander filled his lungs with air that tasted like rain.

"Hey - sweetheart." Xander's voice emerged rough, caught in his throat as Spike slipped out, flesh too *alive* to feel empty. He turned, tipped Spike's lips up and tasted - blood and smoke, salt and rain. *We're just kissing, officer. Nothing indecent about that.* Xander gave Spike's jeans a tug, buttoned them up with numb fingers and a stupid grin.

Spike did a fast down-and-up, getting Xander's slacks back in place - kissing him slow and easy
while his fingers deftly maneuvered fly and button and belt. "Love you," he murmured, and pulled Xander close, hugging him. The wind cut across the back-draft from the highway, cool and full of the scent of the sea - of wet earth - of rain. Spike turned his face into that clean wind for a moment, eyes closed, then he looked back at a squeeze from Xander's arms. "Love you, pet," he said again.

"Love you back, crazy vampire - cowgirl," Xander whispered in Spike's ear - squeezed him tight against his chest before Spike could jerk away and kissed cold lips with warm ones that still tingled from orgasm.

He gave Spike's hand a tug, leading him back to the truck door still swinging open in the breeze - slid across the seat with a sweet ache that promised Spike would be the one driving them back home while Xander squirmed in the passenger seat.

Spike took a last look - up and out. Saw the curling wave of storm-cloud coming in from the west and smiled. Then he slid in next to Xander, fingers lacing
hands together - automatic, habit - learned. It wasn't until they were a few miles down the highway that Spike finally remembered. *Bloody hell* - "*I'm a thoroughbred, that's what she said, in the back of my truck bed*'? Xander - what the *fuck* was that?"

Xander gave in to the urge to giggle madly. "*That*, my bleached friend, was *Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy*.'"

~*~*~*~*~

"Oh my god."

"What's that, pet?"

"Oh. My god," Xander said again and dropped his head back against the seat. He was shirtless and shaking and for once it had nothing to do with coming down from sex or blood.

Spike's chuckle was *far* too knowingly wicked to be
sympathetic and Xander - sighed, and had to admit that none of this was Spike's fault.

Okay, maybe the throbbing burn that was his ass and the matching throb in his neck had something to do with Spike. But it wasn't as if Xander hadn't begged for it.

And the nipple rings.

And the tattoo.

"Ow." Xander summed it up.

"Feelin' like you were used pretty hard, cowboy?" Spike sniggered, and avoided a floppy whap from Xander's hand. He smoothly guided the truck out of the slow lane to the fast, passing a lorry, the wipers working overtime to clear the sheet of rain the lorry wheels fanned up from the tarmac.

"I feel like a cowboy on Sunday who got paid on Friday." Xander looked down at himself. "Out of money, out of booze, too sore for sex, and all
marked up." Xander grinned, closed his eye - spatter of rain on the truck, on the road, soothing in a nice non-contact way. The redness of his nipples wasn't too noticeable and the sharp pain of the piercing had subsided into a quiet throb that ached in time with his ass and the bite on his neck. The tattoo was a quiet burn. the outer half a complex band of knotted leather thongs with an intricate mandala set in the center and long stylized leaves hanging below. At first glance like a feathered American Indian arm band, but the leaves were more Gothic - the weave of the band more Hindi than Sioux. The inner half wasn't done - it would be finished on the next trip to Ojai.

Spike reached over and took Xander's hand, curling his fingers around and just holding. Pushed the gas down a little harder and got the truck close to one hundred. "We'll be home soon, love - fix you right up."

"I can hear you driving too fast," Xander sing-songed and tugged on Spike's fingers, snickered at Spike's unrepentant snort. He cracked his eye open
and looked over at Spike. "What's the big hurry?"

"Just want to get you home. Since you won't stay home - you need a little time to relax. Get ready." Spike edged the speedometer a little higher - squinted at a car in the distance that might or might not be a Highway Patrol.

Xander watched the squint - played his best 'Who me, officer?' lines in his head. "Uh - Spike? How did you get a driver's license? Aren't you legally dead?"

"Money talks, pet. Got enough of it, you can get most anything you like." Spike wondered briefly if he'd actually brought his license, but then dismissed the thought from his mind.

"No worries, Xander. If we get the filth after us, I can just have a little snack." Half-way joking. Half-way not. Wondering what Xander would say to that. A thin line he still trod carefully because Xander, for all his protestations, would be a White Hat until the day he died.
Xander closed his eye again, snuggled back into the corner between the seat and the door to keep his body still when the truck wasn't. "All right sweetheart. Make sure you nail his partner too, then 'cause if you do an OJ, I'm gonna be late for work."

"Won't be drivin' twenty miles an hour, pet, trust me." Spike reached out and fiddled with the radio - shook his head at the poor reception and started poking through the CD's in their case. Driving with his knees, and he made sure Xander's eye was shut. The car turned out to be just another Ford with a 'Jesus is my Co-Pilot' sticker on the back. If Jesus is your co-pilot, why don't you drive a little faster, you git?

The first notes of music made Xander smile. Trying to tell me something, sweetheart?

There ain't nothing I can do
Or nothing I can say
That folks don't criticize me
But I'm going to do
Just as I want to anyway

With his eye closed and the rain isolating the cab of the truck from the rest of the world - Billie Holiday playing on the car stereo - Xander could feel a tightness in his skin the closer they got to Sunnydale. It might have been from playing Wounded Man Sitting for an hour in the truck, but after demon-hunting on Tuesday it was so much easier to believe in the old fashioned Sunnydale Weird. "What did you and Wes talk about yesterday?"

"We talked about what's going on in Sunnydale. About the...vibe. He hadn't heard anything but he's looking into it. He...sounded tired." Spike frowned at that memory. Too tired, too fast...too much. Need to get him away.

"When does has he not sounded tired?" Xander twisted in his seat until he could see Spike - rested their joined hands on his folded knee - rubbed his thumb over Spike's. "You worry about him a lot."
"He's been through so bloody much, is all. Almost dyin' for Connor, then everybody just...abandoning him... Angel takin' his memories... He was so betrayed by that, love, he..." Spike sighed and shook his head. "When we were together...he was so alone. Even when... It was like he was holding himself back - making sure he didn't feel to much. He thinks everything that happened is his fault. Tryin' to make up to Angel for his failures. That's why he stays."

Spike glanced over at Xander - squeezed his hand a little bit. "Don't mean to - to make you feel... Is it all right, love?"

"You did catch the part where I nailed Wesley to the door frame and tasted his tonsils, didn't you?" Xander's lips quirked into a half smile. "It's all right, Spike. I like the guy. And you like the guy. I'm not seeing the problem. Except for him killing himself trying to make up to Angel? As in the guy whose failures almost got us all sucked into Hell with him?"

"Wes has issues, mate. After that prophecy - after
everybody just left him... He pretty much convinced himself he was useless. Keep tryin' to tell him it's all rubbish, but..." Spike shrugged - got his hand free of Xander's grip and patted himself down for a cigarette - lit it and opened the window and smoked, the cool rain misting inside and wetting his arm and the side of his face. The air smelled sharply of ozone and the sea. Nearly home. He glanced over at Xander and grinned.

"That kiss was bloody hot, love - need to see somethin' like that again."

"Wanna participate in a re-enactment?" Xander slid his hand up along Spike's forearm, watching Spike's grin become a lusty smirk. "Then say something dirty in that classy accent and I'll show you what would've come next if he was ready for it."

"Whatever do you mean?" Spike said, 'Wes' voice and a lift of his chin - lift of his eyebrow - and Xander snickered and slid a little closer, not bothering to hide a tiny wince. "Could you be - coming on to me, young man?" he added, goosing
the truck a little faster. *Home soon, fuck yeah...*

"*Wesley's* accent, not Giles'." Xander leaned up to Spike's ear, blew on the rim and watched the shiver work its way down Spike's body - slid a hand into his lap. "Though Giles *was* pretty hot with those chains and manacles he kept in his condo."

"Watcher always had a bit of how's your father goin' on with all that. Who just *happens* to have vamp-proof manacles in their flat? Supposed to kill us all, isn't he?" Spike shivered when Xander chuckled faintly, sending another brush of warm breath over his ear - along his neck.

"I just *happened* to have vamp-proof rope in my basement. That doesn't mean I wanted to tie you to the chair and climb on, does it?" Xander felt the truck shudder onto the shoulder and back to the blacktop - licked a circle over a pale, pale bruise on Spike's neck.

"I'm gonna pull over up here -" Spike said - warning and promise, flicker of fangs. "And you *know* you
wanted me, Xan. Just wouldn't admit it. Imagine, yeah? If you'd tied me to that chair naked. Hands tight to the arms - legs spread... Rope over my thighs, over my belly... Showing off my cock... And it would have been hard for you, love..." Spike breathed the rising arousal-scent from Xander - listened to his heart kick up to a faster rhythm. "You could have slicked up and climbed on...ridden me all night."

Xander sucked in a breath, deep and hard - bit into the flesh at the base of Spike's neck and breathed in the musky *vampire* scent. "Want that."

"Just happen to have some rope at home..."

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Xander snagged a doughnut from the open box on the desk - propped his feet on a stack of safety manuals they had yet to distribute and relaxed; let Russ brief Carl and his assistant supervisor Harry on the parts of the site that were beginning to look
hazardous after the rain.

Agreements had been made - possibly before Xander had even come to work - to let him, as Russ said, goof off on company time for the last few hours of his shift because the bastards in suits owed him.

Xander hadn't complained and had been basking in doughnuts and coffee ever since.

*Mmmmm. Doughnuts.*

And Dave couldn't have any. When Carl had shown up early with several boxes of assorted doughnuts that all involved nuts, he'd pleaded ignorance to Dave's nut allergy.

High School meanness wasn't so bad when it was on your side.

"Alex, is Spike coming down to the site tonight?"

Xander opened his eye to find Carl and Russ
watching him with identical scheming expressions. "Yes, but he'll be pissed you didn't bring him a jelly doughnut. He likes the squishy red ones best."

Carl slid the bottom box off the stack and flipped it open to reveal a dozen assorted jelly doughnuts. "How could I forget Spike?"

"Guys - you really don't need to bribe me to stay here."

"It's not bribery, Alex." Russ slung an arm over Xander's shoulders. "It's appreciation."

"Russ survived a review like this last Spring before you came."

"But Carl didn't bring me doughnuts. He likes you best."

Carl threw a peanut at Russ' head. "The nearest doughnut shop was still in Santa Barbara last spring."
"Okay, so, doughnuts were out, but what about that little diner with the pie? Ronnie's? That pie could bribe Satan back into Heaven, man, and you didn't even get me a single slice."

"There's pie?" Spike asked, slipping inside and gratified by the startled yelp he wrung from Carl.

"Jesus, Spike! Xander keeps sayin' he's gonna put a bell on you - I think I second that." Carl put a hand to his chest, pretending fibrillation of the heart and Spike smirked at him, making a bee-line for Xander and bending down to kiss him, hands in Xander's hair and a discrete nibble at this lower lip.

"Hallo, love."

"Doughnuts," Xander said against Spike's lips and pulled him down onto his lap in a show of unmistakable possession, wound his arms under the duster and crawled a hand into Spike's back pocket by the time his grin reached full wattage.

Carl cleared his throat. "Harry, this is Alex's
scandalous houseboy Spike. Spike, this is Harry Chen, my assistant supervisor."

"Scandalous, Carl? What has Xander been telling you?" Spike gave his very best 'come fuck me' leer and laughed when Carl blushed beet-red. He gave Harry Chen the once-over, sizing him up. Tallish, thinnish, thick black hair and an easy grin. Acceptable. Russ was snickering into a giant, insulated cup of soda and Spike grinned brightly at him. "Doughnuts?"

"Doughnuts." Russ opened the box of jelly doughnuts and held it out to Spike.

"We're celebrating the retention of Alex as one of our own." Carl explained, tipped his chair back and swung side to side.

"Without Dave," Russ added.

"Without Dave."

"And with doughnuts." Harry grabbed a jelly
doughnut before the box was out of reach. "What? I don't *like* nuts." He waved the doughnut at Carl and took a defiant bite of pastry and blueberry ooze.

Xander whispered into Spike's ear, happy to sit back and let the vampire weigh him to the couch. "Dave's allergic."

"Allergic? To gettin' his balls kicked? Or just to me in general?" Spike shot a disapproving eye at Harry and cuddled the jelly doughnuts close. He picked one up and took a huge bite, then spent a little time casually licking jelly off his lips and fingers. Harry watched with narrowed eyes - Carl pretended not to see and Russ grinned and got his own jelly-filled. "Those bloody corp-rats don't know what they got in my Xander - utter shite, all that 'personal grooming' business and the rest." Spike turned in Xander's lap, a look of anticipation on his face. "Did you show 'em your new piercings, love?"

"Everything above the belt. And if there's anything below the belt, we don't want to see it," Carl added quickly. "At least I don't."
"You don't want to see Spike's piercing then?"
Xander guided Spike's doughnut closer and took a bite for himself - tasted like lemon and spice, like *Spike* and that almost made him laugh.

"Sure!" from Russ and "No!" from Carl at the same moment. Spike burst out laughing, leaning back in Xander's arms, *sprawling* his legs out - 'come get me' and 'can't touch this' in the same package. Harry shoved more doughnut into his face and remained silent, but his dark eyes were sparkling with mirth.

Russ leaned forward, elbows on knees. "We're all men here, Carl."

"That's why I don't want to see it! I know what it feels like to stick a needle in my *aparato*."

"What?"

"When?"
"Come on man! Stop holding out!"

Carl swung his chair around laughing. "I am not telling that story! All you perverts can look at Spike's rifle. I am having another doughnut."

"Spoken like a true heterosexual," Russ said and held a hand to his heart. "Unzip, pal."

Spike flicked a glance to Xander's grinning face and then stood up, plopping the doughnut box down on the desk. He made a show of it. He undid his belt with a caress to the long tongue of leather. Popped the buttons on his jeans one by one, hipshot, head down, hands framing the half-hard flesh underneath. Eased himself free of denim and gently pulled his foreskin back so Russ and Harry - who was flushing but also looking - and Xander - who was frankly oggling - could clearly see the blued metal. There was a moment's reverent silence. "Carl, you're looking," Spike purred, and all eyes swiveled to Carl's practically magenta face, half hidden behind his hands and peeking through his fingers.
He dropped his head down onto the desk and waved his hands helplessly. "It's a compulsion! It's a sickness. A mental illness."

"He wants one too." Russ translated with a grin.

"Fuck you, Russ."

Xander wound one arm around Spike's belly, one around his thighs, rested his cheek against one half-clothed hip for a good look. "Nuh. No fucking is happening here." He slid his hand down, sly caress before tucking Spike away and buttoning him up. "Show's over. Mine."

"Stingy bastard." Russ raised his soda in a toast. "To the finest piece of needle-pierced flesh on site!"

Soda cans went up in salute, and Spike flopped back down onto the couch, pulling the doughnuts into his lap and taking out a second one. Mmm - cherry filled. "So - have a good day, love?" he asked, licking more jelly and waggling his fingers at Russ, who was
snorting into his Diet Coke.

Xander snickered and stretched, hooked his hands behind his head and wiggled into the couch. "I had a Hellmouthy day. Russ, you want to tell him about it?" Xander could feel Spike looking at him with banked wariness and dropped a hand onto his thigh, rubbing. Harry had a blank expression on his face but Carl was sitting up and paying attention.

"Two of the paramedics took a walk around the perimeter after one of Dave's crew reported seeing a girl on site near the buried church." Russ fished a paper from the pile on the main desk and read it off. "She seemed lost and didn't respond to their calls. By the time they got to the church, she was gone."

Spike looked over at Xander - looked at Russ, who was serious now. "Anything else, then? They go looking?" he asked. Russ pursed his lips - shook his head slowly.

"They kind of looked around, but they didn't go
down into the church or anything." Russ' voice made it clear that going down into the church was a bad idea - one he wouldn't condone. "It was close to lunch, and they figured it was somebody's girlfriend or a looter - didn't look too hard." Russ tossed the paper back onto the desk and leaned back, hands pushing through his hair. "I wonder if there's been - you know - anything else? That nobody thought to report?"

There was a moment's silence and then Harry cleared his throat. "Guys. Hellmouth? Wanna - explain?"

Xander raised a hand. "I'll field it." Explaining the Hellmouth - didn't get any less weird, Xander found. Ever.

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Spike stretched - arched and twisted luxuriously on the silk sheet and chenille pillows of the Nest - pointed his toes towards the fireplace and soaked
up heat with a satisfied, purring sigh. The door to
the patio was open and a damp, fragrant breeze
curled in, making the flames dance. Outside, the
late-afternoon sun was shrouded in heavy clouds,
and rain slanted down, silvery and endless -
whispering across the surface of the pool and
dripping steadily from the eaves. The sea and sky
merged into a monotone watercolor a half a mile
from shore, and only the white caps of the breaking
waves delineated sea from air. On his back, Spike
reached around and found his book - propped his
head on his arm and a pillow and started reading.
Xander was in the kitchen, finding some food item
or other.

Xander flopped gracelessly onto the pillows with a
grilled cheese sandwich and a can of soda. "That
was Matt on the phone. They're closing the site
early for the weekend because the ground's getting
unstable from the rain." He wriggled around until
his head rested on Spike's stomach and he
stretched out, skin bare to the open doors and the
wind off the sea that ruffled his hair and soothed
the passive ache of recent piercings.
Spike's left hand went automatically to Xander's hair - tugging the strands loose and spreading them out over his belly and thigh - stroking through the freed stands again and again, hypnotic rhythm. "So you're home for the evening then, pet?" he murmured happily.

Xander pushed into the tugging and petting, rolled his head against Spike's stomach and smiled. "I'm home for the weekend - and part of next week if the rain keeps up. There's too much risk of cave-ins until we get the site stabilized and filled in."

"You are? Lucky me, then." Spike grinned down at Xander over the book and tugged his hair gently. "Anything new to tell Wes? Any more ghosties?"

"Or something." Xander hooked his arm over Spike's leg, wormed his fingers into the soft hollow behind Spike's knee, stroked absently. "The guys haven't seen a little girl, but there've been more looter reports and no actual looters. Official word is the rain playing tricks on us." Xander took a bite of
his sandwich, plate balanced on his stomach.

Spike snorted softly - flexed his leg a little, pressing into Xander's touch. "Rain does no such thing. Have you seen anything? I know you feel it, love. It's getting...stronger."

Xander rolled his head to see Spike over the book and brushed sandwich crumbs off his fingers. "I haven't seen anything that goes bump in the night but I feel the weird - like I feel you and what's up with that? Russ doesn't feel it."

"Russ doesn't - you what?" Spike tossed the book aside - pushed himself up on his elbows to look down at Xander. "What do you mean, you feel me?"

"I - feel when you're in the area - if you're awake or asleep." Xander closed his eye, felt for that tingle that was Spike on the edge of his awareness. "If you're...you're scared?" He opened his eye and looked at Spike. "This close to you I can feel that."

"I'm not -" Spike started, and then clicked his teeth
shut, thinking. He was, actually. Scared. Just a little. Sips of his blood - weren't supposed to do anything. Weren't supposed to change Xander, just give him a buzz. A little extra when they were fucking - or fighting. Or showin' up corp-rat bastards who don't know any better... "When - did it start, Xan? How long? Why didn't you tell me!" he added, and ducked his head, dismayed at the sharpness of his tone.

Xander took the plate off his stomach, set it as far away in the Nest as he could reach and rolled over - right arm wrapped over Spike's waist. "It started after I came down. I - thought it'd go away." Spike's skin was cool and smoky under him but the thrum of unease shivered its way into Xander's bones.

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"After?" Spike reluctantly let himself down, lying flat again and reaching for Xander's hand - tugging it up to his ribs and holding it there, fingers laced together. After. Maybe all that blood - that whole
"weekend... "Got you so hopped up on me it - did something... Xan, I - are you all right?" He didn't voice the 'I'm sorry' that was lodged in his throat, but he was pretty sure Xander heard that, anyway."

"I'm good. Wigged at first but good." Xander inched higher, pressed his lips to Spike's fingers and rested his cheek there. "It doesn't hurt. It doesn't do anything - unless you count the way it's kinda hard to think when you come by work all horny - not that you should take that as a request to stop coming by work when you're horny..." Spike didn't feel any happier. "So it's not...normal?"

Spike let his hand wander up, hand to forearm to bicep - lingered gently over the mostly-healed tattoo, traced the feathery leaves below. Then up a little more, to twine his fingers in Xander's hair again. "I dunno about normal, Xander... I've never done this. The only people that got my blood before this were turned, love, I don't - know. We'll have to ask Wes. Maybe he's read something, or..." Spike saw the look on Xander's face - the look that said 'I'll panic if you tell me to', and deliberately took a deep
breath - let it out slowly and smiled. "Can't call Wes for nearly an hour yet - bet that new vampy-sense makes me fuckin' you feel really good."

Xander let his breath out when Spike did, rode the rise of his chest on the inhale and flexed his fingers under Spike's. "It makes me fucking you feel pretty great too. Not - y'know - that it was unpleasant before." Xander felt the grin rise, wormed around in the pillows until he could slide a leg over both of Spike's and straddle his thighs. "Mmmm. I can feel that without the new vampy-sense." He chuckled, stretched out over the vampire and shifted his hips until his cock nestled along Spike's - eyelid fluttered closed. "You said an hour?"

Spike suddenly found himself on top of Xander, with warm fingers stroking down his back - over his ass. Warm hands that coaxed him open - drew him down - held him, helpless in the grip of pure pleasure as Xander kissed him until he had to breathe.

"An hour might do," Xander said softly, tongue
flickering out and tracing Spike's lips. Lips and teeth on his throat, hand everywhere, caressing and kneading, stroking and pressing. Slow lift of Xander's hips, and fiery heat shivering through Spike as Xander began to thrust inside him.

*God, god...so good...* "Xander, love, that's perfect..." Spike murmured, and arched back, eyes closed - letting himself sink into the heat and the hypnotic rhythm - the loving, possessive touch. "Love...love you..." he breathed, and Xander *smiled.* *Moved* and kept moving slow like the roll of the sea beyond their window.

When Spike rolled off Xander at last he lay limp and panting, spread out like a star on the dark reds of the Nest. "Christ, pet, didn't think you'd really take an *hour*..."

Xander turned over onto his stomach, belly-crawled until he could get an arm over Spike and licked at his throat, tasted himself *and* Spike and the softly exploding prickles of Spike's blood. "They call me Marathon Man," he said in an accent that
demonstrated why he'd failed French class. "I am the *master* of providing multiple orgasms on demand." He thought of Anya who had so selflessly sacrificed her time to *hone* that skill of his - and it didn't hurt. Made him smile.

"Fuckin' Master, yeah," Spike murmured, shivering at the feel of Xander's tongue on his throat. Running his own tongue over his teeth, to taste the last, fleeting bit of Xander's blood. *Just tiny sips, we'll be okay. No overdoing it, this time...* "Demon-girl always said you were a Viking in the sack, love. Guess she was right."

Xander lifted his head, propped his chin on Spike's right pectoral and hooked a leg over him. "Ever fuck a viking?"

Spike opened his eyes, staring at the ceiling. "M'not *that* old, pet. I *did* fuck these two...Swedish cross-country skiers, brother and sister. They were tryin' to improve their stamina for the...hrmmm...1932 Olympics."
Xander skimmed his fingers over Spike's nipple - back and forth until his skin warmed and he felt a shudder in the muscle beneath his palm. "How did they do?"

"Weell..." Spike looked at Xander for a long moment and then sighed. He asked... "Dru got a bit jealous, didn't she? And - she wanted to be a blonde for a bit, so... She ate the girl and took her hair and I ate the boy because...he was inconsolable over his sister. Never would have won after that, anyway."

Spike watched Xander from the corner of his eye; tried not to tense beneath the warm fingers sweeping over his skin. Didn't know what to expect but - not a smile. Not that smile - barely there but making his eye sparkle. "Call me crazy but marathon sex and post-coital atrocities make me kinda nostalgic." Xander hesitated until Spike looked at him before adding uncertainly. "Is Drusilla going to come back?"

Spike felt his eyebrow going up and he grabbed Xander's hand, holding it to his chest. "Nostalgic,
pet? 'Fraid you lost me there."

Xander waited - for Spike to say anything about Drusilla but he only looked calmly back, played his thumb over Xander's ragged fingernails. Xander sighed, gave in. "Anya liked to relive her vengeancey glory days during the afterglow." Xander licked his lips, felt the warmth in his belly that came with happy Anya memories. "She figured out reliving them during the foreplay was a bad idea."

Spike snorted, laughing softly. "Demon-girl was a piece of work, Xan. I really...liked her." He paused for a moment, thinking, and then propped his head up on his arm a little higher, watching Xander watch him - watching their fingers skate over each others. "I dunno 'bout Dru, love. I'm - not really sure where she is... She might come back. We spent time apart, now and then..." And that's the true answer, but Spike didn't know if it was the one Xander wanted to hear.

Xander drew a slow breath that - hurt a little, in the
center of his chest and swallowed around a sudden thickness in his throat. "Lucky for me she's already brunette." *God. Don't want to think about losing you if you left with her sweetheart.*

*Oh damn. Fuck. Next time use your brain, William.* Spike squirmed closer to Xander - got his arms around him and gently kissed his forehead, where a line was creasing between Xander's brows. "I'm sorry, love. I wasn't very clear, was I? Dru may come back - she may not. But - it won't matter. I'm not - not gonna just pack up and leave." Xander moved - lifted his head as if to speak and Spike shushed him. "Wait, please? She had me for more than a hundred years... We fought, and we fucked, and we killed... We had grand times. I kept her from dying after Prague - she kept me from some bad decisions. But..." Spike closed his eyes, breathing in Xander's sweet-spicy scent, his cheek nestled on Xander's hair.

"But she left, and I... I just don't... I *love* her, Xander. I always will. I can't *not.* She made me. But I don't - *want* her." Spike squeezed Xander a little - nudged him with his chin until Xander looked up at him.
"Want you, love. For as long as you'll have me. Just - you. I never cheated on Dru. Not in a hundred years."

Xander's heart beat - tripped at the thought of a hundred years. A hundred years of - Spike was promising - radiating - protection, possession, love.

And it was - overwhelming. Xander shivered, had to put his head down over Spike's still chest, worm his arms under Spike and hold on. "I never - cheated on Anya. Unless you count hiding the last bag of cheesy chips for myself." He laughed but it sounded like something painful being lanced - quickly and cleanly and leaving him a little unsteady. "That's...good. I kinda want you too." Words mumbled into skin tasting of salt and smoke.

"You kinda do, love? I want you...like I wanted Dru. How's that go? Truly, madly, deeply..." Spike hoped a movie-title would...make Xander smile. Make his heart slow down a little. "Love - please don't... It's too much, isn't it?" he finished softly, and closed his eyes. Resting in the dark for a moment.
Xander could only answer *without* words - and he *got* it - got what the writers and poets and teachers meant when they said 'with his whole heart'. The kiss *hurt* because he wasn't close enough to Spike in it and *god* - *love you*. He waited until blue eyes opened and smiled. "*Do*. Not kinda. *Do*. I - " Xander Harris - man of many *many* words except when he needed them the most.

"Yeah?" Spike asked, stroking mink-soft hair - hugging the warm body close to him. Xander's heart on his lips - in his look. Spike blinked and took in a deep breath. "I know I...love pretty hard, Xan. Dru told Buffy - we vampires, we love very well..." Spike grinned, thinking about his Dru. "Just not very wisely. I think my affair with a certain Slayer falls neatly into *that* category. I just... Don't want to scare you off, love."

"Again, Spike? Pretty - pretty hard to scare." Xander held his breath, let it out slow and steady, tried to calm his heart beating too hard. Wiped quickly at both eye and socket that always *itched* when he
teared. He ducked his head, couldn't look at Spike while he spoke. "My love history isn't - great. But I'm loyal and I - I want that - you."

"You're the most loyal person I know, Xander. You just...gave your heart away to someone who couldn't take it." Spike lifted Xander's chin - made the man look at him, damp face and all. "I'll take it, Xan. Take it and keep it safe for - forever. All right? Forever."

"Sold." Xander's voice emerged shaky and rough around the edges but laced with a smile. "To the naked blond vampire. All sales are final and void in - in Vegas cause what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. It says so in their TV commercials."

Square Fourteen
It was raining again but that was okay, really. Spike enjoyed the break from the endless California sunshine. Plus, he could go out in the day, if he wanted. He really didn't want to, at least not right now. Curled up in the Nest in the living room, watching a movie and lazily eating every last Cadbury's that had come with his last shipment of Old Speckled. Well, sharing the Cadburys with Xander. Sharing chocolate, and kisses, and slow strokes of his hands over Xander's body. No sex - not yet. Just contact. Snuggling, he supposed. But - he didn't care.

The movie was at a boring spot - a little too much conversation just now - and Spike rolled onto his back, pushing until Xander grinned and got an arm over his ribs - leaned his chin on Spike's chest.

"What, evil undead? You're like Miss Kitty when she wanted to be petted - pushy."

Spike growled, low, but it was half-hearted. "I'm worried about Wes, love. He's been - has he been avoiding us? It's startin' to piss me off." It wasn't
really - it was actually starting to freak him out a little, but Spike wasn't going to go there. With the site shut down from now - late November - until some time in the spring due to all the extra-heavy - and early rains - Xander had a lot of time off and Spike didn't want to...worry him. The weird Hellmouth vibe seemed to have eased off, too - or they'd gotten used to it - but it was still a nagging worry in the backs of their minds and Spike just didn't want to dredge it up. He was loving all this time with Xander. Time that was just theirs.

"He's been putting us off." Xander squirmed in the Nest until he was comfortable in the new arrangement of body parts. He could feel Spike's worry like a quiet flutter in his belly. "And sweetheart - I know a 'don't call us, we'll call you' when I hear one." He traced the sharply delineated lines of Spike's pectorals - smiled at the gentle radiation of comfort - traced his collarbone. "Think Angel caught him?"

"You know..." Spike said slowly, his hand absently going to toy with Xander's hair. "I don't like that
'caught him'. It makes it sound like Wes is doing something...wrong. And we know he's not." Spike sighed, then looked right at Xander, considering. Then he started to grin.

"That look can only mean trouble," Xander said, grinning back.

"We need to just go and get Wes. Kidnap him! Take him someplace quiet and shag him silly." The mental image that went with that was...nice and Spike saw Xander's eyes glaze for a moment. then Xander shook his head.

"What we should do is go down to L.A. and walk right in and - and come out to Angel. About everything. Get under his thick and brooding skin." Xander shimmied up Spike's body, pinned him by the shoulders and claimed that tempting lower lip. Watched the eyes flicker gold with the firelight instead of demon light - felt the comfort turn to the first stirring of lust. "Besides - irritating Angel turns you on."
"Fighting always turns me on, pet. Not as much as you, though." Spike let Xander pin him - kiss him - his hands roaming over the warm skin and sleek muscles. After a little bit, Xander pulled back and Spike sighed. "You really want to do that, love?"

"Course I do! Or...we'll stake him and stash him in the pepper shaker before anybody notices he's missing?"

Spike snorted, laughing, and hugged Xander tight. "That'll be our backup plan, love." Xander was still grinning and Spike had to kiss him again. Then he sighed.

"You know if we do this it's gonna be a bloody mess, Xander. He'll whinge on and on about needing Wes there every minute of every bloody day. And the Slayers'll give us looks... And Andrew..." Spike shuddered. "Andrew will call me a 'vam-pyre and hug me. Sneakin' Wes out'd be so much better. And it'd piss Angel off even more."

"It won't be fun dealing with Angel," Xander
admitted. "But do you care? He whines, we make snappy and witty remarks at his expense. The slayers give us looks, we...make out until they leave or we forget they're there. I think Wes would be happier with a more straight-forward plan." Xander thought for a moment, brow furrowing. "Andrew's a problem."

"Andrew's a bloody pain... Maybe we should get him laid." Spike entertained the notion of dragging Andrew to a gay club and getting him in the back room with the biggest, meanest leather-daddy they could find. But that happy fantasy was interrupted by Xander, who was 'tsk' ing and shaking his head. "What, don't like that idea?"

"Actually I find that idea bizarrely appealing and let's not examine that too closely." Xander's smile faded slowly then slipped away because Spike - didn't feel better. Still bothered, still unhappy. "What's the real problem, sweetheart?"

Spike shook his head a little. "Just...Wes. Can't keep thinkin' about him and...worrying. Makes me wanna
kill something. And Angel's right *there*, conveniently pissin' me off every time he opens his mouth."

"*I* could hit him, instead. He probably won't hit me back and the frustration might make his head explode," Xander offered, smoothing Spike's hair a little and then ruffling it up again, enjoying the 'pissed-off owl' effect.

"You'd just bruise your knuckles on that big, stone lump, love. Best just...slay him with your witty repartee."

"I'll stake him with my well-honed sarcasm. Then give you a good victory staking like the conquering hero."

Spike blinked - then he *laughed*, because that? Was just... "That's awful, pet. Bloody hell!"

"Just...staking my claim, sweetheart." Xander *grinned* - gave Spike's hair a tug and nipped his exposed throat. Then got serious again. "You know Wes won't like it if we fight. Let's just - try to keep it
low-key. For his sake, okay?" Spike sighed - nodded - not pleased but willing to do it because Xander had asked. "But - make no mistake - if Angel wants a piece of you, he has to come through me."

"That's all right then," Spike said, and rolled them over, determined to put his mouth to every inch of Xander's flesh.

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Xander wasn't sure what he had expected from the exterior of the stucco monstrosity of the Hotel Ali Baba - with its wild-growing grounds and long burnt out neon sign - but Classic Moroccan decor with papers scattered over every bit of available floor space and Andrew, crab-walking around the periphery...probably wasn't it.

And luckily the overcast had held all the way to L.A., so Spike could saunter into the lobby with him instead of having to run in under the chancy protection of his coat and a blanket.
"Xander! Spike! Don't move - I have everything sorted in specific piles!"

They froze, and Xander leaned close to Spike, muttering: "Think we can sneak away before he gets to this side of the room?"

Spike muttered back, his arm going possessively around Xander's waist - unthinking reflex. "When he wants to? I swear he can bloody teleport. Brace yourself."

Only Spike's arm around Xander's waist kept him from being knocked over by sheer enthusiasm as Andrew hit them with the force of a small, weepy truck. "Spike! Xander! Mis amigos! Oh, oh Spike - we thought you were dead! Again! I thought I'd never see you again! Again!"

"Hoped," Angel corrected, stepping through a graceful archway, brows lowering like rain over Andrew's parade.
"I'm the proverbial bad penny, Andy - I just keep turnin' up." Spike wrestled Andrew's arm off his neck - set him back a step. Andrew sniffled.

"So, what brings you here, Spike? And with Xander? I didn't think you enjoyed the company of the vampyres, mi hombre."

"Hello? Does anybody see me standing here? Am I invisible and inaudible?" Angel grimaced. "Again?"

"Unfortunately, no." Xander shot Angel a look - and Andrew's company was suddenly a lot more interesting. "I only enjoy Spike's company, Andrew. He's vampire enough for me. Man enough too." Xander didn't even try to fight his grin.

Spike couldn't suppress a snort of laughter at that and he squeezed Xander a little more tightly and then let go - fished out a cigarette and lit it. Andrew coughed, waving a hand in front of his face. And then he got it, and his eyes and mouth went as round as those funny drawings in the comics he bought from Japan.
"Oh my god! Are you dating? Spike - have you given up on Buffy? What about carrying the torch for Anya? Oh my god, I knew it! The constant bickering, the close physical...stuff... It's just like Spock and McCoy! Although -" Andrew paused and leaned closer to them both, and Spike could see that Xander hadn't said anything only because Andrew's ability to babble actually outstripped his own. "Most would say that Spock and Kirk are the ultimate couple, but I find that the dry wit -"

"Andrew - don't you have something you should be doing," Angel snapped, and Spike heaved a sigh.

*Here we go. Pet, give me strength.*

"*Oui, mon capitaine!*"

A line of pain deepened between Angel's brows as Andrew gave him a snappy salute and tip-toed back through the paperwork. Xander could feel the tension growing in Spike the closer Angel came - and didn't like it. When Angel turned to Xander and
spoke, Spike *hummed* with suppressed violence.

"Thank you for bringing him back. I think."

Spike growled and that was enough for Xander. He held up a hand - took a half step between Angel and Spike and looked Angel in the eyes - eye - whatever. "Whoa. Hold on, Deadboy. We're not here for *you* - we're here for Wes."

"What?"

"*We* - me and Spike - are *here* - Hotel Ali Baba - for *Wesley*."

"Why would you and Spike come here for *Wesley*?"

"Not really your business, is it?" Spike snapped. He cocked his head, staring at Angel - watching the words sink in and the anger bubble up. Then - "How's the life of servitude, mate?" Spike asked, and looked up with a grin at Connor, who was standing in the archway, a sheaf of papers in his hand.
"I got a ten-cent raise last month," Connor said, grinning back. The young man ambled across the floor, careless of the papers.

Xander watched him - watched the careless grace in his walk that was just like Angel's had been when he'd first showed up to brood, mope and be a cryptic jerk. Except...Connor was full of life and how weird was that? Somehow, he'd been picturing a small Angel brooding in his dad's shadow, not gracefully dodging piles of paper and offering Xander his hand to shake.

"I'm Connor."

"Xander."

"I've heard about you." Connor glanced up at Angel. "You were a lot shorter in the stories."

"Even vampires forget." Spike looked around Angel to see Wes coming out of an office that was just beyond the archway.
"Spike - Xander, it's good to see you."

Wes picked he way across the lobby and came to rest on the other side of Connor, smiling gently at Spike and then Xander, looking... *Bloody tired.*

"*Why* are they here for you, Wes?" Angel asked again - as if sheer repetition would get him the answers he wanted five minutes ago, and Spike took a long drag off his smoke - blew the lung-ful straight into Angel's face.

"*We're takin' Wes to lunch. How 'bout it, Watcher?*

Wesley flicked a glance at Angel. "I'll get my coat. Angel, I'm taking an hour for a late lunch. My mobile number is by the telephone." Without giving Angel time to answer, Wesley hopscotched his way back across the lobby and Andrew's papers.

"Ohhh-*kay.*" Connor looked expectant. "Dad, I'm taking an hour for -*"
"No you're not. You're on the clock until five, so you'll stay until five." Xander thought Connor had the most expressive collection of eye-rolls he'd ever seen. He was impressed.

"Internships suck when the boss is in a mood."

"I'm not your boss. I'm your dad."

Xander couldn't resist a glance at Spike, wondering if it felt weirdly - human here to him but Spike's gaze was fixed solidly on Wesley, radiating unhappiness.

Wes - looks as tired as he sounded. Damnit. "What's good, Wes?" Spike shouted, watching as Wes gathered a coat from a coat-rack and came back out of his office, shutting the door behind him. "Fancy a curry, or maybe -"

"No," Angel said.

"Wasn't asking you, mate."
"No," Angel said again. "No to all of it. What makes you think you can come back in here after disappearing for six months, take Wesley... I need Wesley! Why don't you ever stay gone?"

"I was gone. I'm not coming back, you git. I'm here for Wes - we're going to have lunch, laugh at you behind your back, and maybe get drunk. Now - Fuck. Off." Spike punctuated the last with a flick of his fingers, sending the butt of his cigarette into Angel's chest hard enough to make it shed a little cloud of sparks. It fell to the floor and Angel stomped on it, glaring. Spike knew he'd said he would try - but fuck it. Angel only understood two things - fight or flight. And Spike? Never ran. Connor looked like a deer in the headlights and Wes looked too tired to fight. Xander - Oops. He looks pissed.

Electricity had crackled down Xander's spine as Spike snapped and he closed his eye - was taking deep and cleansing breaths because one of them had to be the grown up and it was clearly not going to be Spike. And he was not going to give in to Spike's urge to break Angel's nose that was coursing
through him, too. No matter how tempting it was.

"You about ready, Wes?"

"Yes. Angel, you'll be quite all right with Andrew and Connor. If you must, ask Amanda to take my place phoning clients. She has an excellent telephone presence. I'll...see you tomorrow."

"Wes, I -" Angel stopped - glared at Spike some more, then at Xander, then sighed. "Fine. But I wanna hear about this new friendship of yours in the morning." He shot a last, narrow-eyed glare at Spike and then turned and stomped across the lobby, knocking papers askew and leaving dusty foot-prints. Connor made a disgusted noise. "I am the one who has to clean this mess up, since Andrew's too 'busy' to do the heavy lifting." He looked at Spike - at Xander - grinned at Wes. "Have a good lunch, Wes. Nice to have met you Xander."

Spike got his arm back around Xander - got the other one around Wes and wheeled them around.
"Now - let's go get the most expensive lunch we can. I am buying."

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"Sushi without prices on the menu is still sushi, Spike."

Spike swished a piece of fatty tuna through the tamari and wasabi and held it to Xander's lips. "And you love every bite, don't you?"

Spike radiated smug satisfaction. Xander had given in without a fight this time and so far, he'd learned that tuna was a lot more interesting raw, and that in West Hollywood, all you got for macking on your homosexual lover and bookish seducee in public were admiring looks - and a few phone numbers.

Wesley watched the two...lovers...with a smile, eating his own meal with ease, chopsticks held casually and precisely. He'd been - astounded by the warm welcome he'd gotten from both Spike and
Xander. Been astounded and gratified and... He looked down - away - from the smiling mouths. His own lips still tingling from the long, probing kiss that Spike had given him, pressed up against the side of Xander's truck. And from the sweet, slow kiss that had followed later from Xander, leaning across the table and stroking Wes' arm with his fingers. *How I have missed them...*

"You really must try the ikura, Xander, they didn't have that in Sunnydale."

Xander found the bright red-orange roll deftly presented by Spike's chopsticks and obediently opened his mouth, mumbling around the burst of flavor. "'S it?"

"Salmon roe." Wesley watched Xander chew with a blank expression before clarifying. "Salmon eggs."

Xander gave Spike a dirty look, but swallowed instead of spitting. He reached for his beer but Spike stopped him, swapped it for his own glass of champagne. "Chase it with that, yeah?"
Xander did, fresh and sea water salty drained away with fresh and bubbly that - okay wasn't so bad. But it was the principle of the thing. Xander had a feeling from the smirk on Spike's lips that he didn't look believably disgusted and there was probably more ikura in his future.

Spike *liked* surprising Xander with new and different things - with *strange* things, and seeing him enjoy them. Liked showing him all the lovely tastes and scents and textures that he'd discovered in his 100 and more years. And he liked that Wes was in on the game.

"Tastes like sex, that does. Does to *me,*" Spike clarified, when Xander and Wes both have him identical 'huh?' looks. "First time I ever had it, Dru'd gotten it. Dunno where - this little place in Hong Kong..." Spike leaned forward, dropping his voice to a low purr...letting his eyes go half-lidded. "She spread it on her belly - on her sex, yeah? Had me lick it off - every inch...poured champagne over her skin..." Spike sat back, smiling. Pleased that Xander
and Wes' expressions had gone from 'huh?' to 'oooh'.

Wesley sipped at his champagne, felt the flush spreading across his cheeks, deeper and darker than it ever had when he was human. "There is far more to Drusilla than the Watchers ever chronicled."

Xander's expression went from a speculative moue over the ikura to a frown. "Is the Council still tracking Spike?"

"I - I really don't know," Wesley admitted, plucking a piece of yellowtail from the artful arrangement. "I suppose you would know more about the new council than I."

Xander shook his head. "I don't." And he didn't like the idea of the council tracking him - or Spike or Wesley or any combination of them.

"Better not be," Spike growled, feeling Xander's foot pressing against his ankle, rubbing gently. "Done enough for those wankers over the years..."
Spike poked at his rice - grinned. "We'll ask Andrew. He'll tell me 'bout anything I want to know."

"Speaking of Andrew," Wesley said, "I had him do a few jobs for me, these past couple of weeks. He doesn't realize he's working on anything - Sunnydale related. I had him gather and collate a rather wide field of information..." Wes' looked at the two faces looking back - expectation, tinge of impatience, amusement - affection. He smiled. "Yes, well - to make a long story short, I believe someone is mucking with the weather in and around Sunnydale." Wes raised his eyes to the row of skylights that ran down the ocean-side of the restaurant. Rain slid and rippled across them, having started up again while they drove.

"And it's affecting us here, as well." Wesley turned his attention from the skylights to the platter of sashimi and plucked a translucent piece of salmon from the selection.

"This 'someone' have a name?" Spike watched Wesley chew, wondered briefly if Wesley even
knew his demon's natural diet. Fish? Flesh? He couldn't remember Wesley eating sushi before. 'Course before, Wesley had lived on take away and whatever stale pasty had been in the Wolfram and Hart break room.

"I'm sure that someone does. However, I don't know yet what it is. The destruction of Wolfram and Hart's Los Angeles branch left a power vacuum. It could be any one of a number of competitors to fill the position they held."

"Great." Xander reached for his tea, deciding he did not like the silver and brown stuff. "More evil law firms."

Wesley shook his head. "It's not necessarily a law firm. It could be anyone who craves power."

"So we're kind of flying blind, here? Is there any chance that they can - open the Hellmouth again?" Spike didn't like the thought of that. Re-opening the Hellmouth would cause all kinds of problems. And he'd fucking died getting it closed. He'd really be
pissed if all that...pain...was for nothing. He shivered, taking a gulp of the champagne and felt Xander's hand on his knee, squeezing gently. *He probably felt that. Damn.* Spike put a hand over Xander's - waited until the dark eye turned to him and nodded - waited for Xander to relax before he went on.

"So - Andrew's helping... Can you trust him? Is he going to spill his guts the first time Angel looks sideways at him?"

Wesley took a sip of his own champagne - sighed, shaking his head. "I can't promise you that Andrew won't figure it out - he's very annoying but he *is* intelligent enough to become a Watcher. And I can't promise you that he won't bring it before Angel. But *I can* promise you that *I* won't."

"Not that I'm objecting, Wes - but why?" Xander grimaced at a disintegrating piece of California roll falling apart in his soy sauce and resisting the clumsy grasp of his chopsticks.
"S'all right to use your fingers, pet." Spike murmured, brushing Xander's hair back behind one ear and turning his attention back to Wesley. "He's just come to his senses about BatVamp, that's all."

"Spike is...not entirely wrong," Wesley admitted. "As far as I'm concerned, this has nothing to do with Angel. Or the Slayers." Wesley hesitated, fiddling with his chopsticks. "Or any of the others."

Spike watched Wes eat - watched him not watch Xander, who was licking soy-sauce and avocado off his fingers. "Wes - how's Gunn doing? And Blue? Didn't seem to be around."

"Illyria is...around. She's proved herself useful for certain cases that require additional muscle and the 'killing of lesser creatures defiling her presence with their crawling cowardice and offensive weakness'." Wesley smiled to himself, and Spike chuckled softly.

"She's discovered television as well...she likes the gardening shows. Charles...left. He formally retired from Angel Investigations and told Angel not to
call." Wesley stole a glance at Xander who was blushing and using a napkin now.

"Has he, now? Good on him, then." Spike drank some champagne and set the flute down, stroking his finger down the smooth, cool side. "What's he doing? What'd BatVamp do? Can't see him just lettin' go without a fight."

Wesley chuckled - he couldn't not - felt...relief for Charles, that he had escaped so neatly and so totally without consequences. "Angel didn't have a chance. Charles arrived with his resignation and fully researched legal precedents supporting his decision and the legality of his request - Angel's dislike of lawyers has only increased of course. He's gone back to his old neighborhood, gone to work with a friend of his - Anne. They spent Angel's 'last day on earth' together at Anne's youth center."

"So he got out - why can't you?" Xander glanced at Wesley through his hair in time to catch the flinch.

"My situation is more complex." Wesley sighed and
laid his chopsticks aside - put his elbows on the table and leaned on his clasped hands. "I - owe a great debt to Angel. And...there's Connor to consider, and Illyria... And the visions - it's not as easy as - as just leaving..."

A wave of anger - anger mingled with sorrow and want rolled off of Spike, impossible to ignore and Xander shivered under it. Because he knew what it was like for Wesley. Knew the kind of inertia it took to break free of the pull of loyalty to a chosen one. Knew how hard it was. How many excuses there were not to leave. He curled his fingers around Spike's on the table, still chilled from his champagne flute. "You know what? It's not easy - neither's reading a hundred different demonic languages but you do that."

Wes smiled tiredly. "Hardly a hundred, Xander, I -"

to be the Power's little marionette and you *bloody* well don't deserve the great Souled One day after day."

Wesley *snapped* - set his chopsticks down with a furious click. "I am *nobody's* marionette, Spike! I have *dedicated* my *life* to the service of the Powers that Be and their Champions and I am *not* going to - going to be the one who cripples their cause because he was a *coward!*"

"No." Xander clamped a hand over Spike's mouth before he could answer - ignored the flicker of gold and the roil of *pissed off demon*. "No," he said again - quieter and shifted his fingers to stroke over Spike's cheek. "Had about as much of that as I can take sweetheart...okay?"

Spike *glared* - reached up yank Xander's hand away and then...stopped. 'Swee*theart.*' Xander's gaze was - calm, and steady. And full of a quiet weariness and Spike heaved a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. He took Xander's hand in his and turned it - pressed a kiss to the fingers, then the knuckles - then
Xander's palm. "Course, love. M'sorry." He looked over at Wes who was white - hunched - trembling ever so slightly. He leaned up on the table and reached across - gently stroked his own hand down Wes' cheek and sighed again in relief when Wes pushed into the caress for a moment. "M' sorry, Wes, yeah? Don't want to fight with you."

Xander closed his eye, willed his heart back to normal as Spike calmed down - watched Wesley's color slowly return beneath Spike's touch. "Then don't." Xander didn't let go of Spike's hand when it twitched in his grasp, tightened his hold and lifted it to his lips.

Spike let his hand fall away from Wes' cheek - smiled at Xander for a moment, and the warm press of the man's lips on his knuckles. He saw their waitress and lifted his hand, then smiled at Wes who was looking - a little lost. "C'mon Wes - come back with us, yeah? Relax. We brought pillows - going to make a Nest first thing." Wes smiled - frowned - started to shake his head. "No fighting, Wes. Just say yes. Right?" Wesley sighed and then
smiled for real, and leaned back in his chair.

"Yes. But - but that's - that's not it." Wesley looked at the table, fiddled with his chopsticks then his napkin; reached up to glasses he no longer wore and then pressed his palms flat on the table. "I've been - I have been considering your...offer..."

Spike listened to Wes' heart skip and skip and pound a little harder - a little faster. Drew in a breath thick with fear and longing - clean sweat and book-glue and old, dry leather. And a peppery richness that was the demon in him. God...smells so good...Xan - can you feel it? Feel this...

"Wes?" Spike interrupted softly, and Wes blinked over at him, his eyes wide and his lip caught and worried between his teeth. "You said 'yes', love. It's all right. We know. Unless you wanna change your mind." Spike shot a quick glance at Xander who was watching Wesley with a pensive smile, dropped a hand down to Spike's thigh to rub him through denim.
"Blink once for 'no' and twice for 'please take me back to your Nest of Throbbing Love and teach me the pleasures of the flesh you sexy beasts'."

Wesley blinked twice before he'd processed exactly what Xander had said and then flushed. "*Xander, I -"*

"Nuh!" Xander held up one then two fingers. "Once for no and twice for coming in to work tomorrow bow-legged."

Wesley blinked twice.

"I like a man who knows what he wants," Spike said. Their waitress panted up just then, waving the ticket and Spike handed her three hundred dollar bills - plus one extra and stood, pulling his duster on. "Now - let's go get started on the bow-legged part, yeah? Oi!" The waitress turned back - messy twist of oil-black hair and skin like old ivory - pretty little face like a painting and Spike smiled at her, 'come hither' look from under his lashes. "We want a bottle of that champagne for home, hai? Domo,
Wesley watched her blush prettily, take Spike's money with a quick and proper little bow and a very improper giggle and hurry away. "And how many languages can you flirt in, Spike?"

"Just enough, mate. Just enough."

~*~*~*~*~

"Spike? Are we visiting a friend, or something? I thought you got us a room at one of those really fancy hotels?" Xander was staring at the house that was framed in the truck's front window, and Spike had to admit it deserved staring. White, grey and bluish stones. Stucco and old, weathered boards. Greenery like some tropical jungle and a covered, colonnaded porch that wrapped all the way around. Spike leaned over and grinned at Xander.

"No, love. Nobody here but us. And Marta the cook and a couple girls who clean. I rented it for us.
There's a pool," he added, sliding a hand up the 
inseam of Wesley's jeans. "What do you think, pet?"

"I - I think I like this rather better than a drafty 
English manor." Wesley stammered but parted his 
thighs to Spike's attention - and to Xander's when 
he slid his hand up the inside of Wesley's other leg.

"I think I wanna get naked and wet." Xander gave 
Wesley's thigh a squeeze, tongue making a wicked 
appearance, making him look too like Spike for an 
instant.

"Didn't ask what you thought." Spike leaned over 
Wesley, eyes narrowing. Wesley's leg twitched 
beneath Spike's weight.

"When did that ever keep me from saying what's on 
my mind?" Xander shot back with a grin - dropped 
his head and met Spike's kiss, knuckles brushing 
Spike's as Wesley tried to make himself smaller. 
"Gotta admit - it's a pretty good idea. What do you 
think, Wes?"
Wesley felt his eyes going very wide as Spike's attention - and his gaze, which seemed to be composed of some sort of blue flame - was suddenly and completely on him.

"I - I hardly... I mean, isn't it a bit chilly to be swimming?"

"Heated pool, Wes," Spike murmured, and leaned in to graze his lips over Wes' cheek. "Warm, warm, water..."

"Naked flesh," Xander supplied, lips against Wesley's ear - teeth on Wesley's ear.

"I - I the neighbors..." Wesley's voice emerged distressingly like a moan and Spike's lips did taste so very good.

"Privacy fence," Spike countered, flicking his tongue over Wes' lower lip. His hand crept a little higher and he could feel the tips of Xander's fingers against his. Wes squeaked.
"Lots of trees too," Xander said against the side of Wesley's mouth, lips barely brushing Spike's, tongue tasting where he'd been. Spike was cold, Wesley so warm, weird and good -

A hand - Wesley no longer knew whose - had crept into his hair, was tugging, and his zipper was very loud in the truck's interior. "The servants - " And really, his protest would have been far more effective if he hadn't let Xander turn him in a hungry clash of lips and tongues that made his flesh leap within the cool grip surrounding it.

"They've got a private house in the back. Won't come unless they're called... Do you come when you're called, Wes?" Spike purred, pushing for a moment into Xander's cheek - brief nuzzle back - and then slowly trailing his mouth over Wes' jaw and throat - latching on and sucking gently. Feeling the surge of blood in Wes' cock and smelling it - feeling the heat of it flush through Wes' body. God...he has no idea...how lovely...

"Why don't you - try me and find out?" Wesley
gasped into Xander's lips, Xander's tongue sweeping past his teeth to lay claim to him, steal away the startled whimper that burst forth as cool lips, chill suction swooped down on him as only a vampire could and Xander was kissing - kissing - his human heart beating so fast.

Xander tangled his fingers in Wesley's hair, short nails scratched over Wes' scalp, the back of his neck; rode the restless shifting of the slender body against him - wanted skin, and Wesley arched - cried out - quickly muffled by Xander's lips as hungry fingers fumbled up beneath his shirt, over and over stiffened flesh hardwired to his cock and the unbearable suction of Spike's mouth and - and Xander's mouth so hot against his and -

"Come," Xander whispered, the word scalding Wesley's lungs on a gasp that shot through him like wildfire.

"Christ, love -" Spike worked a hand between Xander and Wes, dislodging Xander's mouth. He turned Wes' head and got in his own kiss, tasting
XanderWes and champagne and the lingering spice of wasabi - the warm pepper-spice of the demon. "Bloody brilliant, you are," he said, reluctantly pulling away so Wes could breathe. "Up for that swim now?"

Wesley closed his eyes, swirls of hot skin/cold skin crossing paths, chasing each other across his chest with every breath and he could hear Spike and Xander exchanging hungrily slow kisses. His lips were dry from harsh breath and when he licked them, he could taste all three of them so clearly on his skin and the pheromones oozing off Xander with the musk of release and - and god the subtle salt-musk of Spike's arousal on the air made him light headed.

"God."

"Yes?" Xander prompted and Wesley pried his eyes open to find Xander and Spike cheek to cheek - watching him through half-lidded eyes.

"Yes," he breathed - shivered with the warm and close spice-musk air of the truck cab. "Yes."
The surface of the pool dimpled in the light drizzle that had begun to fall. Spike lay on the very bottom, near the core of the heating unit. Blissful as a lizard on a rock, watching the view. Wesley and Xander, swimming above him - playing in the water. Splashing, wrestling, and letting go of tensions. Naked, because they hadn't been in the house more than five minutes before Xander had seen the wide veranda - the layers of lush green - and the pool like a sapphire in the midst of it, steaming gently in the chill air. He'd stripped and made for the water like an otter and Spike had laughed - had turned to Wes and held out his hand and Wes had laughed, as well. It was too silly to modestly put on swim trunks after what had happened in the truck, and now Spike watched and waited.

*Don't want to push too fast - don't want to scare him off. God, he tasted good...salt, spice, peppery-sweet... Wonder if he'll change next time he comes?*
Gonna make him so crazy for it he just...lets go...

"I keep forgetting he doesn't need to breathe," Wesley said, peering down through the water at Spike. "I have this urge to drag him to the side and perform CPR." Xander looked down, as well - waved at Spike. Spike made an obscene gesture.

"You could perform CPR on me," Xander said, and Wesley felt his face flush - again. He remembered a time when he could let himself go - give as good as he got with obscene suggestions. But that time - and Wesley - were gone as was the woman who made it possible. This was different.

This was...men.

Xander watched Wesley's flush spread and fade, still feeling that little jump in his chest when Wesley looked at him slyly - wanted and let Xander know.

This far from Spike, Xander couldn't feel more than a ripple of pleasure from him. Wanted to lure him to the top - or maybe rent an air tank and weight
belt and join him on the bottom. *Sweetheart if you put on a show down there I am going to drown.*

"Xander?" Wesley watched Xander's eye lose focus, listened to his breathing slow and heart beat faster - something he'd noticed earlier that day as well. "Where do you go?"

Xander blinked, licked his lips and drifted closer to Wesley. He got an arm around Wesley's neck, knees bumping in the water, and murmured. "Spike's getting off on watching us." *And I'm getting off on Spike getting off on watching us but hey - one pervy revelation at a time!*

"But - we're not doing anything," Wesley said, and Xander pulled him a little closer, their bodies floating and bumping. Glancing touches of Xander's half-hard cock against his thigh - his belly. His own body responded, and he felt his heart start to beat a little faster - felt a rush of tingling heat in his groin.

"We could be," Xander murmured, and kissed him - slow, easy kiss, that took it's time. Xander's tongue
leisurely finding every place in Wesley's mouth and stroking over and over. "You wanna know where I go, Wes?" Xander breathed, and Wes gripped the side of the pool, his forearms on Xander's shoulders.

"Yes - tell me..."

Xander tipped his head back against the side of the pool, let his legs float, wrap loosely around Wesley - kept him from drifting away in water that tugged at the ends of Xander's hair, tickled his shoulders. Felt good. Good like the gentle rock of half-hard flesh on flesh. "I go where Spike is."

Wesley had lost himself in lapping water, warm hands skimming over his back. "Hm. Yes - the two of you have been joined at the hip since you found him." Xander's lips were warm and tasted of chlorine, faintly of champagne and salt.

"No." Xander breathed against Wesley's lips - soft and firm and so nice to kiss. "Where he is. Now." Xander's eye drifted shut and an eddy of wind
whipped his hair across his face. "It's so warm down there - feels like a hot mouth around his cock when he wraps his hand around it like he's doing now. It's getting to him - that he can see us but he can't hear us or scent us."

"You... Xander, are you saying that you can...sense Spike? You can...hear him, somehow?" Wesley braced his feet on the side of the pool and let himself bump gently against Xander - leaned forward and tongued a bead of water off his upper lip. "When did this happen?"

"Uh huh." Xander's tongue darted out to slide beneath Wesley's. "Uh huh," he said again, slipped a hand up to the nape of Wesley's neck and pulled him lower in the water, tasted the pepper-salt-chlorine flavor of his lower lip, eye half shut. Hips nudged lazily against hips, weightless bump and slide and Xander felt a tremor in the force that was Spike. "And after the conference. He's coming," Xander whispered against Wesley's neck - \textit{bit}, and then tongued the mark provocatively as Spike surfaced.
Spike rose up behind Wes, one powerful kick getting him close, his hands on the pool's rim beside Wes' - pressing against him and crowding Wes into Xander - putting his own mouth opposite Xander's and licking - sucking - finally biting gently. Wes shivered all over, his head going back a little, and Spike brought his legs up, winding them over Xander's - around Wes' hips - pulling them closer still.

"You two...floating up here...touching and kissing...drivin' me crazy," he whispered, punctuating his words with small kisses - small bites that made Wes gasp softly. "So bloody lovely..."

"Like the show sweetheart?" Xander barely lifted his head and the words left shivery trails over wet skin, made Wesley shudder between them. Xander dropped a hand to Spike's thigh, rubbed water-warmed flesh that tugged them all closer together. He could feel the lazy burn of arousal off Spike, wrapping them like the water's currents and slipped down through Wesley's grasp - pushed off the
bottom and rose behind Wesley as well, pulled his body into the Spike-Xander cradle with a warm hand across his belly. "It's too bad Spike sinks like a rock when he lets go."

"Oh, I - " Wesley clutched the side of the pool in a death grip, the teasing bites and Xander's hand - heavy and possessive across his stomach - making his head swim. "It's sh-shallow by the stairs," he managed finally, and gasped when Spike's cock slipped between his legs. Just gently pushing at his balls - skimming the sensitive skin of his inner thighs. "Oh -"

"Don't let go," Xander said against his ear, took a deep breath and dropped - slid like an otter between Wesley's legs, brush of hot tongue from Spike's balls to Wesley's tip. He suckled, chlorine and pepper-musk and the copper-bright taste of Spike in the back of his mouth and spark of Spike's want want now in the back of his mind. Heartbeat and water and hands in his hair and slippery slick wet skin everywhere he touched.
Spike felt the buck and full-body shudder go through Wes as Xander's mouth touched them and he wound his legs with Wes', opening them wider to the water and to Xander - buried his face in Wes' throat, licking and sucking up bruises in a slow and delicious trail from behind his ear to the top of his shoulder. Wes' heart was beating faster - still not human-normal, but different - and the spicy, demony scent of him was strong. "You taste so good, Wes," he said into Wes' hair - nuzzled his cheek in close and heard Xander surfacing again. "Can't wait to taste you again - can't wait for you to come in my mouth... I want Xander to know what you taste like..."

Wesley tried to reply - wanted to but as Xander took a quick breath and sank beneath the water again he could only moan against Spike's lips - tighten his fingers on the edge of the pool until concrete crumbled under their tips. Xander's hands were warm and strong stroking his inner thighs, pushing them apart and tonguing his way between them and god where had the boy learned to hold his breath so well? "He - he's going to know fairly
soon."

Oh, not yet, Wes. Not just yet... Want you so fuckin' hot for it you can't even talk - can't even think. "Not just yet, love," Spike murmured, taking a firm grip on Wes' cock and squeezing, just enough. Xander surfaced again, tossing his head to the side, whipping water out of his eye. "Let's go inside Xan, yeah? Get the Nest made. Wanna get Wes all...warmed up." Xander knew. Touch and talk and wait - tease. Make Wes the focus of their attention - make it last. 'Only get to do it the first time once,' Spike had said somewhere outside of L.A. 'Let's make it take a while.'

~*~*~*~*~

Spike had kept his promise.

Taste and touch.

Tease and torment.
Hard and soft and hard until want was a slow burn for all three and Wesley had the drugged movements of a man half out of his mind, pushing into every touch however slight, however light; stretched out like a cat in the center of the nest and sheened with firelight and a fine film of almond oil Spike had sworn was only to relax him.

It worked brilliantly.

Spike was running his hand - light, hard, light, hard - up and down Wes' thigh - was sucking his nipple into his mouth and biting it gently - tonguing it and then blowing cool breath over it. Watching Wes' writhe - gasp - arch and twist and all but beg. It was time. Spike moved up until he could talk in Wes' ear - watching Xander stroke Wes' belly and just brush the head of his cock. Looked...hungry.

"You ready, Wes? You ready to be fucked? I wanna see Xander fuck you, Wes...want to see him hold your legs and push in so...slow... Want to see him make you scream. Wanna suck you off while he does it, Wes..." He knew Xander could hear him -
scented the extra surge of *wantwantwant* that was coming, smoky and rich and heady off of the both of them.

"Would you let him do that, Wes? Let me do that...?" Spike bit gently at Wes' throat and smirked over at Xander when Wes gasped, whimpering.

"He's not the only one who wants, Wes." Xander watched Spike circle, round and round a spot on Wesley's throat that had him shivering - shuddering - and Xander's skin tingling in sympathy. "Gonna shove you so far down Spike's throat it'll take him an hour to get his voice back. And all *you* have gotta do..." Xander put his lips against Wesley's ear, felt Spike's fingers curl around the back of his neck and stroke. "Is say 'yes'."

Wesley nodded quickly - beyond words - beyond individual concepts that took more effort than *now* and *for god's sake man - hurry up*.

"What do you think, sweetheart? Will the judges permit a nod?"
Wesley felt as if he were bathing in liquid fire - felt as if he was drowning in ice and flame. He was floating and made of lead, all at the same time, and the demon inside him was struggling - snarling - wanting, so damn badly. Spike's mouth - Xander's mouth - their scents of clove and salt and citrus and musk - iron-tang of blood and clean sweat and he just...

"Please...yesss..."

"That's a good lad, Wes." Spike's voice was smoke and good whiskey - smooth and deep and peaty and stoking the fiery burn in Wesley's belly, making him moan embarrassingly when those fingers stopped teasing and completed their journey, slid on slick oil into him one then two - electrifying stretch that made his teeth click and clack against Xander's. Made his lips ache, stretched wide by Xander's passionate hungry response.

*God - wants me wants -*
Wesley sucked in breath - hard and aching so quickly as if now that Spike was done with teasing he wanted to waste no time at all and it felt wonderful, like nothing he could do for himself - nothing he'd felt in - "Years."

"Huh?" Xander pulled away and pulling away was bad - pulling away would simply not do and Wesley pulled Xander restlessly back to his lips, mobile tongue and barely chapped skin and the taste like want want want on his tongue.

"It's been - god Spike! - years since - "

Spike's fingers went still in him and Wesley whimpered - moved his hips, begging without words.

"Years, love?" Throaty purr, and Wesley turned his head, looking for that scent - that face.

"Spike - please, please - it's...it's more, it's..." But speech was deserting him again as Xander bit his neck - cupped his balls and tugged and rolled and
then Spike pushed \textit{in} again - three fingers this time. Exquisite burn, hard stretch, so \textit{good}, so incredibly good and Wesley didn't know if he could take it - \textit{wanted} to take it. Wanted them to simply devour him - consume him - never let him go, never -

"Never...let go, never...god, \textit{god} - Xanderrrr..."

The Nest shifted, gentle rock and shift of bodies - fingers withdrew and Xander was \textit{in} - stole his breath, stole his \textit{words} and everything \textit{burned} stretched wide, wide, \textit{wide} and so open. Nothing \textit{left} to hide from them then Xander \textit{moved} - molten slide that made him gasp, arch, grasp for Spike, for something \textit{anything} solid. "\textit{Fuck Wesley} - relax - gonna - \textit{hurt} if you don't relax. Or - oh \textit{oh} - okay that - that's good too."

Wesley shuddered, \textit{shivered} around Xander - rippled and \textit{changed} the sleek \textit{demon} skin smoothrough like sharkskin and so \textit{tight} Xander caught his breath - stared down at the demon splayed wide and trembling for \textit{them}; felt \textit{shock lust want} rolling off Spike in waves of desire and satisfaction and
sank into slick and smooth grasping impossible heat. "So - fuckin' beautiful, Wes."

Spike stroked his hands over the sleek, new skin of this Wes - this other Wes - halfling demon, magical creature, beautiful, beautiful man. He was moving and gasping and arching under Xander, as sinuous as a snake - as a cat. Claws sunk in the pillows of the Nest - legs around Xander's ribs and Spike kissed his way down Wes' belly to his cock. Darkly plum-colored, flared head and balls small and sleek and tight. Different - beautiful.

"So lovely, Wes..." Spike murmured, and bent his head to taste and then to engulf, sucking down the pepper-sweet-salt of Wes' demon flesh.

Wesley drew in a great breath, arched and pushed onto Xander, into Spike - rattling purr in his chest. Stared wide eyed down the length of his silvery-sheened body that framed Xander's darkly tanned skin, so human - so very human and he - "Never - never - !" and Xander's rhythm stuttered. "No - no keep going. God don't stop."
Oh - fuck. First time...Wes, you daft man... Spike pulled back from Wes' cock - leaned up and kissed him, stroking his skull - his face. Touching the spines, lightly and quickly, and Wes shivered. Xander had slowed - was moving in a languorous rhythm, his hands rubbing Wes' thighs and Spike reached back to touch him - connect.

"You've never done this, love? Never been the demon for this?" Wes' dazed eyes tracked to him and he shook his head. "It's all right, Wes. Just let it go. We'll take care of you." Spike kissed him again - a deep, possessive kiss, and then made his way down Wes' body, back to his cock. Back to driving him over the edge.

Wesley's fingers stretched and curled in the Nest; punctured silk, tore mindlessly into pillows. Xander was a distant aching tide filling him and leaving him empty over and over. From the first shudder of the demon emerging everything was more - was overload - he could smell the fresh copper-brine scent of Spike's pre-come, smell the pepper-iron
tang of his blood and the musk-salt human scent pouring off Xander and wave after wave of dizzying human lust driving him mad with the demon's instinct to fight or run or - give in - to mate. Be marked.

"More - Xander please!" And god who had known that would be all it took? All it took was that length splitting him open and battering him from the inside - harder and rougher than he could have taken - could have wanted as a human and hungry hungry suction from Spike and - so close so close needneedneedneed -

Spike's hand on him suddenly, and Spike's mouth on his - moving to his throat and to his chest - pressure of teeth and then a sudden, sharp sting that Wes knew - knew were fangs. The sting rippled out, transmuting to impossible heat - to nettle-throbbing ache that traveled down his body in waves. Xander pushed his legs higher - kissed him and licked at him and then blunt human teeth were closing onto his shoulder, grinding bite of more painstingingheat that became pressure that became the rollers of an
ocean as wave after wave of mindless, shaking sensation crashed through him. Wes felt his body bow upwards - felt his hands clench down tight and his mouth open and he *shrieked* - hoarse, bull-roaring scream that had nothing remotely human in it.

Spike's mouth was suddenly on his cock again, *coolwetpressure* and he felt Spike swallowing - felt Xander kissing, rubbing - still *thrusting*, and Wes gasped for breath after breath, the orgasm longer than a human one - more exquisitely knife-edged and pleasurepain than anything he'd ever felt. Oh god, oh god...want... "Want...want..." he whispered hoarsely, and Spike slid his mouth off Wes' cock - took his mouth in a hard kiss that tasted of himself, of Spike - of Xander and of blood.

And oh Xander was moving gently again - slow *thorough* strokes that stretched and burned and tested the resilience of this skin every time; made pleasure ripple under the surface and Wesley could hear himself gasping, hear the rattling purr and Spike's whiskey-smoke chuckle as he claimed
Xander's lips and shared the flavor Wesley still tasted behind his teeth, under his tongue. So - sexy *together* his mind supplied lazily, rocked and soothed, stretched and filled, buzzing and tingling at the tip of every nerve.

Spike *did* taste of pepper-sweet and salty copper musk and the almond in the body oil that made Wesley gleam, made Spike's lips slick and warm and slightly bitter against Xander's, *lust affection* *mine* rolling off Spike, rolling off the *demon* within Spike. It infected Xander, *infused* him, warmed his body and fizzed in every vein. "Share, stingy guy." Xander nipped at Spike's jaw, his throat.

Spike tipped his head, his demon voicing a rumbling growl-purr, counterpoint to the rattling sound of pleasure that was faintly vibrating Wes' whole body. Xander nuzzled in closer - licked and then sucked and then *bit*, drawing a mouthful of blood with a moan of pleasure. Spike felt the blood hit him - felt the jolt go through Xander's body, heard his heart kick up and smiled - bent his own head around to sink fangs into Xander's throat and roll the hot,
sweet blood over his tongue. Iron-spice tang competing with the sharp copper of Wes' blood and Spike groaned - pulled away. Wes was wide open - breathing in deep, hard gasps, his hands stroking over Xander's arms and belly, leaving little welts when his claws snagged on skin.

The dark-rosy blood of Spike's earlier bite had smeared on Wesley's chest and Spike leaned down to lick it off - to lick and nibble and suck his way to Wes' mouth. To continue to touch and take and learn every inch.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley woke to his human body, to warm silk and eviscerated pillows that tickled his nose with their spilled stuffing. To a crackling fire in the expansive marble fireplace and to the distant sounds of -

_Ahhhh. That must be breakfast._

Wes stretched hard, feeling pleasantly achy -
deliciously used - in a way that made him shiver all over. He rose slowly and caught sight of a heavy terry-cloth robe, lying over the arm of a chair. He hesitated a moment and then picked it up - caught a whiff of spices salts sweet and knew it was Xander's robe. He put it on and snuggled into it, then made his way to the kitchen.

There were opaque blinds across all the windows and sunlight glowed behind them, gold-green and thick as syrup. Xander was perched on a stool, wearing some faded green sweats, torso and arms a road-map of pleasure-pain: welts and scratches and livid bites and he looked pale but utterly satisfied. The Watcher in Wesley worried - felt guilt for his part in marking Xander - but he looked so...satisfied. As did Spike, who was sitting on the counter-top near the stove, his own robe slipping off his shoulders and flapping around his shins.

"No, love - that can't be right. You sure you know how to make this?" The heavy-set black woman at the stove - her hair a mass of beaded braids and her dress a riot of jewel tones - smacked at Spike's
hand.

"You stay out of that. I am the cook! I've been makin' this for forty years!" She shot Wes a friendly once-over and then turned back to the stove, stirring something that smelled - heavenly.

"Call that biscuits? And gravy? It's not even properly gravy colored. S' not supposed to be white like that."

Xander leaned his cheek on his folded hand and gave Wesley a lazy grin, traced a prominent scratch across his ribs and his eyelid fluttered shut with lustful memory. "Breakfast is American biscuits with gravy and hot coffee - and whatever Spike demands for himself because for a guy who brings me sushi and weird shit I can't pronounce, he is really fussy about breakfast." When he held out his hand to Wesley, the Englishman came to him like a toy on a string and he caught Wesley around the waist for a sweet-slow morning kiss tasting of sugared coffee.

Wesley glanced at the basket of baked goods and
nodded as sagely as he could with Xander's hands making him want to arch and purr like a cat. "Ah. Scones."

Xander raised an eyebrow and Marta aimed another slap at Spike's prodding fingers, then whirled and fixed Wesley with a decidedly unhappy glare.

"I don't cook scones. I cool good, pan-baked biscuits just like my mama did and if somebody don't make this fool get away from my stove I'm gonna have to do some serious damage." She heaved an impressive bosom up, then down, and Wesley leaned against Xander and smiled faintly. "Now - what you want for breakfast?"

"Pan-baked biscuits with gravy would be lovely. Thank you." Wesley slid his hands along Xander's forearms and closed his eyes. "They smell heavenly."

"Now there's an Englishman whose mama taught him some manners." Marta poked at Spike with a
wooden spoon - *hard.*

"Spike has manners," Xander said and ignored Spike's laser glare, nipped his way provocatively up Wesley's neck instead.

Wesley gasped - shuddered - felt it was only *proper* to agree. "*Excellent* manners - which he chooses not to use in polite company as a matter of principle."

Spike snapped his teeth at Marta and then jumped down - *stalked* around the enormous kitchen island toward Wes. "You're right, Wes - where are my manners? Need to give you a proper good morning." Spike *pounced* and had Wes' robe open - his own - and in a matter of seconds was pressing up tight, skin to skin and a kiss that took Wes' breath away.

"Morning, love," Spike purred, nipping at Wes' lip and listening to him pant, satisfied.

"G-good morning, Spike, I... I'm so sorry, Marta -" Marta rolled her eyes, going to refrigerator and
pulling out a carton of eggs.

"Ain't nothin' I ain't seen before, though I don't think I ever seen one that white," she said, and Xander hunched over the island in a fit of laughter, coffee spewing out of his mouth.

"They don't come any whiter than Spike." Xander agreed, mopping with napkins. He grinned and tugged the other two back into range, accepting his third or fourth good morning kiss from Spike since arriving in the kitchen. Spike shoved the coffee away and put the glass of orange juice back into Xander's hand with a glare. Xander drank meekly.

"Charles said that as well." Wesley ducked his head, not entirely comfortable with his nakedness pressed tight and warm to Spike's skin in the presence of an absolute stranger.

"So'd Oz. Pause to marvel." Xander ducked a swat from Spike and nibbled into his neck, into the bite that hadn't completely healed yet.
"Careful, pet," Spike grinned, pushing into Xander's heat - into the fragrant, delicious skin in the crook of his neck. Then he paused, thinking. "Don't think Charlie-boy ever actually saw me bollocks to the wind...did he?"

"That day in Angel's office," Wes murmured, glancing furtively at the oblivious Marta, and Xander snickered.

"Story!! Oh please, story," he begged in a hushed voice, rubbed his thumb over the bite on Wesley's throat too and watched him briefly shimmer silver-blue.

"That's right..." Spike lifted an eyebrow at Wes, his tongue darting out to lick his upper lip. "That was a bit of all right, that," he added, and had to kiss Wes again, delighting in simply being able to, reveling in Wesley's warmth, Xander's warmth. Leaned hard into Xander and ran circles around Wesley's abused nipple with the edge of his thumbnail.

Xander closed his eye to savor the rush of smug
satisfaction that tingled through him this close to Spike, made him wish he had more than a pair of ratty sweat pants between him and Marta's eyes - or maybe less. The brain cells jury was out, cloistered and ordering pizza for lunch. "Story," Xander demanded again in his best *I am three years old* voice with the brain cells he had left.

Wesley was *blushing*, and the rush of delicious heat and scent made Spike close his eyes, basking for a moment. Then he pulled Wes a little closer and shuffled them both between Xander's thighs, ignoring Marta's snort and muttered *'none of that in my kitchen'* and the creak of Xander's thighs spreading wider so early on the morning after.

"Well, it's Wes, innit love? Shouting at the poof, all wild-eyed and hot under the collar and then Angel has to go poncing out, doesn't he, bein' the Batvamp and Wes is in there, and I walk in..." Spike stopped and rubbed against Wes, full-body press and a thread of purr. "Couldn't resist, could I? I grabbed him and snogged him and before I know what's happenin' I'm bent over the desk and Wes is
givin' it to me somethin' fierce... And Charlie-boy comes in lookin' for Angel... Thought he'd choke on his latte." Spike snickered, but his hands were caressing down Wes' back - up Xander's thigh. "You were lovely, pet," he whispered to Wesley, and Wes smiled at him, ducking his head.

"Somebody's got a kink for desk sex at the office." Xander sing-songed into Spike's ear, rested his cheek against a bony shoulder and watched Wesley's rosy blush recede.

"Didn't complain much, did you?"

Xander nudged half hard flesh against Spike's thigh, blew on the mark he'd left the night before. "Excuse me - did I say it was you?"

"Breakfast!" Marta said, and they all jumped. She eyed them and then thumped a bowlful of gravy down on the island - rapidly added a plate heaped with sausage and bacon and uncovered the pyramid of fluffy biscuits. "Juice in the 'fridge, 'an here's fruit -" turn and turn back and a bowlful of fresh, mixed
fruit appeared. "Plates in the warmer, silver here." She stopped and looked at the three of them, her dark eyes appraising and narrow. "Don' you be touchin' my stove or my pans. I'll clean up when you done." Then she turned and stomped out.

Even Xander could hear a distant door slam behind Marta and Wesley relaxed at last, slipped his hands out of the sleeves of his robe and around Spike's waist. "Tell me, Spike - did you get a discount in the rate for hiring her on?" His voice and expression were serious but his eyes hinted at laughter.

"Marta? She's a gem, pet - said she'd make me Eggs Benedict with blood sauce 'stead of Hollandaise..." At Xander and Wes' identical horrified looks Spike broke down, snorting laughter, and Xander whapped at him.

"Stop that, evil undead, and pass the gravy. I'm starved."

Wesley listened to Xander and Spike bicker and banter over the breakfast, over the pool, over the
Nest and who left the most towels on the floor back home.

It was... It reminded him of happier times at Angel Investigations.

With benefits.

He closed his eyes against the building pressure in his sinuses, pinched the bridge of his nose but let his hand drop when Spike looked up at him - suspiciously. "All right, pet?"

Wesley shook his head, the words coming to him quickly, naturally - and automatically. "Yes. I'm fine. A bit of a headache. It was quite a night."

Spike looked less convinced than Angel would have but apparently satisfied by a warm touch and a warmer smile. Wesley only hoped that it would *wait* until he could leave the room - hoped it would be something simple he could phone in to Angel.

"Excuse me. Some demons still retain certain
human bodily functions when we eat." Wesley pushed away from the kitchen island - felt the dizziness creeping in around the edges of consciousness by the time he reached the bathroom and realized that it would have been much more thoughtful to his knees to have stopped at the Nest as the vision crashed down on him and his world tilted eighty degrees to the left.

"Wes? Wes, you sodding bastard -" Spike got an arm under Wes where he was sagging against the counter, his palm pressed to his forehead and his face white and strained. "C'mon, come lie down - Xan, get on that side -" Xander slipped under Wes' other shoulder, his mouth thin and tight and they walked Wes carefully back to the Nest - settled him on the more intact pillows. "You think I'd forgotten about the bloody visions? Think I forgot they way they made you feel?" Spike glared at Wes, whose eyes were closed, and Xander reached out and smoothed a hand down Spike's arm.

"Is he gonna be okay?"
"Mostly," Spike muttered, and gently pulled a throw up over Wes' legs.

"Is he gonna be a moron about it when he wakes up?"

Spike snorted, fussed with the blanket and pillows. "Mostly."

Making sure Wesley was comfortable, Xander crawled over him to wrap himself around Spike, catch his hands and tuck them up safely between them. "This is what happens to him all the time?"

"Yeah." Reluctance in Spike's aura. Unhappiness threaded with anger.

"Does it hurt him?"

The reluctance and anger soared, swiftly tamped down. "No."

Xander shivered, heard and felt Spike's teeth grind and eased the blond head down onto his shoulder,
rubbed the steel-stiff muscles in Spike's neck. "I hate it too."

Wes made a small sound - shivered - and he was his demon. He opened his eyes slowly, shading them from the light, and Spike glared down at him, not lifting his head. "You git."

"I'm really quite all right, Spike, you needn't -" As Wes tried to sit up Spike reached out and pushed him down - leaned down until he was inches from Wes' face.

"Don't start this shite with me, Wesley," he hissed, and then sat back up, leaning hard on Xander but lacing his fingers with Wes' - squeezing hard.

Wesley sighed - he sounded so tired. "You have to let me up, Spike. I've got to call Angel. Got to tell him." He was flickering and shivering - in and out, human and demon, hair and spines. Squeezed Spike's hand then used it to pull himself upright, leaning heavily on them both.
"Wes - "

"This is not open for debate!"

Xander flinched away from the sharpness in Wesley's voice - a growl when he was closer to the demon's side.

"Lie down, Wes! Fuck's sake, Xan can get your cell," Spike snapped - pushed, because Wes might not suffer the agonies that Cordelia apparently had, but he still hurt and the dizziness made it worse. "What if you fall, damn-it?" he added, as Xander scrambled out of the Nest and dug through Wes' discarded clothes for the cell.

"Then I fall! For god's sake, Spike I am not fragile!" Wesley clutched his head with both hands and moaned, sinking back into the pillows. "Give me the fucking telephone before it drives me mad!" Images flickered, swam, chased each other across the back of his skull, a throbbing loop of what will be. He grabbed the phone before Xander could kneel, called up Angel's number with shaking fingers and
curled onto his side. "Angel. Get to the East Hills Teen Center. Vampires - who used to be regulars. Anne and Charles don't know. No - I don't know. When - when The Simpsons is on. I see it on the television behind them - "

"Six o'clock."

"Xander says - Oh. I see Andrew is finally earning his - it was Connor?" Wesley inched his way to Spike until his cheek pressed to one cool knee and closed his eyes. "Seven - no, twelve of them. Five come from upstairs."

Wes finally clicked the phone shut and then just lay there, his head pillowed on Spike and his eyes closed and Spike sighed and began to stroke his back. "Change, love. You said it helps." Wes lifted his head a little, looking up at him and Spike saw confusion and then sadness before he lay back down. And changed, shimmer of skin and bone and muscle, and Spike was stroking the fine-grained, oddly sleek skin that was the blue-grey of twilight.
"I'd rather...gotten out of the habit. I don't change around Angel..."

"More fool you," Spike said, but he kept his voice soft. Xander slithered around in the Nest until he was behind Wes and curled up around him, arm over Wes' ribs and his hand gently stroking Wes' stomach.

"What's it like?" Xander felt the flare of anger from Spike, reluctance to have even this much to do with the visions. Still didn't know what to say - but hey he was physical comfort man. That, he could do. "What do you see?"

"It's - rather confusing at first. It's not dissimilar to a teaser trailer for an action show you've never watched before. I may pick out a face, a location - a word here and there." Wesley groped until he got his hand around Xander's and pressed back into the warmth hesitantly - gasped when Xander pulled him back firmly instead and held him there, nuzzling into his neck. "It doesn't hurt me as badly as Cordelia's visions hurt her but the Powers...compensated."
Spike's eyes narrowed. "Something you didn't tell me, Wes?"

"The visions continue to replay until I've relayed them to a true Champion. It's...a guarantee that the message goes to someone who can do something about it." Wesley pressed Xander's palm flat to his chest and counted human heartbeats against his own. "It guarantees I won't take matters into my own hands."

"That really sucks," Xander muttered into Wes' hair, and Spike agreed - had thought that since the beginning, when Wes had come back from the dead with his new 'powers' and his new demon-self. The Powers That Be really did not have a thimble-full of mercy in them.

"And Angel knows so it's done now, yeah? Done and you just rest, mate." Spike stroked the hairless scalp, brushing the spines and Wes closed his eyes, his breathing slowing and slowing as he relaxed. Xander's hand smoothed his belly, over and over,
and after a little while Spike shifted and Wes' dark eyes glanced up at him.

"What is it? Am I squashing your leg?"

"No, pet - you're fine. I just...wondered. Last time you came to see us you didn't know what you wanted." Spike traced the angular features - ran a fingertip up one pointed ear. "What made you change your mind?"

"Xander."

"Huh!?"

Wesley chuckled into Spike's thigh, pressed his palm over Xander's fingers. "I'm afraid so."

"You been talkin' to Wes behind my back, pet?"

"What did I do?"

"Paved the way for a wonderful shag." Wesley patted Xander's hand, grimaced as even that small
movement made his head pound and sighed. "You were right - that's all."

"Not that I'm not used to hearing I'm right - and by the way I am not used to hearing I'm right, so say that again any time you want to - but what am I right about?"

"The only path to freedom when you walk in the shadows of Champions is the path of being true to your own desires."

Xander's eyebrows drew down, confusion clouding his eye. "Uh - pretty sure I never said that."

"Be yourself," Spike translated, slid cool fingers over the tattoo covering Xander's shoulders.

"Oh. Huh." Xander grinned, traced the bones in Spike's hand. "Didn't know you were listening."

"I always listen. I'm a Watcher... Errr, that sounds rather odd," Wes continued, as Xander sniggered into Wes' back. "What I meant is that I...notice
things. And I noticed...you. I would be a very poor Watcher - or even ex-Watcher - if I could not see the inherent wisdom in what you do. And the facade...is so tiring. So very...tiring." Spike leaned down to kiss Wes' shoulder and grinned at Xander, who smiled back, an absurdly pleased grin on his face.

"I'm wise? I mean - I am wise. In a not wise guy sense." Xander took a deep breath, caught Spike's raised eyebrow and returned an embarrassed smile. "Um. I mean, thanks."

"You camouflage it well, love," Spike deadpanned, then grinned, and Wes poked him in the leg.

"Don't make fun, Spike - I would never... We would never be here if it weren't for him."

"I'm very grateful," Spike said, bending to give Xander a slow kiss. Then he delicately turned Wes' head just enough, and kissed the other man as well. "And I'm glad you're smart enough to know who to listen to."
"'Cause if you listened to Spike, you would have tried hitting Angel until he agreed with you instead - and that kinda never works." Xander grinned shamelessly.

~*~*~*~*~

The sunset was lurid - the sky all bruise-blue and mercurochrome-orange, skeined with brown rags of polluted clouds. Spike wrinkled his nose at it and followed Wes and Xander into the Ali Baba, lighting up a smoke just as he stepped in. Knowing it would piss Angel off, but knowing that Angel was going to be pissed, anyway, and why not enjoy a smoke? The lobby was still stacked with papers, but most had been moved to tall piles along the right-hand side and Andrew was crouched over one of them, lips moving silently as he read the top page.

"Wesley! I was worried about you! Where have you been! You had a vision and you didn't come in!" Andrew's face was pink and Spike idly contemplated
his plan for getting Andrew laid. It might take a bit of the squeak out of him.

Xander leaned into Spike's side and watched Wesley wrangle Andrew with the finesse of a master. It was impressive.

"Everything is fine, Andrew. I trust you completely in my absence." Wesley clapped Andrew on the shoulder in passing, disappeared into his office before the expression of stunned pleasure on Andrew's face reached full wattage.

"You're moving up in the world, Andrew."

"I am? Of course I am! I am a fully trained Watcher of the New Council, after all!" Andrew looked closely at Xander and Spike. "Have you been biting each other? Because the books say that's bad, and Xander you really should put some Bactine on that."

"Huh? No, no - it's fine -" Xander recoiled slightly as Andrew scampered over, peering at his neck, one finger coming up to poke -
"Sod off!" Spike growled, and Andrew pulled back and clasped his hands behind his back - took on a 'scholarly' air that Spike privately thought looked more like constipation. Lips pursed, Andrew paced away a few steps and paced back - whirled, suddenly, that *finger* coming out again.

"Ah ha! Theodora Montcollier Armistage! In 1643 she wrote of a local woman who had been *thrallled* and taken under the sinister spell of a local Master Vam-*pyre*! The evil creature -"

"Bloody *hell!*" Spike lunged and Xander yanked on the tails of his coat, pulling him off balance.

Xander hauled hard - turned him around and held on tight. *Hunger* and *annoyance* cutting sharply into Spike's limited supply of patience - pulled Spike's head down to the wound in his neck. The urge for *hunt still* made Xander shiver and harden. He licked his lips at the feeling of Spike's tongue curling experimentally over the wound. "Don't taunt the vampire, Andrew."
Spike nipped sharply at Xander's neck - sucked up the tiny drop of blood there and then turned to look at Andrew, demon-faced as Xander shuddered. He took a last drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke at the pale, tense boy. "I don't have that thrall, you wanker. That was Dru, as you lot well know. Ask Rupert about it some time."

Andrew seemed about to speak when there was a sort of ripple - subtle as the faintest wash of perfume from an old trunk. Angel was back - was slamming right through the doors and Andrew jumped.

Xander's hold tightened on Spike as Angel swept through the lobby like a thundercloud, a clattering of armed Slayers in his wake. "All of you - stay where you are."

Indignation rolled off Spike and he jerked in Xander's arms, opened his mouth and had it filled immediately with warm and friendly tongue, still orange juice sweet. "Finally, an order I can follow."
Words muttered into Spike's lips, for Spike's ears only.

Spike didn't mind kissing Xander, and did his best to ignore the six or so Slayers that stood around the lobby, weapons in hand. He was vaguely aware of Andrew bustling around and the Slayers talking, but really, Xander's heat and sweet-citrus scent, and his hand on Spike's ass under the duster - his rapidly hardening cock pressing into Spike's hip - were a far more pleasant distraction. In fact, distracting enough that he didn't hear Angel say anything at all.

The hand clamping down bruisingly hard on his shoulder got through though, and he swung around on pure instinct, game-face, snarling, and his fist lashing out, straight into Angel's chin. Kaleidoscope vision of Andrew's round, open mouth and three Slayer's starting forward, weapons raised, and Wes in the archway, his eyes flashing black for just a moment.

Angel's head snapped to the side and he turned slowly slowly back to face Spike and Xander, dark
eyes flickering yellow. He looked from Spike to Xander behind Spike's shoulder - flicked a glance at Xander's hands sliding around Spike's waist, resting possessively on his hips, then lifted his eyes.

"I said maybe Spike and Xander would like to explain to us why they neglected to mention the power harvest in Sunnydale."

Square Fifteen

"Told you a dozen times you dozy pillock! I didn't sodding know. Fuck off." Spike threw the phone in the direction of the cradle. "God. Wanker calls himself a PI?"

Like a pissed off cat, Spike was all grumble and growl, mutter and snark but allowed Xander to manhandle him around in the Nest and spoon up behind him - even tolerated petting from the center of his chest, down to his thigh, to his knee and back. "'M not a sodding kitten, Xander."

"Yeah, yeah. Tell that to someone who can't feel you starting to purr." Xander dropped his head,
nipped at the almost-healed wound on Spike's throat and tasted the copper-musk flavor that was after-sex Spike blood. "I thought I blocked his number."

"Bastard borrowed Wes' cell."

Xander slowed the sweep of his hand beneath Spike's chin and tipped his jaw up, slid his thumb along the groove beneath full lower lip until he felt the first stir of unnecessary breath. "Wanna keep talking about Angel?" It'd been the same story for fucking weeks.

"When do I ever want to talk about BatVamp?" Spike grumbled. He wanted to be mad, but Xander's body was so very, very warm - his hand was petting and stroking from chin to chest, he does think I'm some kind of bloody cat... and Xander's mouth was nibbling and licking and generally revving Spike up in the best possible way. He squirmed backward a little, not even noticing the grumbling, stuttering nearly-purr that vibrated in his chest as Xander bent his considerable talents to calming him. "'Sides, if
there's somethin' wrong up here, it's for him to deal with. He's the bloody Champion, even if I did kick his stupid potato-shaped ass all over the place."

Spike's wiggling was beginning to create a response as enjoyable as it was predictable. Xander nibbled at the healing mark on Spike's throat until it broke open, lapping at the trickle of blood - felt the rusty almost-purr in it and swept his hand down to Spike's belly. He sealed his lips over the wound and sucked at the tingling bright-pennies taste of Spike. "So what's keeping him?"

"Wes's talkin' to contacts. It's all -" Spike waved a hand through the air, words escaping him for a moment as Xander pressed his hips in closer and his hand a little lower, possessive caress that made the demon rise, mouth opening in soundless bliss. In that form the thick wet-earth and wet-stone smells coming in through the open sliding doors were much more vivid. Yeasty, vegetative scents, overlaid with the brine-fish sea. Xander shifted again, mouth back on Spike's neck, and Spike whined, lifting his thigh - opening himself. Hoping Xander got the hint.
"It's all - talking, researching, stuff like that, innit? An' Angelus' is too impatient. Thinks I found out something up here I'm not telling him. Love..."

Xander felt the word vibrate in Spike's throat, resonate with a pleasure-thick groan of his own as the vampire's body easily accepted him, still slick - still warm from the last time. He shivered, perfectly still - put his fingers over Spike's lips, silencing him and closed his eyes. Storm wind, patter of rain on the patio roof, in the pool; Spike's breathing - fucking sexy sound from a creature who didn't need to breathe - and Xander's heartbeat. Beating hard enough to feel through his ribs.

For Spike to feel against his spine.

Xander dropped his lips back to Spike's throat, drawing blood in time with the beat of his heart.

Needwantyearn oozing from every pore of Spike's body but Xander held still.
"You're still talking about Angel."

"Not - anymore, Xan - *fuck* -" Spike couldn't keep his body from *wring* - slow roll of every muscle as Xander pulled the blood from him - as Xander's cock held him open and held him on edge. The wood in the fireplace popped softly, the flames singing and flattening in the intermittent breeze that came in the door. Making warm-cool-warm along their close-pressed skin. Xander's hand slowly stroked up, from hip to chest - paused to rub over Spike's nipples - then moved higher. A moment later his forearm was pressing lightly to Spike's mouth and Spike licked the salt-clean skin and then delicately sank his fangs in. Drank blood like tonic water and whiskey, full of *needlovewantmine*.

Xander sucked in a breath, sharp and burning against Spike's throat. His fingers flexed, brushed over the smooth hollow of Spike's cheek in a caress. "*This* is what I want you thinking about sweetheart." He shifted against Spike - *in* Spike, and pressed a moan to his throat. "Three months - three months during the twenty two hours a day I am *not*
patrolling Muddydale - when all we have to do...is fuck. Suck. Nap..."

Spike groaned around Xander's flesh - settled his fangs a little more firmly into the sweet, yielding flesh and drew out slow tendrils of blood. Flexing around Xander's cock, rubbing his free hand over Xander's hip and thigh - ribs and back. Pulling him closer and doing his best to feed love you love you love you into the...bond...that blood had forged. Wishing, not for the first time, and with a small twist of sadness, that it worked both ways.

Xander's lips moved against Spike's throat - might have been a kiss, might have been love you - and Xander pushed closer to Spike along every inch of their bodies.

~*~*~*~*~

The truck skidded - slithered - skidded again and Xander fought the wheel, cursing. Spike watched the shifting terrain outlined in the headlights,
making sure no hidden wash-outs or sink holes surprised them. The 'patrols' that the company insisted on had been reduced to a thrice-nightly drive around the perimeter of the site. The continuing rain - *Mojo'd rain, damn-it*, Spike thought, scowling - had made much of the site too treacherous for any vehicle. And tonight it was pouring - chilly downpour slashed sideways by a steady ocean breeze - and Xander had opted for the limited perusal but far greater comfort of a vehicle patrol.

"Watch your left, pet - the edge is gone, there," Spike said, and Xander twisted the wheel, silent. *Bloody stupid, this. Nothing here for thieves, don't need to be here if you're a magic-user...* The truck ground upwards and at the top of the small rise Xander stopped. From here they had a good view of a fairly large section of the pit - the trailer, First Aid tent, and a few other buildings. It was a good place to stop and have a smoke - a drink - a snog. And to let Xander rest his arms.

"Bloody awful night for this, yeah?" Spike said,
pulling the thermos of hot chocolate out from under the seat, and Xander leaned back tiredly and nodded, flexing his hands.

"Yeah." Xander let Spike take his right hand and press skilled fingers into aching flesh. He closed his eye in blissful relief as the rain slashed down on the cab roof and the wind rocked the truck on its tires. "It's like something out of one of those movies I used to laugh at before finding out it was all real."

"Lions and tigers and bears, oh my," Spike said absently, working his fingers up Xander's forearm to his bicep, kneading and rubbing. Easing the tension in the muscles there while feeling his own ratchet up, notch by notch. Something was...odd tonight. Something was off. The Hellmouth vibe...stuttered, and it was making him twitchy. And he could have sworn -

Xander lifted his hand when Spike reached his shoulder, smoothed his fingers over Spike's cheek and into his hair, tugging at the tufts. "Tremor in the Force?"
"You're mixing your movies, pet. See, 'Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!' is from *The Wizard of Oz* while the Force is from *Star Wars*. I'd expect a closet geek boy like you to know th - "

Xander cut Spike off firmly by jerking the parking brake, then jerking Spike into a kiss. "*Who's* a closet geek, videogame-boy?"

"S'good for hand-eye coordination," Spike said, purely rote answer that Xander actually chanted under his breath along with him. Spike scowled - pulled Xander closer by a handful of jacket and kissed him back, nipping gently at his lower lip. "No, no tremor, just - this place. Makes me..."

"Edgy," Xander said, and Spike nodded - patted around until he'd found his smokes and lit one, cracking his window and cursing softly as rain instantly blew in.

"Yeah, edgy. Bloody mess, this," he added, gesturing out at the morass of mud and debris that
had, over the past few weeks, become deeply cut with gullies and washes by the rain. More debris had been uncovered as the rain had washed away acres of hard-won, leveled topsoil.

"Hey buddy - this 'bloody mess' guarantees my employment for the long haul." The retort was habitual but didn't bring that glow of hard working pride it used to. Xander shivered in a blast of rain coming in from Spike's cracked window and turned on the heater - squirmed around until his back was to his door and Spike was leaning against him between his legs looking out into the night. "How crazy is it the company's keeping me, Russ and Matt on site to do round the clock patrols?"

"It's bloody idiotic, pet... Makes me wonder... Whoever's mojoin' this place, you think they'd want it all secret - think they'd be happy to have the lot of you clear out for the whole winter." Spike finished his smoke and fed it out through the window - closed it and leaned back into Xander, letting the man tuck him up under his chin and wrap his arms around him. *Feels so good... "I wonder if -"* Spike
stopped, staring. Something moved in the halogen-spangled depths of the pit. Something pale and human-sized. "Now what in bloody hell is that?"

"I can't see what you're - fuck." Xander swore softly - turned off the headlights and squinted down into the pit. It flickered in and out, pale glowing form. Back and forth - back and - "Strobe light?"

"No, there's no reflection and - look the rain's not lightin' up around it and there's no - shadow..." Spike leaned forward on the seat, peering out the window and cursing softly when the wipers obscured everything for a few seconds. "There -"

Whatever it was flickered, a stuttering strobe that had no rhythm to it. Not mechanical...not regular enough... Spike thought, but the rain made a haze over everything and he just couldn't tell.

"Jesus. I can't see a fucking thing. Keep your eyes on it sweetheart - I'm gonna get us closer." Sunnydale survival mode - run toward the weird. Xander flipped the truck lights on - pushed Spike off him,
buckled back into his seatbelt and shifted down into the lowest, slowest, *meanest* crawl his truck could give him. "Doesn't look like it can hear us."

Spike put his forearms on the dash and stared, watching the jerky column of pale light as it ticked back and forth, fading and then growing stronger from minute to minute. *Repetitive* movement, but random, none the less. The truck growled along through the mud, slewing slightly sideways in a particularly bad wash and then straightening as Xander fought the wheels back to true. "Bloody hell -" Spike breathed. As they got closer, it looked more and more like a *person*. Or something very similar.

The truck wheels spun, skidded and caught - and Spike's growing tension was getting under Xander's skin like ants. Burrowing ants. Burrowing Hellmouthy ants. "*Fuck.*" Xander hit soft clay and the truck lurched - wheels spun, kicking up splatters and clots of mud over the engine grind - slip slide and going nowhere. "God *damn* it!" *Not now. Not fucking now.* My town: soup.
"Shit." The light - whatever it was - was getting fainter. Spike moved - slid across the seat, opened the door and was gone, leaping down the slope of the pit, slithering in a slow-moving spill of clay and silt and suspended concrete dust. Running toward the flicker-flash of white and blue and pewter-grey that turned, moved, stopped - flickered out and then in and did it all over. But it was fading - washing out - losing bits and pieces as if the rain were chipping away at an ambulatory watercolor and when Spike made a final leap, from a chunk of foundation to the foot of the apparition all he caught was a fading glimpse. Heavily-bearded face, turned-up collar, what looked like a plastic sack swinging from a thin hand. Legs in ratty and translucent slacks and step, step, bend, straighten, step step, turn - gone.

"Fuck!"

Xander panted to a halt at Spike's side long minutes later, hair dripping with water and streaming into his eye and into his socket, breath coming hard, hands on thighs. "What the fuck was that?"
Spike was *thrumming* with *shock* *anger* *confusion* and Xander reached out to him, caught his hand - slippery and *cold* from the rain and wind - and pressed it to his forehead until he could straighten up and catch his breath.

Spike took a step forward, straining for any sign. Nothing. Just rain, sleeting sideways and pocking the rich silt of mud that crawled slowly downhill underfoot. "It was... I *know* him - knew him... It was Popeye. Remember him? Crazy guy that was always collecting cans and stuff...?" Spike turned slowly, surveying the surrounding terrain but there was simply nothing there at all. He tugged Xander closer, squeezing his hand a little. "Shouldn't be out here in the wet, love. You'll catch your death."

Xander let Spike tug him up, pull him against his body and huddled close for the illusion of warmth. They were *both* shivering. "Caught *you*. You wanna give me a heart attack, crazy guy?" Xander's hand crept up, caught a fistful of the back of Spike's tee shirt and held on. "Was it a ghost or what?"
"I - dunno, Xan, it..." It had been strange - frightening in it's strangeness. Spike was no virgin when it came to ghosties and ghoulies and things that go 'bump' but... This ghost had been - off. Good lord deliver us, he thought, absently finishing the prayer and then feeling Xander's bone-deep shiver. "Damn-it, Xander - out of this, now. You're gonna get sick." Spike slung his arm around Xander - got the duster over him for what protection it could provide and began the torturous process of getting them both back up the ice-slick incline to the truck.

"Yeah, right - I was gonna sit in the truck like a girl while you faced down the Hellmouthy goodness?" Xander felt the little roll of unhappiness off Spike and squeezed his waist - gave him a smile. "Product of the Hellmouth here, remember? Try keeping me away from the stupid stuff when my honey's out there."

"Don't have any doubts about you fightin' off the oogedy-boogedies, love. It's pneumonia I'm concerned about." Spike still had some Victorian
ideas when it came to illness, and anything that might settle in the lungs brought a sort of helpless terror over him - a terror he efficiently buried. But it was there, nonetheless, and he eyed Xander warily on the way up the hill, already planning hot baths with eucalyptus, hot soup, warm Nest and cuddling for the next day or so.

"I know that look." Xander glanced warily at Spike, tried to shiver a little less. "That's the 'made of glass' look."

"It is not," Spike muttered, swiping irritably at his face, blinking rain out of his eyes. Then he grabbed Xander's arm and hauled as a chunk of saturated earth broke out from under their boots and began to ooze it's way down-slope.

Xander staggered into Spike - and thank god for vamp strength because mud wrestling was only fun naked, warm and with beer after - or so Xander had heard. "It is, too."

"Not."
"Too - whoops!" Xander's feet shot out from under him and he clutched at Spike as the vampire righted him. "See?"

"You want to go arse over tit into the mud, pet?"

Xander sighed, wiped the water from his eye and shoved his hair out of his face - wished he'd worn the patch because the cold water seeping into his socket tickled and made his skin crawl and he could feel a headache coming on. "Okay, so I might be looking forward to a little made of glass treatment."

"Knew it," Spike growled - gave in and turned around and simply lifted Xander up, fireman's carry, and stomped on towards the truck, muttering under his breath. "Oi!" He slapped Xander's butt, rainwater spattering off under his hand. "Stop flailin' around, you're gettin' mud on my coat."

"Fuck! Ow! Asshole!" Xander pounded on Spike's back, laughed until he choked on rainwater and coughed. "Is this your evil plan? To drown me?" The
metal of the truck was cool to Xander's back when Spike set him down. He caught Spike around the waist, tugged him close and nuzzled into his throat, tasting rain water and ozone on cold skin - and genuine worry. He cupped the sharp line of Spike's jaw and fanned his fingers over his cheek in a way that would have been more comforting if he wasn't shivering, but a guy works with what he's got. "I'm fine."

"You're as cold as I am, pet, and your head's startin' to hurt, isn't it? You've got that - look." Spike wrapped himself around Xander, kneading the back of his neck and snuffling unhappily into rain-soaked hair, scenting the beginning of tension and pain. "Can't lie to me, pet." He pulled back and fixed Xander with a narrow, golden stare. "Now get in the bloody truck."

Xander dangled the truck keys and kissed Spike's cheek. "You're such a sweet talking romantic."

"It's gonna take hours to get all that mud out of the truck," Xander moaned, and Spike chuckled and smoothed Xander's hair back from his forehead - nudged the hot-water tap off with his foot and folded his arms securely around Xander's ribs.

"Take that long to clean my coat up, love," Spike said, and Xander sighed. The truck had been well and truly stuck and Spike had had to get out and push. He'd ridden back onto solid pavement in the back, since he'd had to push two more times to get them up out of the pit altogether. But then Xander had insisted he get in, even though he was practically a golem, coated in clay. Spike rubbed his chin slowly back and forth over the crown of Xander's skull, breathing in deeply of the grapefruit and eucalyptus, orange and cinnamon and clove scents coming up off the water. He'd put in every oil they had that seemed astringent - good for the lungs - and the water temperature had made
Xander yelp. But now they were boneless - floating - and Spike felt the beginnings of a grumbly purr shivering in his chest. *Git. Who cares about the mud? Just wanted you home... Wanted out of there...* They'd have to call Wes.

Xander ran his palm down the sleek smoothness of Spike's leg, felt the purr vibrate through him. "You're better than those massage chairs at the mall. And I don't have to put twenty five cents in you to make you work." His voice came out dozy, content.

"No, but you could put something else in me," Spike purred - rubbed a slow hand across Xander's belly, just grazing his cock. Slow and lazy, though, since they were both so **warm**, and so relaxed. Bath-tub foreplay could last for an hour, if the water was kept hot.

"Not that flexible, sweetheart." But Xander arched into the petting, stretched down to his toes that curled and uncurled luxuriously. Spike's contentment was a soporific drug and Xander
curled his fingers into Spike's hair, tugged him down to his neck with a full-body shudder.

"You just need to practice more, love," Spike said, doing a slow lick from shoulder to just behind Xander's ear. Then back down, nibble and suck and the merest graze of a tooth. Xander's blood - practically syrupy with contentment and love - made Spike groan softly, eyes fluttering closed.

"I can feel that." Xander whispered, held absolutely still. "I can feel your eyelashes against my skin. Do it." He felt more than heard the next groan, rubbed his palm against the elegant curve of Spike's skull. "Practice." He felt a jump in Spike's lust - wondered if Spike heard the word as Xander meant it. Wondered if Spike hoped the bond would start to work both ways...if Spike took enough.

Does he know...? Course he knows...always knows...Spike sucked a little harder then let the demon loose - slipped needle-sharp fangs into Xander's flesh as easily as a knife through butter. Drank slowly in long, smooth sips while Xander's heartbeat
kicked up a notch or two and he sighed softly, his fingers curling into Spike's thighs.

The oils in the water made every touch slip-slide slick and Xander hummed his pleasure, simple touch along Spike's legs, up to the fine indentations of his hips. "Feel so close to you like this." The suckling was gentle and burning - warm as the water and his head fit perfectly into the curve of Spike's shoulder. Love you. Love you. Want that to be the first fucking thing you feel.

"Mmmm..." Spike stopped, finally - reluctantly slipped out and away, licking once over the blood beading out from the two punctures. "Me in Thee and Thee in Me," Spike said softly, quoting an obscure prayer he had heard once. "One day..."

Xander was absolutely boneless, limp but for the aching hardness that wasn't going anywhere this close to Spike. Lazily, he turned his head, tasting lemons and salt and his own blood, and the tequila musk taste that was always stronger when Spike's demon was to the fore. "Want you to feel this."
Want and longing and love pouring off of Spike and the same thrumming in Xander's chest.

"I... Yeah. I do, too, love." Spike kissed, carefully - mindful of fangs and the awkward angle, shivering when Xander let his lip snag on a razor point and paint both of their mouths with scarlet. "Love you..." Spike breathed, and let the demon go, so he could kiss more recklessly.

Lips stinging, tingling - body thrumming - Xander twisted and tugged until he had Spike straddling his lap, facing him, kissing him - vampire of a thousand hands. He dragged his fingers through Spike's hair and tugged, laid biting kisses down the smooth line of his throat, knew they left a trail of red behind - pulled back and looked at the pattern of red on white and pink where water dripped from Spike's hair and admitted in the silence of his head how much the sight turned him on. "God. I was a pretty normal guy...once."

"Normal's subjective, love - you should know that better than most." Spike rocked slowly in Xander's
lap, his hands roaming over back and ribs, chest and belly. Doing his own kissing and nibbling, nuzzling into the long, humidity-curled hair that lay over Xander's shoulder. "Far as I'm concerned, you're perfect."

Xander mmm'med around the droplets of blood and water and *demon* he was licking from Spike's throat, ran his hands over the slick topography of Spike's ribs and shoulder blades. Abruptly, he lifted his head - looked down at riotous black-white curls and had a moment of *absolute* certainty. "I want to tell the gang about us."

"Do you, now?" Spike tipped his head, looking at Xander, and Xander looked back, a thread of fear-scent skeining out into the air. "That's a lot to lay on their door-step, love - *me*, for one - us - this..." Spike ran a hand slowly up Xander's back. "You sure, love?"

"You're my honey, the vampire I love. And okay - I could *possibly* have made that sound less girly - " Spike's relief was like a *wave* rocking through
Xander with enough force to leave him dizzy. "Spike - yes. That's yes. Fuck yes I'm sure."

"Then I want you to, love. Wish we could do it face to face." Spike smirked, trying for cocky, but he knew Xander could feel the trembling relief that had loosened the coiled-tight spring in his chest. "Anytime you like then, love - any time."

"What time is it in England?" Xander could feel the trembling. Could feel the *loveneedfearrelief* radiating from Spike and tipped him closer - closer - closer until breath couldn't slip between them and he was glad only *one* of them actually needed to breathe. "Willow emailed me an invitation to England for Christmas. Left a phone number." Spike wasn't the only one shaking.

"Did she now? Christmas with the Scoobies - that'd be a new thing..." Spike said, hugging Xander back just as tight. Remembering *his* first holiday with the 'gang' with a grimace. Remembering a passing comment from Xander that had been the prelude to mumbled explanation about Christmas and sleeping
bags and drunken Uncles and parents. Other than the sheer joy of shocking the hell out of them, Christmas in London sounded...horrible.

"We'd have a chance to talk about this - ghost thing with Rupert," he added uncertainly, not sure if Xander wanted to go or not. Hoping not.

"Uh...you don't have any attachment to Christmas in London, do you? Because I was kinda thinking we could talk to Giles about this ghost thing over the telephone."

Spike leaned back against Xander's knees, dropping his hands to Xander's belly and sweeping smooth circles there with his thumbs on either side of Xander's navel. "Attachment? Bloody hell, pet - none at all. I'd go if you asked me but - can't actually think of anything I'd rather do less. Thought we'd have our own Christmas - maybe have some of it with Wes..." He leaned down and kissed the side of Xander's neck - nuzzled for moment into warm flesh. "Whatever you want, love. So long as I'm with you."
"Can we not make a big deal of Christmas?"

"Christmas is for getting drunk and shagging and - well - maybe not that," Spike said, contemplating Christmases past and dismissing the more...demony bits that Dru had gleefully introduced to the celebrations. He very much doubted Xander wanted a tree decorated with strings of teeth. "Think we can manage that, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So long as I'm with you, pet." Spike repeated - words buzzed against Xander's throat, against the bite that gently throbbed in time with Xander's pulse.

"I want to call Willow - give her the contact but not the commitment. Want her to know I'm happy." Xander whispered the words against the shell of Spike's ear.

"You'll get an earful from the Slayer, pet - best be
prepared. Me bein' alive - me bein' with you - she'll bust a gut, yellin'." Spike paused, pressing his head into Xander's cheek for a moment. "Maybe we should be drunk," he mused. "Be a hell of a lot more fun... Can't wait to tell them, love, that I've got you now - that you're all mine."

Soft reassurance, because Spike could sense the lingering tension in Xander, and guessed where it came from. Love you, pet, love you so much... Don't doubt me.

Xander closed his eye - took in a long slow breath and leaned back against the rim of the tub with a double armful of cuddly vampire. "You have so got me," he assured him, nuzzling into bicolored curls and warm skin.

When they'd dried off and Xander had fed the living room fire to a blaze warm enough to keep even the most finicky vampire happy, they'd curled into the Nest with the speaker phone, Willow's phone number at Council Headquarters and the rest of the
Old Speckled.

Hissing of static, clicks and a tinny beep, then the double *chirp-chirp* of the phone ringing, somewhere in London. Nearly noon, and the sun would probably be sunk in clouds or fog - another dark, London day relieved only by Christmas lights. Spike could remember it from his last trip there, right after Prague - searching for a cure for Dru. Oxford and Bond Street, King's Cross and Piccadilly Circus, lit with white light and swagged in greenery - SoHo tarted up in tinsel and blink-lights like the old whore that she was. He could imagine Buffy and Dawn there, shopping for presents - Harrods and Bonds and all the shops up and down Oxford. He missed it and he didn't - felt that odd nostalgia twist in him and then fade as the phone clicked and he heard Willow's voice for the first time in...a year and a half.

"Xander! You called!"

"I called," Xander agreed and let out a slow breath of relief - it was easier to talk to Willow than he
feared. She didn't sound - unhappy to hear from him. "We called," he corrected because that was the point of it all.

"We? We who? You found someone? What's she like and is she coming for Christmas too?"

Jolt of unhappy acceptance from Spike, one Xander could feel in his gut and didn't like. "Uh - can you get everybody else?"

Silence on the line then little girl voice. "Is something wrong?"

"God no. Everything's right. But I want to say all of this once, you know?"

"All of what? Oh! Oh. Right. Gang then once then - right. Don't go anywhere."

"Not going anywhere." Xander wriggled into the pillows until he could wrap himself around Spike, tangle their limbs, kiss without straining his neck...yeah kisses were part of his plan and a
strained neck could put a crimp in the follow through.

Xan-man, the guy with the plan.

"Okay?" Spike's tension hadn't changed - hadn't spiked or lessened - just was.

"I'm all right, love. First me, then us, yeah? Might make 'em so confused, finding out I'm alive, they don't hear the rest." Spike got an arm over Xander's - got his cheek in close to Xander's hair and breathed the comforting scents of home - of Xander. Hating the unhappy moil of emotion that was making his stomach clench tight. Hating that...rejection...was still the worst thing - the only thing. Still the one thing he didn't want to hear. "Be all right," he murmured, brushing his lips over Xander's hair, and listening to distant footsteps and excited voices, coming closer.

"Okay, Xander. We're all here."

"Who?"
"Me, Buffy, Giles and Dawn. And I've got the speaker phone on."

Xander took a breath, a deep one and slipped his fingers through Spike's. "Okay. Hi, guys. I'm still in Sunnydale and everything's - okay we'll get to the part about everything later. Spike's back in Sunnydale too."

There was a long silence - a thick silence. A tiny little hiss of indrawn breath that Spike somehow knew came from Dawn. He could see her, hands over her mouth, trying not to give herself away. Or maybe ready to give herself away, who knew?

"Spike is in Sunnydale? What do you mean Spike is in Sunnydale? He - died, Xander. Again. I - saw him." Buffy's voice, sharp and a little wavery - demanding.

"Can't always trust your eyes, Slayer - the Hellmouth, after all," he said, and listened to the hush again - the calm before the storm.
"Spike?" Buffy said, and then Dawn was laughing, saying something like 'he's alive!' and Willow was muttering something and then - "Giles, you look awfully unsurprised by this - big surprise," Buffy said, her voice cutting across the chatter like a sword blade.

"Well - yes. I - we thought it was better for all concerned if you weren't drawn back into the...situation with Spike, Buffy. You had earned your rest from the...situation."

Xander tightened his fingers on Spike's and kissed the knuckle of each one, looked up into tense blue eyes. *Let* Giles sweat it out.

"*Situation?* There was no - situation, Giles, there was -"

"Buffy! C'mon. Not fourteen anymore. I *know* you two were sleeping together and I know what happened -" Spike flinched at that, just barely. Not from guilt, but from Dawn *knowing*. He hated that thought - hated that knowledge being in her brain.
"Dawn! This is - just - Stop, okay? Xander? What's going on, exactly? Since nobody here wants to tell me anything."

"Or me! I didn't know - anything, either," Willow chimed in, the hurt tone coming through quite clearly. *And the guilt-train starts rolling. Slayer and Red's best weapon.*

"Mind if I answer that one, sweetheart?" Xander murmured, got a shake of Spike's head for an answer.

"Did he just call him *sweetheart*?" Willow, in a shocked whisper.

Xander decided to ignore that for the moment. There was still a teeny *tiny* infinitesimal glow of pride that Buffy wanted *him* to tell her what was going on, wanted him to come through when nobody else was. It took one look at Spike's unhappy face for him to get over it. "Short version: the amulet trapped Spike's spirit. The amulet spat
him back out at Wolfram and Hart and he fought the good fight for a while. He got pretty badly hurt during Angel's apocalypse last Spring and took off...and then I found him."

"When?"

Xander licked his lips. "Four months ago."

"How long was he fighting with Angel? Why didn't Angel say anything? Xander, does Angel know he's with you?"

"He's right there, Buffy, you could try asking Spike! Hey - Spike! I - I've really missed you."

Spike had to grin at her fake wobbly tone. *Win an Oscar, that one.* "Missed you too, Niblet. Sorry I didn't... Well, just sorry. Seemed like it was for the best, yeah?"

"Sure, dying and coming back to life and letting me think you're still dead, that's just great, that -"
"Dawn! That's not - important right now -"

"/ think it is!"

"Children, please. Can we just - calm down?" Giles cleared his throat and everyone was silent for a moment. "Xander, does Angel know Spike is with you?"

"Does he ever," Xander muttered, grinned up at Spike, basked in the glow of Spike's pride pleased want you and the smug memory of decking Angel.

"Oh." Disappointment bled through Willow's voice. "So when you said 'we' you didn't mean you found a new girlfriend? You only meant Spike's living with you again?"

"Actually, when I said 'we' I meant I found a new boyfriend and Spike's it...but I was hoping to lead into that slowly and that's kinda not an option anymore is it?"

"Okay - wait - boyfriend? First with the huh? and
then - what? Xander, you're not gay. Are you? You weren't before - did Willow really gay you up and it just took this long to - to take effect? Willow -!

Spike snorted softly into Xander's neck, planting a quick kiss there while Giles staved off another descent into chaos.

"Buffy! I would never do that! That's - completely immoral and - and -"

"Really, Buffy, let's not - jump to conclusions -"

"Well, what, he was with Anya and so not gay before and then -"

"Buffy, you're so dumb sometimes!"

"Niblet, enough of that, now. Maybe let Xander talk?" Spike listened to huffed breaths and a squeak, like a drawer being opened, and then the glug of liquid. Too bloody right, Rupert. I need my own Dutch courage for this. Spike groped around and grabbed the last bottle of Old Speckled and popped the cap off.
"Fine. But he'd better use small words because Buffy is so blonde about this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

Since Spike was drinking the last of the Dutch courage, Xander helped himself to a little English courage from Spike's lips - a kiss sweeter than shaky. "Gay now. So so gay now. Unbelievably, happily, *gayly* gay. Question answered?"

"But Xander - how could you not tell *any* of us?"

"Um. He might - kind of have told me," Willow said hesitantly. "When he was in Africa."

"*Spike* was in Africa?"

"Guys! A little focus here. I met a guy in Africa. He wasn't *the* guy but he was a good guy. A *safe* guy - I guess the right guy at the time." Xander smiled at the silence on the other end. "I told you I found myself in Africa, Buffy."
"So you were with some guy in Africa and...now you're with Spike. Spike's gay. Xander - are you sure -"

"Geez, Buffy!" There was the muffled sound of someone whapping someone else and then a yelp and Giles makes a sharp little sound.

"Enough of that. Now - Andrew - told me that you had come back, Spike, but - why did you abandon Angel? I thought that you were - committed to the fight there. Working with him and his - team."

"I did. Until the big showdown. Then - things changed. I got hurt, like Xander said. Took me a while to get better. Wes fixed me up and I stayed up here, is all. Got tired of listening to the broody bastard go on about his mission - got old. 'Sides, he's got his Slayers an' all, really don't fancy being part of some - Council operation." Xander's lips were warm against his chest and Spike sighed and curled a little closer. "Better this way - Xander doesn't wanna live in L.A., anyway, and I don't
blame him."

"How is Wesley, Spike? Is he - all right?" That was surprising, coming from Buffy, and Spike grinned at the phone.

"He's all right, Slayer. A little different now. But he's - just fine."

Better than fine. In the silence that followed, Xander shifted against Spike - Wesley was very fine these days.

Willow took a deep breath - Xander knew it was Willow - a guy wasn't best friends with someone the first twenty years of his life without recognizing every last sound they made. "If Spike's with you, Xander, we'd be happy to have him in London for Christmas too."

"We would? Ow!"

"Buffy!"
"Of course we would!"

"Thanks guys - but we're not...coming for Christmas."

"But Xander, you promised!"

Xander winced as Willow went straight for the guilt. "Ah - actually, Wills - I didn't. I said I'd think about it and...I did. We'll call again and I'll send presents...."

"But Willow said you were coming!" Dawn, this time, finally moving past fake-tears and into something a little more real. Hurt and confused and Spike had to sigh again - had to stroke his hand through Xander's hair and think about what he was going to say for a moment because he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"She didn't know, Bit, she - well, it's best if we don't, yeah? Xander's got things to do there, can't just pack and go whenever he likes. And I'm not so bloody fond of the Council that I want to walk straight into their den."
Dawn made a frustrated noise and Spike could see her stamp her foot. "That's so lame. Work? Expect me to believe that? What's the real reason? Spike? Are - you really - all better?"

"Course I am, Dawn - don't worry about me. Good as new. Just ask Xan, love, he'll tell you."

"Xander?"

Xander had to smile at the impatience in her voice. "It's true, Dawnie. He's as good as new and fully functional."

"Too much information!" Xander heard Willow clap her hands over her ears.

"Xander," Giles interrupted with his thoughtful voice, his Watcher-polite voice. "I realize you're no longer in the Council's employ but you - both you and Spike - are truly welcome here."

And how hard was it to say those words, G-man?
"Thanks. It's not that I don't believe you - because I do - but I've got responsibilities here, like Spike said. The site's closed down for the rainy season and I am the night shift until Southern California dries out."

"Xander - How can you want to work in the crater that used to be Sunnydale? When you know what's under there?" 'Instead of spending time with us' Xander heard Buffy's unspoken words.

Xander wished he had a real answer - wished there was an answer. "Wanted to go home, I guess."

"That's not home, Xander, it's just...a hole in the ground."

"It's the place where Anya's buried, Buffy. And...my parents. And Joyce and Tara... It's not - just a hole. It's..." Spike felt the shiver come over Xander and he hugged him close.

"It's more than a hole, Slayer. It's his choice, what he's doing. His own. You made yours - let him make his." He could hear the heavier breathing - maybe
even a snuffle or two from Dawn and Willow, and then Buffy's voice, a little softer.

"I know, S-spike. It's - I just... I don't like to think of that...being dug up. Being...disturbed. I just - I thought once we got out of Sunnydale we were out, you know? New lives. New...everything."

"You are out, Buff." It was harder to speak than Xander expected. Harder to find the words with the names fresh in his mind. "You don't have to come back but I think I need this. I need to do this. Make it real. For me. For them."

"Xander - " Buffy sounded so hurt.

"Buffy - " Xander sucked in a hard breath and closed his eye. "It's not about you this time."

"Xander, I -" Buffy stopped, and Spike could see her. Could her big, wounded eyes and her trembly lip. Could see the arms wrapping around in self-defense and self-comfort. "I know it's - it's not -"
"I tell her that a lot. So she won't forget," Dawn interrupted, and Spike smiled softly. "It's okay if you don't come ho- come here for Christmas, Xander. I can - I can come see you after, maybe! Like - Easter or something. And - you can get some vacation time, right? I want you to meet my friends..."
Dawn's voice trailed off wistfully and Xander sighed. Spike rubbed his hand slowly over Xander's hip, just connecting.

"That'd be lovely, Bit, and we'll - we'll talk about it, yeah? But we need to discuss something with Rupert. Serious stuff, now."

"What - do you need to discuss? Is something happening there?" Giles' voice was instantly alert, and Spike shook his head. Anything to get away from the soppy emotional scenes and Rupert would be fine.

"Well...it's like this, Watcher..."
The rain was letting up by the time Xander and Spike reached the site, giving way to a fine mist that would turn into fog by midnight - that Xander didn't look forward to driving in even if it was better than rain and mud. He'd come into the garage and wondered if there was still a truck under all the mud and how many quarters he'd need to take to the do-it-yourself Quickie wash to get it all off.

"Hey, Russ." The office trailer was half sunk in the soupy mud of the site and Russ had his shoes off, feet up on the desk and muddy footprints in size fourteen triple-e all over the floor. "Busy day?"

"It could not have been any less busy. Christ, I'm ready to go out there and steal some equipment myself to give us something to do." Russ saluted them with his mug of what smelled like hot chocolate. "Hey, Spike."

"Russ. Could steal something for ya, if you like. Had my eye on one of those DitchWitches," Spike said, stomping his boots hard on the steps, glaring at the
clumps of mud that had adhered in the short walk from truck to trailer. *Sodden' ridiculous.* *Bloody magiced weather and bloody Hellmouth mud and if there's mud on my bloody coat again I'm gonna do something nasty to whoever's making this into a bloody swimming hole.*

Xander gave Spike's hand a squeeze and edged past Russ into the little file area of the trailer. Russ tipped forward in his chair to give Xander room and drained his mug. "Steal the black one. The red one likes to jam up and chew on Dave - I think it's got a crush on him."

"Yeah?" Spike contemplated that, fishing for his cigarettes and lighter. "Think it's possessed? Could do some mojo - set it on him like a bloodhound." His cigarettes were damp and he scowled, looking for a dryer one. Damn humidity. The whole trailer was musty with it.

Russ tossed Spike a dry packet of Marlboros from the desk, still wrapped. "Matt's emergency stash. He's trying to quit, anyway." Russ grabbed a folder
off the desk and passed it to Xander without looking. "It's more fun because it's *not* possessed though, man - I'm not so sure anything *else* isn't possessed out here. It's been wild once the sun goes down."

Behind Russ, Xander froze.

Spike glanced over at Xander, stripping the cellophane off the pack and opening them. "Yeah? What's that mean? Stuff been - happening? What kind of stuff?" Spike settled one hip on the desk and lit up - inhaled deeply and watched Xander dither at the other desk, watching Russ. *Bloody hell.*

"Guys, I've gotta run out to the truck." Xander spoke quickly before Russ could answer. Didn't want to *hear* it right now - gave Spike an apologetic smile and a kiss on the cheek. The Xan-man was going to spend a few minutes more on his little vacation in denial land.

"Xan - love -" Spike put out his hand - weightless, fingers just curling over Xander's shoulder. "You all
right, love?" Xander just looked - pale. Strained. Not right. *Bloody phone call and the bloody Scoobies, got him all...stirred up before and now...*

Xander reached up, wrapped warm fingers briefly around Spike's and pulled them to his lips for a quick light kiss - and a nod. Felt Spike's concern and held his fingers to his cheek before letting go. "Yeah. I'll be right back."

Russ and Spike watched together as Xander left, watched the door bang shut behind him. Then Russ watched Spike smoke furiously for a few moments before asking. "Things all right?"

"Hmmm?" Spike was still staring at the door and he turned at looked at Russ, not really *seeing* him for a moment. "Oh, it's - had a call to the old gang, you know. Things were a little - tense. He's all right, really. Things just have to...settle." Spike tamped out the cigarette and sighed - felt for his flask and took a long drink - tipped it towards Russ, who hesitated and then shook his head.
"Okay - if you say so - only have to ask, you know -" Russ spread his hands, and Spike nodded, putting the flask away.

"I know, Russ. Thanks, mate."

Russ leaned back in his chair, filling the entire corner of the trailer and folded his hands over his stomach. "Feel like I should be asking you if you've seen any weird stuff out there. The official word on the flickering lights is ball lightning or swamp gas, by the way. We're s'posed to keep our distance for insurance purposes and to document each sighting." Russ nudged a stack of forms with one sock-covered foot. "They don't pay me enough for this shit."

Spike snorted softly, settling back onto the desk - taking out another cigarette but just holding it. "Bollocks. If it really were swamp gas or some such nonsense, it wouldn't do any harm to go near it. You see any of - it - up close?" Had to ask, because... Because he and Xander both wanted to be wrong, basically. Hated to think what it could be, so wanted
it to be...something else.

"Yeah. And let me tell you that is some *freaky* swamp gas that looks through the goddamned window with a pair of eyes." Russ glared at the wall. "It's Sunnydale, man. This town put freaky on the map but *those* things make my skin crawl. Sol won't come anywhere near the pit - says it makes him twitchy."

"Makes us all twitchy," Spike muttered, and went for his flask again. He didn't blame Sol a bit - he wouldn't be here himself, if not for Xander. The nerve-scraping effect of whatever was being done was getting worse, and it put him on edge. He tipped the flask up and drank, and decided to just keep it out on the desk - listened to Xander's footsteps squelching closer outside. "So - anything else? Any - tall, dark, and not-human comin' round, disturbin' the peace? Anything...out of line?" At Russ' eye roll Spike held up a hand, nodding tiredly. "I know - it's the Hellmouth. But - anything?"

"Freaky weather. Freaky clockwork ghosties. No tall,
dark and not humans unless you wanna count the vamp from L.A. who came around a few days ago."
Russ wasn't looking at Spike as he spoke, innocently preoccupied with a speck of mud trapped under his fingernail. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?" The trailer door opened, but Spike barely heard it.

Russ flinched, and Spike didn't realize he'd changed - growled - until he felt Xander's hand on his arm, pulling at him - distracting him.

"Spike? We don't eat the nice man who buys us doughnuts, right?"

"Angel was here. Fucking bastard. Here. Nosin' around -"

"Angel? Russ, what the hell?" Xander asked, turning toward the other man and Spike shot to his feet and paced irritably down to the other end of the trailer and back while they talked. Sodding wanker, told him - none of his business! BatVamp just will not leave well enough alone!
Xander kept a nervous eye on Spike, on the seething *pissed off vamp here* emotions roiling through the close confines of the trailer. Russ kept an eye on Spike too. Chalk one up to the Sunnydale survival instinct.

"He said he was a private detective hired by the firm to check out the recent looter reports." Russ looked from furiously pacing vampire to Xander, who had his face in his hands and was slowly shaking his head back and forth. "He wasn't, huh?"

"No, the fucking cunt was *not*. Bloody hell! Wes *told* him -" Spike resisted the urge to put his fist through something and instead shoved the squashed-out cigarette into his pocket - grabbed another and lit it, puffing furiously. He was going to have to kill *several* things tonight.

"Not a private investigator," Russ concluded.

"He's a private investigator," Xander corrected. "But he's also kinda family -"
Russ held up a hand the size of a small dinner plate. "Man, that's all you've gotta say. Listen, Spike - hang out in here for a while. I've gotta show Alex some damage in the artifacts tent - give you time to cool down." Russ nudged Xander in the shoulder, stood up and shrugged into his coat, zipping it and pulling the hood over his head before waiting for Spike to turn and face him again. "I didn't tell this Angel guy anything."

Spike glared for one moment longer - realized, finally, that he'd vamped and hadn't even noticed. He shook it away - sighed and gave Russ a lopsided smile. "Yeah, I know you didn't, mate. Sorry for all - that. You go on, I'll just have a drink, calm myself down. Be careful out there in that bloody cess-pit."

"Hey. We're professionals." Russ caught Xander around the neck in a stranglehold of manly affection and wrestled him out the door with a croak and a wave to Spike. Russ waited for Xander to get his footing in the watery site mud before letting go. "He really doesn't like Angel."
"He really hasn't liked Angel for about a hundred years." Xander was conscious of Russ giving him a startled look but kept walking. Russ would think about it for a few minutes, absorb it and then they'd get on with what needed doing in the artifacts tent.

The long steel tables were empty and the only smells were rain, mud and metal. The big equipment cabinets at the back were triple locked and sunk far enough into the mud that Xander pitied any poor thief who thought it was a good idea to _lift_ one out of there. "Where'd they take all of the junk?"

"IDed bodies to the coroner, personal effects to a warehouse on the hill - but check this out." Russ pulled Xander around the table to what Xander thought was a cut in the fabric - until Russ shined his light on it.

"Jesus. Looks like somebody blew a hole in it. Did anyone hear gunshots?"
"Man, I'd like to see the gun that could make a hole that big." Russ fingered the circumference of a hole almost as big as he was with ragged edges, singed.

"Lightning?"

"Too far from the poles and there's no other damage. Matt noticed it this afternoon, thought you might know something about it."

Xander shook his head, wiped the water off his hands on his marginally less wet jeans. "You've got the wrong guy. Did he get pictures of it in daylight and send out the work order?"

"Yeah but you really think they're gonna send someone out to fix it in this weather?"

"Let's tape it up before the heavy rain starts again so we don't have to deal with it when it rips up to the cross-beams and starts flapping around hard enough to tear the whole tent apart."
Spike paced, and cursed, and drained his flask and smoked at least five cigarettes before he felt - calm. *Calmer*. He wasn't sure, exactly, why Angel's visit had pissed him off so much, but it *had*. The implied lack of trust, in them and in Wes. The 'father knows best' attitude. The *sneaking*. All of it. That, and the bloody Hellmouth. The energies seemed - stirred up, tonight. More than usual. They seemed agitated; swirling and shifting - building up to something, and Spike was pretty sure he didn't want to know to what. He finally slowed and came to rest next to the desk - stood for a minute and just breathed, eyes closed. Knowing that whatever he was feeling was going out to Xander, maybe. They weren't sure of the distance yet.

And he didn't want Xander upset because of a centuries-old grudge. Sighing, he turned around, ready to go help Russ and Xander in whatever project they felt *had* to be done right then. And
looked straight into the face of Riley Finn.

Xander took a moment outside the tent to drag the damp air deep into his lungs, draw it over his tongue the way Spike did when he was scenting things - and smiled because that thought of Spike was all he needed to feel him. Pissed - but calming down, coming around and Xander swayed gently on his feet just feeling, letting Spike's calming calm him too.

"Alex?"

"Yeah?" Calm. Love you, sweetheart. Xander started to smile before the angerfeararragerage hit him like a wall - made him gasp and stagger - then he was running for the trailer, for Spike, panic shooting adrenaline through his veins.

"Alex!"

Squelching, slip-sliding footsteps following after him and Xander pounded up the trailer steps, threw
open the door and tumbled into wrong wrong wrong.

Spike snarled, the rage and fear that had bubbled earlier boiling over in a split second. He backed away, trying to gain ground - room to fight - and Riley advanced, mouth moving silently, gun swinging - pointing - firing. Spike ducked - and Riley went through him - ice-water bath and the feeling of a thousand needles being dragged over his skin. Flinching, he whirled away only to come face to face with a white-coated doctor holding a syringe.

What the fuck is going on! Fucking doctors - soldiers - Riley fucking Finn - The light in the trailer was flickering - stuttering - taking on a strobing quality that made the suddenly advancing figures move in a jerky, unhinged way. Another doctor, two more soldiers, moving, turning, doing - one with blood down her arm, one with a bound, gagged prisoner. And Riley, again, the first doctor, again, and the second - another and another and the trailer strobed and flickered and went out - candle flame.
Reformed in a moment in the white, white, white of Initiative examination rooms; flicker-flash like an old silent film, drafts of needle-scratch and ice as the ghosts pushed through him again and again.

Spike backpedaled and hit the wall - slid along it groping for the door in the scratched-white Kinescope that had transformed the trailer into - nightmare. *Fuck - get off me - get out of here - door's just there, know it is, just ghosts, just cold, can't hurt - can't touch - fuck, fuck - Xander!* There was something - in the back of his brain. Like his name being called from far away and a soldier walked through him, leaving him shuddering, down on one knee. And the door crashed open, and Xander stumbled in.

For the first second the door was open the trailer was *gone* - nothing but flickerflash corridors, doctors, soldiers, demons, *walls* and biting cold that shot through Xander's coat and into his *bones*, with Spike's terror thrumming through him like a live current but he couldn't *see* Spike.
Took three running steps down the corridor and banged into the big desk he couldn't see, hard enough to wind himself.

And then it all flickered out like the end of a film reel - left nothing but Spike, huddled down on one knee - crammed between a filing cabinet and the couch. The bitter cold of the close air - scent of ozone and metal - was stifling. And the mindless panic from the terrified vampire was making Xander's heart race in his chest.

"Spike. Sweetheart - " Spike's fingers were cold - cold even for him - colder than they possibly could be and he tucked Spike's hands quickly into his jacket. "Baby - look at me..."

"B-bloody c-cold, m'c-cold -" Spike felt - something. Pressure of fingers on his, distant and painful. Tingling like they hadn't since he'd been human and gone skating on Twelfth Night eve and gotten chilblains staying out too long with Cousin Edgar. The whitewhitewhite fading from his vision, slowly
darkening to the familiar dented paneling, scuffed linoleum and battered, second-hand desks. And Xander, pulling him close, faint and thready *fearlovehurt* like the merest wisp of smoke on a still day. There was a *bang* and the trailer lurched and Russ was there, too - cursing.

"Fucking freezing in here! Get him out, Alex -" Russ' hands, Xander's, pulling him up and out into thinning fog, the beginning of a drizzle and warmer, humid air.

"Fucking - h-hell, Xan - you okay? You h-hurt, love?"

"I'm okay sweetheart - I'm okay." Okay if his heartbeat would fucking go back to *normal* and the adrenaline didn't drop him in the mud. "Come on, baby. Let's get in here." Xander pinned Spike up against the side of his truck, held him with one arm and dug into his pocket for the truck keys - wrestled the truck's back door open and Spike *in*. Into the familiar interior, familiar smells, deep leather back seat where he could wrap Spike up in his arms and the ratty blanket he kept for daytime sunshine
Spike emergencies.

The truck rocked on its axles as Russ climbed in front and Xander tossed him the keys. "Turn on the heater, will you?"

Spike huddled into Xander - into his jacket and into the crook of his neck, despite the damp. He felt the truck rock as Russ climbed in and then the rumble of the engine. He was shaking - bone-deep chills like he hadn't had since he sick. Xander's hands on his back, under the duster were warm and soothing, his scent was everywhere, and Spike just breathed, gulping oxygen and carbon and trying to get his nerves and his body back under his control.

"D-did you see it? Did you ssee them? And th-the labs and..." He twisted so he could look at Xander - at wildly tangled hair and a streak of mud across one cheekbone. "Was it th-there?"

"I saw it," Xander said - quietly, cupping the back of Spike's head with one hand and rubbing at the steel-tight muscles of his neck with his thumb. "But
it wasn't *real.*"

"What the fuck *was* it?" Russ twisted in the front seat, a blast of hot air pouring from every vent and beginning to steam the windows.

"The Initiative." A shudder ran Spike through and his hands twisted in Xander's shirt, grasped him so tight Xander could feel the fibers giving way, feel the need and fear still radiating from Spike like something living, twisted and *wrong.* "They were this - secret government thing, experimenting on demons."

Russ was silent - watched Spike huddle into Xander, watched him shake hard enough to rattle them both apart and nodded. "They gone?"

"Fuck yes."

"Good."

"How - how could it be *here?* Just fuckin' g-ghosts, not supposed to be - " Spike couldn't finish that and
he wished they could just go home - curl up in the Nest and sleep - cuddle - *fuck*. Anything.

"There was -" Russ shifted again, sounding nervous, and Xander made an encouraging noise. Spike cracked open one eye, looking at the blond, bulky man in the front seat who looked ashen under his Viking-pale skin. "I was behind Alex and I tripped and - the whole city was there. Just - like a...painting on a mirror or something. Those - that place was around me but - everywhere else..." Russ swallowed. "I could see streets and everything. Just for a few seconds."

Xander shuddered. "They don't pay us enough - "

" - for this shit," Russ finished for him and put the truck in gear.

"Where're we going - ?"

"Home. I'll get Sol to drive me back for my truck tomorrow. They do *not* pay *any* of us enough for this shit."
As the truck made the slow and bumpy climb out of the pit and Spike shivered in his arms, Xander wasn't going to disagree.

~*~*~*~*~

Warm, finally, and thank god. Russ and Xander had stoically driven with the heat on full blast, and now Spike was curled around Xander in the bedroom Nest, electric blanket on 'high', a belly-full of the last of the ginger wine, heated and spiced, and a the last drops of a near-scalding shower drying out of his hair. Spike thought Xander must be becoming some strange, hybrid creature, able to withstand the heat that Spike craved so much. He was kissing Xander slowly, his muscles limp, his brain a warm fuzz. The shiver of emotion from Xander he'd felt earlier was gone, but he was sure it would come back. Only a matter of time, now. Time and blood.

Spike let his mouth move slowly to Xander's neck - let his fangs rest there for a moment against the
steady, reassuring *da-dump*. "Love you, Xander... Love you so much..." He bit gently - drank slowly, in small, separate mouthfuls while Xander sighed and moved against him - lazily stroked his hip and shoulder and cheek.

"Love you too, sweetheart... You okay, now?"

"Mmm..." Spike finally drew away - licked the small wounds clean. "It was...it was like ice, just going through me. Blades of ice. Made me cold all the way to my bones." He shivered, remembering, and curled closer. "I couldn't - see the door, couldn't..." Xander hugged him, and he fell silent. *Bloody soldiers. Never leave me be...*

Little tremors worked their way through Spike's body, eased out slowly under the gentle up-down stroke from shoulder to hip until Spike was quiet and *still* against him, boneless and warm. *The way he should be, dammit.* It was *wrong* seeing the Big Bad reduced to a quivering, shivering vampsicle. He felt Spike nuzzle into the small punctures, the burning hot-cold of Spike's tongue cleaning them
and sighed in pleasure, stretched and relaxed completely under the gentle lapping and the soft waves of comfort...safe coming off of Spike. "I felt it - you."

"'M sorry about that, love," Spike murmured. Because he was. Because he wished Xander only ever felt the love and the lust and the laughter, not the demon's rage or the mind-numbing fear that hand all but crippled him. Won't let that happen again. Will not.

Xander snorted, curled his fingers into Spike's hair and held him close against his neck, all smooth skin and soft-rough tongue. "Yeah because you so did that to me on purpose." His eyelid fluttered, soothing warmth tingling outward from his throat. "You don't have to go back there with me, sweetheart."

Soft huff of laughter and Spike nipped at Xander's jaw, making him twitch away and then grin. "'M not gonna stay away, Xan. Whatever those bastards are doing is - fucking things up. It's gonna make things
bad, there, and you're bloody well not goin' in alone. Sol won't go, and his kind don't fear much."

Another nip - much softer - that turned into a kiss that trailed down Xander's throat to the bite again. "Stuck with me, love."

Shiver of laughter and a soft gasp when Spike lipped at the bite. "So not complaining here. My Big Bad - gonna keep me safe?"

Spike grinned up at Xander - pushed in close to him and closed his eyes, and took a long, satisfied, utterly *content* breath. "Always keep you safe, love. From ghosties and ghoulies and long-leggity beasties and things that go bump in the night."

~*~*~*~*~

The night was cool - *clear* for once - and Xander had *no* urge to go back into the pit. Not yet. Give him a couple more nights - which was why it'd seemed perfectly *reasonable* to patrol with binoculars.
From the roof of his house.

Wrapped up in a blanket with Spike and maybe a thermos of hot mulled cider or chocolate (un-mulled because *that* was a mistake never to be repeated or spoken of again) with a view of the ocean and a view of the pit and yeah - Xander could handle being paid to spend the night like that.

But.

The pit was filled with fireflies.

That weren't.

And he hadn't been able to bring himself to put the binoculars to his face yet.

Spike didn't *need* to look through the binoculars to know what was in the pit. The haze of ground-fog did nothing to hide what looked like a swarm of stars - of fireflies. Phantoms. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Scattered across the pit like a double-handful of glitter, dancing a peculiar and nearly
static dance. From a distance, Spike supposed it might be pretty.

"Bloody hell, pet...look at them..." On the phone, Wes had suggested - and Giles had confirmed - that they were most likely nothing but phantoms. Conjured energy that had no tangible form or brain, even. 'They're basically memories,' Giles had said. 'The particular energy of individual people has imprinted on their surroundings. Whatever is interfering with the energy of the Hellmouth is - calling them up.' Wes had said it better.

'Places remember, Spike. Things...collect.'

"Things collect..." Spike murmured. He wondered if his own phantom was there, somewhere. Pacing his crypt, or fighting the Slayer - going under the knife. He shuddered and leaned in closer to Xander, bracing on the slope of the roof.

Xander shivered - felt the shiver pass through Spike and held him close, one hand over his heart. No heartbeat but if Xander concentrated, he could feel
the unease centered there like an aura and he rubbed at it soothingly. "It's one thing when Wes says they can't hurt you..."

"It's another to see a bloody - army of 'em. Do you think..." Spike took a drink of hot cider, curling the cup close for the warmth. "Do you think - we're down there? Do you think...there's a phantom Rupert somewhere, polishin' his glasses?"

Or a phantom Anya dropping her dress and asking phantom me to interlock parts because it's stupid not to? Xander closed his eye, rolled his forehead back and forth across Spike's shoulder, trying to think. "Does the energy pick the strongest memory of the place?"

"I dunno. Maybe the - most familiar. I mean - old Popeye, he was always picking cans. It's what he did. He'd pop up outta no-where at the damn dump, dragging that sack of cans like a fuckin' whale behind him..." Spike sighed and thought about it.

"Maybe if we saw somebody else...up close, like."
They stared unhappily into the pit. "That so is not how I want to spend my evening." Xander unconsciously fisted his fingers in Spike's shirt, twisted the material and watched what looked like the Sunnydale High Football Team on the field. *Wonder if Larry's down there.*

Spike shifted against him and Xander smelled fresh cider being poured, then the sharpness of whiskey. He licked his lips. "Can't touch us. Can't hurt us."

"I know..." Spike watched Xander watch - took a long pull of whiskey-and-cider and grimaced. "Jesus - that's not good. Put that with the mulled chocolate experiment. Maybe if we had better cider..." He trailed off, looking at Xander's unhappy expression.

"We don't *have* to, love...but maybe we should."

Xander turned his head, nuzzled his blind side against Spike's cheek then pulled back far enough to look at him. "Get better cider? Yeah, sure or you
can drink it without the booze. It was good without the booze..." Xander sighed - gave up on deliberate misunderstanding - it never worked outside of sitcoms, and sitcoms were bad. There was a lesson in that. "We should," he admitted. "Not that we don't know our way around Sunnydale blind - or half blind - but I have the overlay map in my office."

"Sodding hell, Xan. I don't wanna be a bloody white hat tonight," Spike moaned, but he let Xander tug him up - held his hand as they walked the mild incline of the roof to the ridgeline and walked it back to the ladder planted against the garage door. Once back on solid ground they went to get the map, and make a plan.

Xander watched Spike examine the map - kept his left hand moving on Spike's back in soothing little circles he wasn't aware of until he looked - as if it was someone else's hand - but he didn't stop. "Patrol," he said finally.

"Patrol?"
"Patrol. If we're going to see *us* it'll be where we spent the most time - right?" Xander put his finger down on the map - on Revello Drive. "We'll start at Buffy's and work our way over to your crypt, then the Bronze."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Spike didn't particularly like the idea, but it was the best course. The past was best left in the past - he'd learned his lesson well enough, hadn't he? and he had no wish to see it played out before him again. *Can't be helped. Go there, see what there is to see, get out. Then we can...turn the telly up good and loud and shut the curtains.* Spike concluded to himself that the increasingly intrusive 'buzz' off the Hellmouth was what was getting to him - not ambulatory memories of some of the worst moments of his life.

"Let's get going, then, and get it bloody well over with."

"And get out," Xander finished for him, his skin vibrating with Spike's nervous energy, the *tick* and *twitch* that still hadn't gone completely away after
the office trailer going all Initiative on them. He drew a deep breath and pulled Spike to him, chest to chest, hip to hip, thighs tangled with thighs and his breath mingled with the breath Spike didn't need. "This is real. Us. Now. We're real." *Love love. God - wish you could feel this sweetheart.*

"Shh, pet, it's all right..." Spike crushed Xander close, pushing his face into the crook of Xander's neck and kissing softly. "We'll be fine; quick recce and then home again, nothing to it." He deliberately kissed over a mostly-healed bite-mark, feeling the reluctant shiver it woke out of the man. "No worries, love."

"No worries," Xander repeated and wished it sounded more confident. He was a normal guy - the normal guy. Hellmouthy goodness was supposed to be someone else's problem. One for the heroes. But where was Angel? Cozied up somewhere in Los Angeles. "Let's get it over with." He handed over the keys to the truck, fingertips lingering against cool fingertips then clutching. "Spike?"
"Yeah, love?"

Xander felt his smile twist and skew. "I didn't want to be a white hat tonight either."

"Soon as we figure this mess out, love, we *quit* the white hat business. And for good an' all, this time, yeah? Kickin' puppies and knockin' over milk-bottles, we'll be evil full time." He grinned, trying to make Xander laugh - trying for something *else*, because twitching with anticipatory nerves was making all of this just that much *worse*. "We're devils and black sheep, we're really bad eggs -" he sang softly.

"Drink up, me hearties, yo ho," Xander finished, and grinned back.

"We've got a deal then?"

Xander took Spike's hand, opened his fingers and laid a kiss on his palm - salt, smoke and a hint of spilled cider. This time, his smile reached his eye. "We've got a deal."
The drive to the site was mostly silent, the flickering blue-white lights and the swirling fog cranking up the tension in the backs of their skulls and under their skins the closer they came. With an unconscious fidget, Xander wrapped his hand in the tail of Spike's duster and held fast to the leather. "Turn here. Take Crawford into town." Neither of them wanted to risk passing back through Sunnydale University - through the Initiative.

"Right," Spike said shortly, fully vamped to take advantage of better eyesight. He drove slowly, avoiding the worst of the washouts and the protruding humps of newly-exposed debris. A roof-corner here, a bit of tilted pavement there - it was looking more like Jonestown after the flood than any sort of reclamation project.

The phantoms jerked and fizzled and winked in and out, all around them. He drove through one, and
didn't do that again when part of it passed through the cab and Xander jerked away. Finally, they came to the edge of the 'safe zone', beyond which the truck was unable to pass. From here, they would walk.

Xander rubbed briskly at his arm - at the feeling of static electricity under his skin where the phantom had brushed. Like bugs. An unpleasant crawl of memory accompanied that too and he...shut down. No Sunnydale. No Master Dracula. No history with this place. "Get it over with," he muttered, puffs of ice-white breath melting into the fog, into the cold that seeped right through his jacket. He started to walk, knowing Spike would catch up - keep up - but sometimes a guy had to keep moving, keep walking because between walking and thinking? He chose walking even if every step squelched and he stumbled without depth perception in the thick ground fog.

Spike took a long look around, making sure of certain points of the topography, so he'd be certain to come straight back where he wanted to when
they were done. Then he strode after Xander, slipping a bit on the saturated ground but catching up quickly enough. He flinched when a newly-manifesting phantom solidified around his arm, the cold of the thing only intensifying the cold that lay thick over the pit-floor. Then he was next to Xander and they walked on, heading deep into the residential part of Sunnydale, alert for anything - anyone - familiar.

Xander walked as close to Spike as he dared on the uneven ground, breathed in the vampire's fierce protectiveness that made him feel...*better* if not safe. Impossible to feel *safe* with faces fucking materializing in front of him and passing *through* him like the time Jesse's dad brought home dry ice and Xander and Jesse had dared each other to get closer and closer to the surface until Willow put a stop to it by talking them into making root beer instead. "Jesus!" *Whitewhitewhite* and *big* and Xander threw himself sideways and who the *fuck* ever heard of a ghost *minivan*?

"*God.*" He shuddered, hands on his knees, sucking
burning cold air into lungs that didn't want to let him have it.

"Bloody hell -" Spike was a bit shaken, himself - instinct had had him twitching as surely as Xander, and they were both lucky he hadn't had them flat in the mud to avoid - Thought it was the fuckin' labs again, for a second. Damn-it.

"C'mon, love, we're all right -" Spike slid his hand over Xander's shoulders - into his hair and down his neck, gentle caress. "Almost there, Xander."

"Fuckin' hate this place," Xander muttered, leaning into Spike's touch to ground himself in real - in the faint scent of Spike he could still make out under the rain-mud-ozone freak show of the Sunnydale fog. And the thrum of calm calm and protectiveness rolling off Spike like silent thunder.

He was grateful Spike didn't move his hand, didn't take the cool weight away from the back of Xander's neck as they walked in silence. Side step here to avoid a phantom, turn there to stay on high
ground, out of the soup of the ruts and gullies - then stop.

"Fucking hell."

_Bloody...fucking hell...that's - oh, _damn-it, that's..._

"Joyce," Spike breathed, staring, and Xander's skin had gone cold under his hand. _Of course she could be here! Should have thought - fucking Christ - _The phantom of Joyce was - cooking something, Spike supposed. There seemed to be a corner of a stove there by her hip - a burner. She was stirring moving - then turn to where the kitchen island had been and gather something - turn back. Then stutter, flicker and the phantom - reset. Stir, turn, gather - turn - gone.

The phantom was incomplete, as if the focus had been more on the hands and face - on the action. The legs flickered and disappeared several times, leaving the torso floating. _Please don't let it turn or - or look at us. God, please..._

"Xander, love - you all right?"
"I don't - want to see this." The words came up from Xander's belly, croaked through a throat closed too tight for words. But he couldn't look away either. Stir, turn, gather - turn - gone. And god Spike was lucky he didn't have to breathe because it hurt. It was every time Mrs. Summers had invited him to stay for dinner. It was every time she had made hot cocoa and he helped.

And it was so wrong. And any second now she'd turn - she'd turn and smile and he'd lose it and - "I can't - do this. I can't fuckin' do this. I've gotta..." Xander shook his head - jerked away from Spike and backed up. "We're here. We've seen. Now we're going home." He turned - knew Spike would follow - had to get away.

Stumble trip - skid slide. Away.

That's - all.

Away.
Spike felt Xander leaving - heard him, but didn't quite register the words for a minute until he finally turned his gaze away from friend, my friend... Joyce and saw Xander wasn't there. He could just see him, heading the wrong direction for the truck, moving unsteadily through the fog that was lit like some bad horror movie; all flashing light and looming shadows - eye-tricking eddies that made things seem farther away.

"Xander! Wait for me, love -" he called, his voice oddly flattened by the fog - made small. Xander didn't stop.

With a curse, Spike trotted after him.

The cold deepened around Xander without Spike's anger nerves protect you love you keeping him warm and he wrapped his arms around himself. Stumbled on - stumbled quickly. Get back to the truck, turn on the heater, get out, litany to the rhythm of the blood pounding in his ears.
These things had no right to wear Mrs. Summers' face. Make her wrong and he hated it - resented them for taking away his last memory of Mrs. Summers - replacing it with this - leaving a sick feeling in his gut. He didn't notice the flicker flashes, didn't feel the piercing cold when he staggered through them, only heard his fog-muffled yelp when the ground disappeared under him in a way ground shouldn't and tumbled him down slope in a shower of wet and mud.

Xander lay there, shivering in the cold and wet, clutching at the ground until the world stopped spinning - squinted up into the fog to get his bearings and froze.

Flicker-flash.

Above him.

Coming down and Xander wished with all his soul he and Spike hadn't gone looking for the familiar.
Flicker-flash.

Black-white-blue.

Silent film reel jerky movements.

Familiar - so familiar Xander didn't need to hear.

'You won't come upstairs? What are you...ashamed of us? Your mother's crying her guts out!'

"You don't understand!" Air thick, syrupy thick - can't breathe - can't move.

'No. You don't understand. The line ends here, with us, and you're not gonna change that.'

Flicker-flash.

Silent - but Xander felt every footfall on every step. Felt it vibrate through the cold, into his bones.

Flicker-flash.
Blue-white-black.

Almost there. Almost there and Xander knows what's coming.

_No no no no no no!

No noise. No noise but the blood roaring in his ears. No Spike lost in the fog and Xander wasn't stupid. He knew which one of them had a better chance of finding the other. But there was no light but the flicker-flash coming down down through the fog and it was happening all over again - couldn't move, couldn't run, couldn't do anything but watch - then scream.

'You haven't got the heart.'

Xander was moving faster than Spike thought and he broke into a run, chasing a moving shadow that turned out to just be a shadow and he snarled, impatience and a little trickle of fear working through him. "Xander, damn-it!" Bloody hell, he
could fall, he could get into a pit where the mud's too deep and too damn slippery - he could - Spike stopped - closed his eyes. Opened his mouth and scented, slowly. Searching. Just as a thread of spicesaltsweet was coming to him, something...happened.

Fearhorrorhopelessfearfearfear slammed into him - Xander-feeling, overwhelming - sickening. Spike roared, eyes jerking open as he started to run, following the faint tug that said Xander was that way, that way.

"Xander!" He ran, phantoms passing through him in draughts of ice-water and then skidded, almost falling. Xander - there - half-crouched and frozen, mud stringing his hair and smearing his clothes. And something - flickering column of a man coming down on stairs that were there and not, seeming to crumble away under each heavy tread.

Familiar face - familiar body - and Spike watched Xander's father descend in nightmare jerks - reach out and touch - and Xander flinched, a keening
noise of pure terror coming to Spike. He leapt as the phantom phased out and reappeared at the top of the invisible flight again. Leapt and skidded and thumped down next to Xander - grabbed him and yanked him up - yanked him around, yelling into his pale, shocked face.

"Xander! We're leaving!"

Feeling of Spike. Spike.

"Spike." Xander croaked, sagged - Love you love you sweetheart - shaking all over then Spike picked him up and carried him out, carried him away and Xander hid his face against soft wet black leather and wept.

Square Sixteen
The bedroom Nest was warm - was soft - and Spike was curled into silk and chenille and heated blankets - squishy pillows and big body pillows and a faux-fur throw that felt like mink, and one that was velvet. And he was so tense his back hurt. He was listening - listening to Xander. Listening to him breathe, and listening to that tiny little catch, the barely-there wheeze on each inhalation. The mouse-squeak of doom. Not anything of doom - fuck's sake! He said he was fine - said he got a touch of bronchitis every year in the damp, that's all it is. Nothing to do with last night and the bloody pit and the bloody cold and wet. Nothing to do with pneumonia or...or anything else. Now get a sodding grip!

But it didn't help. He couldn't relax, and he couldn't stop listening to Xander's lungs working, and he couldn't stop...remembering. Maybe I should get another blanket? Or...more of that menthol stuff. Nice and warming - bloody fantastic. That's the ticket... Spike stretched carefully over Xander - reached the nightstand and picked up the jar of Vicks Vap-O-Rub. Stealthily unscrewed the cap and
scooped out a generous fingerful. Then he inched his finger toward Xander's already-greasy chest.

"Smear any more of that on me and I swear to god I'm gonna make you eat it. I've got so much on me now it's all I can taste." Xander rolled over and glared up at Spike, and Spike deflated uncertainly, feeling the annoyance rolling off of Xander. Feeling affection, too, but...

"Sorry, love. Just...can't help it."

Xander wheezed out a grumbling breath, wriggled in the nest to get a grip on Spike and maneuvered him on top. Spike's anxiety crawled up and down Xander's spine like ants at a summer picnic but the genuine, deep lovecareworryfear that created it settled in Xander's chest like a puppy. A puppy with great big don't hurt me eyes and a waggy tail and the metaphor was getting away from him quickly. "I'm all sticky. Uh - and now you're all sticky too." He sighed, threw an arm over his eye. "Sorry."

"Nothin' to be sorry for, pet." Spike scraped the
blob of menthol goo back into the jar and settled his elbows on either side of Xander's head - kissed nose and chin and lips and forehead - kissed the arm that was hiding the eye until Xander finally let him tug it aside. Love and want and sorry, like little moths flickering in his belly and Spike smiled down at the man. "Can't help fussing over you, love. Just the way it is."

"Can fussing involve less goo, I ask you?" Spike's eyes were half obscured by a tangle of white-black-white waves. Xander pushed Spike's hair out of his face and slid his hand over Spike's skull until he cupped the back of his head, rubbed at the tension there. Wished he could slip his fingers in and stroke away the tension inside too. "Less goo," he said again. "That's all I ask. Grant a sick man's request." Xander sniffed, felt the wetness in it and groaned, stretched for the box of tissues. "And yuck."

"Thought you liked the goo, love. All - warm and tingly." Xander's stretching for the tissue-box rubbed body to body in a more than pleasant way, and the residual mentholatum that had transferred
from Xander's chest to Spike's made him shiver. "You know, I'll bet that stuff would be perfect for -"

"Don' say 'sex'. Bleese, bleese do not say 'sex'!" Xander glared at him, tissues balled to his nose, and Spike grinned.

"Make great lube, don't you think?"

"Or 'lube'." Xander blew his nose and glared, throwing the balled tissues onto the floor. "Because while that is a concept that may appeal very strongly to parts of me, I feel about as sexy as a slab of week old beef."

"Always sexy to me, love," Spike murmured, stroking his hand over Xander's chest. But he could feel the achy discomfort of Xander's heavy lungs and stuffed head and he shifted sideways instead and just curled around Xander - stroked lank hair back out of his face and kissed the stubbled cheek. "Want something to drink, love? Or some soup? I can heat up a bowl for you. Whatever you need."
"You. I need you." Xander rubbed his hand over the bumps and planes of Spike's back. "And maybe something to get this taste out of my mouth - but mostly you." Xander coughed his way through a sigh and cleared his throat. "Starve a fever, cuddle a sexy vampire for a cold. Isn't that how it goes?"

Starve a fever? Bloody hell - "You fevered, Xan? 'Cause you're not making much sense. Except for the 'cuddle' part." Spike wormed close and nuzzled into the crook of Xander's neck - just breathed there for a moment, soaking up the scents and the love that was coming from Xander - the heat. Then he reluctantly pulled back. "How 'bout some of that Souchong tea Wes sent? Nice strong flavor, sure to cut through all the junk in your throat. Want some, love?"

Xander smacked his lips - tasted something that smelled like old shoes and felt like shag carpet - and grimaced. "Yeah." He pushed himself up onto his elbows with a groan, waited for his body to herd enough energy his way to swing out of the Nest. "And one of those oranges Mariel brought over.
And then more cuddling the sick and gooey human."

"Done - hey? What're you doin'? No need to get out of bed, love," Spike pulled blankets and throws back up over Xander as Xander sat up and made 'I am getting out of bed' motions. A pile of used tissues cascaded to the floor and Spike swiped at them with a pillow - stared a the pillow for a moment and tossed it on the floor, too. "I'll be right back, Xan."

Xander stared blankly at the still life in pillow, tissues and carpet until his mind wandered - and decided that lying in bed was the better part of valor. Bed was where the tissues lived. Xander helped himself to another one and blew, waving Spike away graciously. "Check the messages," he called after Spike. Okay, mumbled after Spike but hello - vampire hearing. Xander wheezed his way into a more comfortable position and closed his eye.

Spike stretched hard, watching Xander settle himself like a dog in a nest - poking and turning and
finally curling up again with a rattling sigh. He walked out to the kitchen, picking up the hand-set and turning it on - dialing the number for the voice mail. Just one message. He listened as he filled the kettle and plugged it in. *Electric kettles for sick days, real kettles when we're not in a hurry.* Somehow, tea just didn't taste the same when he made it with the electric kettle, but the near-instant hot water was handy.

"Hey guys, it's Russ. Uh - haven't heard back from you, you said you were gonna...check things out and it's been a couple days... Anyway, I'm just - wondering if everything's okay, man. I...ummm, well, I talked to Carl and Matt, and we really want to get together and...discuss this. How about this afternoon? Around four, maybe? Anyway - gimme a call back, man, okay? Bye."

Xander listened to the clank and clatter of Spike preparing tea and shuffled around in the Nest, burrowed his toes into the warmth of one of the squishy chenille pillows. In the many-hued and sultry warmth of the Nest, the pit and whatever was
going on it in seemed - unreal. And that made Xander nervous. He could still feel a thin thread of Spike's anxiety, like a filament stretched between them, vibrating with the nerves that still jangled from their last encounter with the pit.

Spike could feel Xander's contentment, but he could also feel the thread of unease, and knew where it came from. The pit - the ghosts. That encounter two nights ago that had... Fuck. That had been bloody awful. Xander had woken up the next morning to a heavy chest and aching head then succumbed to Spike's prescribed bed rest with barely a whimper of protest.

SHouldn't have done that. Should have thought first... Spike dunked the tea-ball a last time and then flung it into the sink - put a spoon and the box of sugar-cubes on a dinner plate along with two cups of tea. He'd talked Xander into sugar-cubes because they were fun, but Xander actually used them in the tea, which made Spike shudder. But it'll make his throat feel better. He added an orange and carried it all into the bedroom, wishing not for the first time
for an old-fashioned breakfast tray.

Xander was buried in throws and pillows again, and Spike edged carefully into the Nest, sliding the plate onto the nightstand. "Tea's up, love - come and have a sip."

"Were there any messages?" Xander mumbled thickly, struggling upright and leaning on Spike gratefully after the vampire slipped his hands under Xander's shoulders and pulled him into a comfortable sitting position. Xander took a mug and immediately dropped two sugar cubes into his tea, stirred - and dropped in three more. His hand hovered over the box, undecided for a sixth.

Spike watched Xander's hand hover - hover - hover and he finally reached out and snatched the sugar-cubes - firmly shut the box and set it on the nightstand next to the plate and his own tea. "You'll be drinkin' sugar-sludge in a minute, love," he said, shuddering slightly at the thought. Xander's tea-drinking habits were dreadful. Xander glared - sniffed - and stirred his tea, chasing the sugar-cubes
into oblivion. Spike picked up the orange and dug his thumbnail into the top - began to peel slowly, turning the orange as he sliced with his thumb. Xander watched, mesmerized - blowing occasionally across the top of his mug in an effort to cool the near-boiling liquid inside. After about two minutes, Spike held up a spiral of orange-peel and a naked orange and Xander laughed.

"I love that. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"My mum taught me. She liked to hang the curls in her closet - made her clothes smell fresh." Spike eyed the curl - sniffed appreciatively and then piled it on the plate and turned to breaking the orange into wedges, absently licking tart juice off his fingers.

Xander took an orange slice, nibbled at the end then bit off a piece, tried to catch the juice that ran down to his palm and mumbled around it - against his skin. "Messages?"

"Oh, right. Russ called. We forgot to call him back."
He's in a tizzy over the pit and..." Spike gestured uneasily, the orange dribbling a little juice over the Nest. "...everything. Wants to come see us - bring Carl and that Matt along. Wants to be here in a couple of hours."

Xander coughed against his wrist - groaned and scarfed down the other half of his orange segment. "Great. Bring the whole family to the Harris House O' Germs."

"They won't be soaking wet and running around in the mud, Xander. You can talk through a handkerchief, like Nijinsky did." He put the rest of the orange on the plate and picked up his own tea - blew across the top for a moment and then took a delicate sip. Perfect.

"Who's Nijinsky?" Xander sipped cautiously at his own tea, sighed in relief at the hot n' sugary goodness - and smiled at the rush of irritated amusement coming from Spike.

"Russian ballet dancer - the best ever. He was mad,
of course. The good ones always are. Dru an me saw him dance in Paris. 'L'apres-midi d'un Faune'." He glanced over at Xander's expectant expression and smiled. "Means 'Afternoon of a Faun, love. Like Pan, you know? Goat legs an' horns. Dru wanted him..." And she had - so much so that Spike had been jealous. Seven years later Nijinsky had danced his last dance and sunk under for good. Spike had always wondered if he'd let Dru have him - would he still be dancing?

Throat warmed with the tea, body warmed with the *lovelovealways* of Spike's affection for Drusilla, Xander twisted his head enough to see Spike. "She wanted me once."

"Did she, now? Not surprised. I was a bit of an anomaly for her - she liked them dark and dead sexy." Spike grinned at Xander - at the comfortable feeling of affection and humor coming from him. Glad that Xander wasn't...*jealous* of Dru - of how he had felt about her. How he *still* felt about her. "What happened, then? She usually got whatever drew her fancy."
"What happened? Angelus tackled her to the ground and Cordy pulled me into the house and slammed the door." Xander poked at that memory with the stick of caution and shuddered - yeah, still scary as fuck. "Of course, that didn't save me from the other hundred Sunnydale women who were out for a piece of the Xan-man that night. The Xan-man learned his lesson about invoking the magics he didn't understand. And now for his next trick, he's gonna stop talking about himself in the third person."

"Angelus? Must have been in the chair, then - I do remember them goin' at it hammer and tongs one night... And all over you." Spike leaned over and kissed Xander - smoky sugar and eucalyptus. "And I'm the one's got you. Guess the best vamp won," he added smugly.

"The best vamp so won." Xander leaned into Spike, soft and cool lips that felt so nice against chapped and hot. And impossible now not to feel wanted with tendrils of possessiveness coming off of Spike
to wind around Xander like tentacles. Xander shook himself away from tentacle sex thoughts he was so not well enough for. "I had it out with Harmony once too. And Angelus. It's like a who's who of your romantic history. Except Harmony never wanted me."

"Wouldn't exactly call what me an' Angelus got up to _romantic_. More like...protective male bonding when the girls crooked their little fingers at us one time too many." And Angelus had been a bloody good lay, although Spike didn't think Xander really needed to know that. Xander was _better_, and that was all that mattered. "Harm wanted that Antonio bloke and shopping trips to Paris - she couldn't keep much more than that in her brain without poppin' a vein. You'd have been wasted on her, love," Spike added, taking another sip of the smoky-smooth tea, rolling the flavor over his tongue.

"She was like that as a human - except she planned to nab Antonio or Brad or - not Tom because he was too old - but all the other vampires in Interview With The Vampire and wow that explains
everything about Harmony as a vampire." Xander watched Spike's throat flex when he swallowed, thought about vampires and about Harmony. "Actually - she was a lot less scary as a vampire. Less evil, too."

"She was a bit of a joke, really." Spike thought about that - about that bubble-headed girl's ambitions and hopes - about her unicorn collection and her desperate desire to be loved. "But...she wasn't all bad, our Harm. Always good for a bit of gossip or a tumble." Spike grinned at the memories - glanced a little guiltily at Xander. "All in the past, love, yeah? All of them...in the past."

Xander propped his chin on one hand so he could get a good look at Spike's face instead of a close up of his neck. "Why the guilt? I mean, fondly remembering naughty touching past - I get that. But not the guilt."

"Oh, it's just...habit, I suppose. Talkin' about past loves and paramours isn't really done, is it? Call it a left-over." Spike drained the last of his tea and put
the mug back on the nightstand - snuggled down next to Xander, soaking in the warmth. "Just don't want to make you feel...bad, love. Ever."

"Bad is so not the way you make me feel." Xander mumbled - wormed an arm under Spike and went boneless. "Horny. Often. Loved - always, which I can blame on the fever if you want."

Spike snorted. "Not bleeding likely."

"Uh huh. Loved," Xander continued with a grin, "wanted - ho boy do you make me feel wanted - and..." he took a deep breath "...kinda awed. Sometimes."

"Well...that's natural, isn't it?" Spike tilted his chin up - preened a little and Xander flailed at him, snorting.

"Don't get a big head, you." Spike grinned down at him - reached out to stroke his fingers gently over Xander's cheek and chin - his throat and the tattoo of leaves.
"Why 'awe', pet? Nothing that special, here. Didn't have a hand in the coming-back-to-life bit, and the rest -"

"It's like a really big tree." Xander propped himself up on Spike's chest and leaned into the fingers tracing soft skin around his empty socket. Just skin now and he liked Spike's touch even if it faltered when Xander got to the 'tree' part. If fingers could speak, Spike's would have said 'huh?'. "The tree's always there and when it leaves wet towels on the floor every day and drinks the last of the cider, it's easy to forget how old it is and how much it's seen."

"Tree's maybe not the best analogy for a vampire, Xan." Spike laughed softly, combing the dark hairs of Xander's eyebrow - just ruffling the long lashes that lay over his cheek. "But I...I understand. Sheer bloody talent got me this far. Pretty damn amazing if I do say so, myself." Holding in the laughter but knowing that Xander could feel it - just as he could feel it building in Xander. Rising bubbles that tingled through his whole body and made him fight the grin
that threatened.

"At least I didn't say the tentacled alien sex plant analogy out loud." Xander considered that, gave in to laughter and Spike's hand on his back which was starting to wander and kissed him, grinning lips to grinning lips. "Okay, so maybe that one's actually more accurate."

"Sounds more interesting too."

"You're not wrong."

"My boyfriend's a ge-ek," Spike sing-songed, and then burst out laughing as Xander glared at him, whapping half-heartedly.

"M'not a geek -"

"Alien tentacled sex plant thing. You are so." Xander pouted and Spike leaned up to kiss him - groaned softly. "It's nearly three, love. I'm gonna call Russ, tell him come on over. 'Bout an hour." Spike slithered reluctantly from Xander's grasp - piled
mugs and spoon and sugar and the left-over orange back on the plate. "I'll come help you get dressed in a minute, yeah?" Xander was still wheezing, and Spike resolved that the meeting would be a short one.

"Yeah." Xander groaned and dropped back into the pillows, listened to Spike make his way to the kitchen with the dishes. Then with the single-minded stubbornness of a man who'd been lying in his own sweat for a day and had visitors coming, he rolled to the side of the Nest and swung his legs over the edge.

'Quick shower' had no meaning when a guy's head was spinning like the Disneyland teacups but hot steam and minty-clove soap were about as close to heaven as Xander hoped to get.

Spike dropped the dishes in the sink with a small crash of pottery and then absently checked that the primary colored, geometric-patterned plate and striped mugs hadn't broken. All safe. Need to watch that, he thought. But he'd thought that before. He
grabbed the phone off the charger and hunted up Russ' number - felt a sudden wash of *dizzyfallingno* and sprinted for the bedroom. The sight that greeted him made him snarl. Xander standing unsteadily next to the dresser, a pair of sweats dangling from the drawer, a t-shirt on the floor. His flushed skin gone a sickly ashen-grey, his knees buckling and his hands clutching frantically at the dresser-edge.

"Xander! Bloody hell - what the fuck are you doing?" Spike tossed the phone at the bed and darted to Xander - got an armful of sweating, too-cold human.

*Whoops. Pissed off vamp.* Pissed off *worried* vamp if the angry fear roiling around Spike told the truth of it and Xander was not up for arguing. He tried innocence instead. With a dose of puppy eyes. Eye. "Taking a shower?" He sagged gratefully into Spike's arms because the dresser might have been solid but it wasn't so good at catching him when the teacups turned into Mr. Toad's Wild Ride.
"Git," Spike snarled - hoisted Xander up over his arm and all but carried him to the bathroom. Sat him down on the closed seat of the toilet. "Stay there." He closed the drain on the tub and started it filling. "Not gonna have you get in the heat and steam and fall over. Bath for you and I'll be sharing and no arguments." He darted back into the bedroom and snatched a throw and the phone off the Nest. Went back to Xander and wrapped him up snugly, feeling sorry and weak and cold and love you ghosting through him. "Let me take care of you, love, yeah?"

That moment, shivering with cold and damp on his own personal Splash Mountain in February, it sounded better than sex. Or at least as good as sex. Because that was some good sex he wasn't having while he was sick. Xander nodded and blew his nose, dropped the damp tissue into the waste basket and smiled. Love and protectiveness and the resignation to Xander's idiocy. "Big bad?"

"Bad enough to keep you safe, you git," Spike said - hugged him close, rubbing his arm and shoulder
through the throw, feeling the relief Xander would never admit to. He scrolled to Russ' number again and pressed 'dial'.

"Russell's House Of Pancakes, home of the famous oak syrup. We're closed on Wednesdays." The voice on the other end was unmistakably Russ and in the background he could hear Sol's hissing laughter to something Carl said.

"Russ." Spike couldn't help laughing and Russ laughed with him. "Told Xander 'bout what you said - he's up for it so - four, yeah?"

"Yeah, man. That's cool. Carl just got in from San Bernardino and he called Matt from his cell on the road. You don't want us to come by closer to sundown?"

Spike thought about that - thought about driving past the pit in the darkness and the ghosts all there, flickering like little soul-lights. "No - in the day is good. The sooner the better, yeah?"
"We'll be there at four. We'll bring Matt and the beer."

"Any hope of something good?" Spike asked forlornly, and Russ just laughed, disconnecting. "Soddin' cold, lite...horse piss. The things people will put in their mouths..." Spike ignored the incredulous look from Xander and turned the water off - poured a stream of cinnamon oil into the bath, then the orange-ginger stuff and was reaching for the eucalyptus when Xander cleared his throat, amusement and affection.

"Is this a bath or a fruit salad?" He watched and suppressed a groan when Spike poured in the eucalyptus oil anyway.

"'S good for your lungs, love. Don't want to worry your mates, do you?" Spike swished a hand through the water and Xander felt the underlying or me in the miasma of Spike's emotions.

"My mates will call me Typhoid Xander and Rudolph The Red Nosed Village Person and crack jokes at my
expense." Xander let Spike help him up, leaned on him willingly long enough for Spike to steady him and unwrap the throw from his shoulders. "But I didn't want to worry you."

"Then hop into the bath and quit griping about the bloody oil," Spike muttered. He sighed, then, and hugged Xander closer for a moment - pulled back and looked seriously at him. "I'm sorry, love. Just...can't help it, yeah? Saw the 'flu take down thousands, start of the century. Big cities like charnel houses, they were dyin' so fast - couldn't get 'em into the ground. Blokes your age an' all, perfect health, dead inside a week." He shivered at that - at the remembered carrion stench of rapidly corrupting flesh and the deserted streets - the fear like a fog over everything. He held Xander's wrists - watched him lower himself carefully into the steaming water and then took up position behind him, spooning close. "Don't ever want to lose you, love...ever..."

Spike's words ghosted over Xander's throat, cooling damp skin and making it tingle the way it did when
Spike's fangs barely pricked the surface. 'Ever' really took on a whole new world of connotations with a guy like Spike - and letting his head drop back on Spike's shoulder, baring his throat - that did too. "Do you spend much time thinking about it?"

"About forever, love? Or you? Or both?" Xander smiled, eye shut and his hair sticking to Spike's shoulder, and Spike cupped water up in his hands and sluiced it over Xander's chest, running his palms slowly after. "Think about you all the time. Forever...not so much. I've lived with the notion for a while, now. But I think about you and forever...every day. I want it, Xander...want it with you."

"I'd be lying if I said that thought didn't freak me out." Xander tightened his grip on Spike's legs at the first ebb of loss from Spike, turned his face to nuzzle against his jaw. "But I'd also be lying if I said I never thought about it - wanted it." Xander licked his lips. "If it came down to it...I want you that much, trust you that much. Trust you that it'll be me waking up - not a monster with my face."
Spike closed his eyes - hugged Xander close and then closer, feeling a shivery little knot of buried tension unwind somewhere in his belly. *Mine for always, mine for...ever...* Pushing the love and relief and desire he was feeling out, as best he could - hoping Xander was feeling it as strongly as he was. "You'd be fine, love - just fine. I'd see to it...promise..."

~*~*~*~*~

Wrapped up in a pair of Spike's old sweat pants that Xander couldn't bear to throw out since Spike's recovery, and a fluffy green robe, Xander did his best sack-of-potatoes impression against the end of the couch, feet tucked under Spike and tissues at hand. And if his eye kept drifting shut when Spike dropped a casual hand to stroke his calf and ankle, none of the three men sitting in patio chairs opposite them complained.

Russ was the first to drain his beer and the first to
speak. "I think I speak for all of us when I say: what the fuck is going on down there?"

"You remember Wes?" Spike asked, and Russ and Carl nodded - Matt looked a little blank. "Friend of ours," Spike explained. "Knows about...stuff. He said - someone, or some...ones - are trying to...tap the energy here. Get to the old Hellmouth vibe and...siphon it off. He says - that's what the phantoms are all about." Matt shifted in his chair, looking - uncertain. Dark red hair and pale skin, he reminded Spike for a moment of the wolf - that Oz, Red's old beau. "You - got a question, mate?"

"Yeah." Matt propped his elbows on his knees, beer can dangling between his hands. An eagle tattoo on one arm and a faded 'in memory of' dedication on the other shifted with his fidgeting. "So who's playing the trick on all of us and what the hell is it?"

There was a moment of silence while everyone exchanged looks. "It's not a trick, mate. It's - some kind of bad mojo -"
"Look," Matt interrupted. "I'm an open-minded guy, right?" He made an infinitesimal gesture with his fingers toward Spike's hand on Xander's calf, and Spike felt his lip curling in a snarl. "But ghosts on the site? And - what did you say - a 'Hellmouth'? I mean -" He looked over to Carl and Russ for support - met their serious expressions with a hesitant smile. "That's just - crazy, guys. No such thing."

Xander stifled a cough, ignored Spike's snarl and slid his hand over cool fingers, linking them together. Didn't like the homicidal urges pulsing from the vampire like a heartbeat. *Predatory nature, oh yeah.* Xander cleared his throat, grimaced at the taste and pointed a finger at Matt, Spike, Carl and Russ in order. "You gotta go up on the roof tonight."

"What's on the roof?" Russ had edged his chair a little closer to Matt at Spike's lip curl and Xander was grateful.

"Ask not what is on the roof but what is visible from the roof. Ladies and gentlemen -" Xander paused and rewound that. "Gentlemen and gentlemen, we
have ringside seats for the Sunnydale Freak Show."

Spike watched Matt as Xander - and Russ and Carl - started explaining Sunnydale, the Hellmouth - demons. Matt's expression went from hesitantly amused to baffled to a little pissed and Spike sighed. *Wait for it...*

"Okay, this is - you guys are trying to pull something over on me or - this is a *joke*, ha ha. But come on - seriously now. This is all *bullshit*, guys." Matt took a long drink from his beer and Spike watched Russ, Carl and Xander exchange *looks* - and then look at *him*. He sighed again.

"Yeah, yeah, I bloody well know it. Right." Spike got reluctantly up off the couch and crouched down in front of Matt, who recoiled slightly. "Listen, mate, I'm gonna do somethin' and you're gonna watch, and you're gonna...*touch*, because I don't want you thinkin' this is a trick. Right?" Matt opened his mouth to say something and Spike lifted a finger. "No talking. Just -" He grabbed Matt's free hand and put it on his face - on his cheek - holding it there
while Matt wiggled uneasily and looked pleadingly at Xander.

"Man, this is so - I mean, I'm not -"

"Relax, Matt," Xander said, and Spike tapped his knee.

"Pay attention, mate." Then he changed, and he saw surprise and horror and disbelief flash across Matt's face. Felt his fingers tighten along his temple. "Go on now - explore a little. Know what you're seein'? You're seein' a vampire, mate."

Matt's eyes snapped to Xander, round and wary and his heartbeat kicked up a notch. "Both of you?"

"Just me. Go on."

Matt's eyes fixed on Spike, flitted from gold to ridges to the jagged sharpness of Spike's teeth. But his touch slipped below the demon's face to settle on Spike's throat - instinct of a man who knows the difference between live and dead lies right there
and that's where his hands began to shake.

"Goddamn." Matt pulled his hands back with a quick nod and Xander could see the connections forming in his mind when Matt's gaze fell on Xander's marked throat. "Goddamn."

"Demons exist, mate - we're everywhere you lot are - humans," Spike added, as Matt seemed a little spaced, for a moment. "And this place used to be demon central until - until some people shut it down. Now it looks like somebody's trying to start it all up again and what's been going on in the pit is just the start." Spike stayed still as Matt's fingers pressed one more time into his throat, seeking for the pulse that wasn't there - reaching hesitantly to brush the ridged flesh over Spike's brows.

"Jesus, I... I don't - Jesus."

"Process, Matt. We got over it years ago." Carl reached around behind Russ to pat Matt on the shoulder and took a swig of his beer.
Xander felt Spike's amusement - and then *Spike* when he returned to the couch and manhandled Xander into leaning against him like an infrared-guided heat-seeking vampire. "Trust us, Matt. And if you can't trust us - shut up and *listen*. Then as soon as the sun goes down, Spike'll take you guys up to the roof and you can do the seeing is believing thing again."

Matt sucked in a sharp breath and snapped visibly back into focus - back to *business*. "Right. What're we going to do about it?"

"*We* are not doin' anything, mate. Wes is doing research, and the rest of us are stayin' the fuck out until we know more. It's nothin' you want to poke at, believe me." Spike snagged his own beer from beside the couch and drank - pulled Xander a little closer. "Whoever or whatever's doing this is...powerful." *And Xander'd never get over his mate's bein' hurt if they decide to charge in.*

"So this meeting was about...?"
"What we know so far and keeping you guys out of the pit." Spike's pleasure in Xander's warmth rolled off him in waves, melted into Xander's bones and he tipped his head onto Spike's shoulder.

Matt drained his beer, looked like he wanted another. "But the ghosts can't touch you. Can whatever's down there hurt you?"

Xander shuddered, felt Spike shudder and held Matt's gaze. "Believe me when I say uh huh."

~*~*~*~*~

Spike watched Xander open his mail program - download messages and settle in to read one that came with a faux-parchment background and little pen-and-ink looking flowering vines around the edges. Email from Willow and it looked like she was gonna go through every single style of background her program offered. Much better than the dancing clowns. Poor boy wouldn't even go near his mail 'til I deleted it. Spike knew Xander could feel his
affection - and the amusement over the incident - and Xander reached over and whapped half-heartedly at him.

"We will not discuss my phobias. Huh..."

"Good news, bad news, indifferent?" Spike asked, letting his finger mark his place in 'Good Omens'.

"None of the above." Xander sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face, left it covering the empty socket against the headache he still sometimes got if he spent too long reading from a computer screen. "Giles has Dawn chained to the books - Willow swears she's their best researcher." Which summed up paragraphs one through three and those left him with a glow of pride. It was paragraph four and Willow's cheerful inquiry about Andrej giving him the headache.

Spike felt the headache that was budding somewhere behind Xander's eye and he tossed his book aside - scooted over closer to Xander and tugged him over until Xander's head was in his lap.
He could feel a sort of sadness as well - a frustrated in comprehen sion. "Niblet's always been smarter than they give her credit for. What else, love?"

"Willow keeps asking about Andrej." Xander relaxed to the feeling of Spike's fingers combing through his hair, gently untangling knots and Xander's hair had never been so tangle-free in his life before Spike. *Girly vamp.* And Xander was so not voicing that thought any time soon. He smiled and wriggled around to get comfortable.

"Thought you parted ways with him."

"I did. Willow's still waiting for me to run back into his loving arms." Xander squinted up at Spike. "He was a great guy but there was no loving with Andrej. Arms or otherwise."

"Nothing like a good, strings-free shag, love. What's Red thinking, then? Doesn't she believe you?" Stop makin' my boy feel bad, Red - 'm not as souled up as you might think..."
Xander let his breath out slowly, searching for that 'I love Willow. She is my best friend.' place that had calmed him before. He wasn't finding it but Spike's fingers against his scalp went a long way to stave off the bad. "She thinks this is the strings-free shag. Willow? Not so much with the approval of my romantic choices."

Spike dragged his fingers through Xander's hair - let his fingertips rest lightly on Xander's temples and began a slow massage. Sending as much love and comfort and want you as he could. "She'll come around, Xander... And if she doesn't... Lucky she's half the world away, yeah? Least she won't be natterin' at you on our bloody front step." Willow had never been as actively 'Spike-hating' as Buffy and Xander and Giles, way back when, but there was a core of cold ruthlessness to the woman that made Spike snarl to himself. She could and would do things 'for your own good' with the full knowledge that really it was mostly just for herself. That sort of thing - he wouldn't put up with. "Any good news, love? Anything from Wes?"
"Huh?" Xander came back slowly from happy vampire-fingers land. "Oh. Yeah. And not exactly." Xander stretched and rolled over, pressed his forehead to Spike's hip and got an arm around his waist. "There was email from Connor. Something about Wes is too busy being shouted at by 'Dad' and he's coming to Sunnydale without him tonight. Without Angel," Xander clarified, "not Wes. Illyria's coming too."

"They're coming up tonight? Why's he draggin' Blue along? Haven't seen Wes in too long..." Memories of their time in L.A - of the heated pool and showing Wes exactly what demon constitution was good for made Spike grin, and Xander squirm around just a little, grinning back up at him. "Think Wes'll do anything with Connor listenin' in?"

Xander thought about Wesley's progress - then he thought about Wesley and laughed. "Yeah - in about a million years after Connor's gone deaf and has a dozen grandchildren." Xander wormed his fingers into Spike's robe and began a slow sweep over the Nest-warm skin of Spike's back. "Oh - and don't
forget - when Angel's on the other side of the planet. Maybe then."

"Hmmm..." Spike slid a little lower in the jumble of throws and pillows, curling around Xander, pulling him so he lay half over Spike. "We'll just have to make him so desperate he's beggin' for it. Tease him unmercifully. And..." Spike brightened, "We could always gag him. He might like to explore a kink or two."

Xander lifted his eye to Spike, shifted around until he could feel the hopeful half-hardness against his hip. "Not that I'm objecting in any way to the possibility of sexual hijinks but you do remember they're coming up here to figure out what's going on in the pit, right?"

"Nothin' says we can't get up to a bit of slap and tickle when the whole ghost thing's been talked to death. Send Illyria out, have her patrol the pit with Connor..." Spike sighed, seeing Xander's expression. "No harm in trying."
"They're only gonna *be* here two nights, sweetheart." Xander bent his head to lip at the sensitive skin beneath Spike's jaw and worked the belts of their robes open, felt *want* and *sulk* and *curiosity* that did feel weirdly cat-like from Spike. "And I'm sending kinda mixed signals here, huh?"

"Nothing mixed about this," Spike said, sliding his hand down to Xander's cock - squeezing the mostly-hard flesh gently. Xander's illness had eased - the wheeze had gone away - but Spike still had a moment of doubt. *Don't want to over-tire him...*

"That hesitation better be wondering if you left the stove on - you didn't - and *not* wondering whether I'm up to this, pal. Because I am." Xander lifted his head, trapped Spike's hand between them with his weight and rubbed slowly against Spike's curling palm.

"Mmm. Yeah..." For a moment all thought fled and then Spike was arching up into Xander, pulling him close and kissing him. "Sorry, love, sorry..." he breathed, but kissing was more important.
"Less with the sorry, more with the kissing." Xander had their robes untied, had got them open. The cocoon of brocade and thick, soft terry was warm with Xander's body heat, smelling of shower spices and the kind of musk Xander knew would raise a knowing eyebrow when Wesley got there. "If I can't have you for two nights, I want you now." Not that they'd be refraining for two nights. But that part of Xander who believed in not screwing when his guests couldn't was a stubborn idealistic bastard.

Of course, Connor could always join in and then -

Okay, so not going there.

Xander shook with silent laughter, felt the niggle of confusion wiggle its way through the enveloping lust radiating from Spike and shook his head. "Please don't ask."

"Have to, Xan - you've got this look..." Spike let his legs fall open, snuggling Xander closer and kissing up his neck to his mouth - light, teasing kisses.
"A 'look'? I have a look?"

"Oh, yeah," Spike said. "Like you're thinkin' something...naughty..."

"Oh no. No way. No thinking happening here." Xander mumbled into good lips, clever lips, lips and tongue of Spike that were doing their part to make sure his brain was a thought-free zone.

"Oh yes. Lots of thinking - lots of naughty, twisted, sexy thinking. I can feel it, love," Spike said, hand and hip pressing Xander's cock - fingers stroking and circling and tugging. Other hand wandering down Xander's back and digging into the sleek, solid muscle of Xander's ass. "Be a good boy and tell me..."

"God." A shudder took the long route; rippled its way down his spine and made Xander's eye roll back into his head. "There is a world of wrong in what the words 'good boy' in that voice do to me. Okay - there...might have been thoughts of naughty
touching involving Connor and an orgy of four but that is a thought that lives in the part of my brain of which we will never speak."

"Yeah?" Spike rolled his hips - slid his fingers along the crease of Xander's ass, just brushing the sensitive flesh inside. Licked at a bite-mark, feeling the sensation shudder through Xander, feeling the hotwantneed crowding in on him. "He is tasty...lovely hair...kissable mouth...got a tight little body... Bet he'd be good. Like you can be good....yeah? My good boy," Spike purred. Not for a second would he join us, love, but god...the way you feel...

"Evil," Xander panted, "undead." Lust and playfulness shimmered the air around them, made it impossible not to laugh. "Manipulating me like that...gonna fuck you now." Back, against Spike's fingers and thrust against his belly, against hard and harder flesh.

"Mmmm...I've been a bad, bad boy -" Spike took the skin of Xander's throat between his teeth -
pressed lightly, shaking his head just a little. Grinned when Xander's hips jumped against his, helpless reaction. "A very bad boy...daddy..."

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Wesley, Connor and Spike were seated around the dining room table while Xander leaned a casual hip against the counter. He and Spike had finished one quick shower's length ahead of their guests' arrival and Xander hadn't bothered to keep the stupid grin off his face. Connor - his father's son in at least one respect - had scented the air, dropped his face into his hands and groaned.

Ah, kids.

With the heavy cloud cover rolling in off the ocean they were able to leave the dining room blinds open to a view of scrub grass, beach and a slate-gray sea. Illyria walked on the beach, unnatural storm winds lifting and tangling her hair. Xander wondered if gods needed to stretch their legs after long drives.
Wesley clicked once - twice - on his laptop and then angled it just a little so that Spike and Xander could see. "I've been tracking the weather - I'm afraid there will be no let-up any time soon. And as you can see, the anomaly is fairly large - all the way south to L.A., and north as far as Santa Maria. I'm hoping that Illyria will be able to pinpoint it's origins a little more closely."

"So you - what? Let her wander around out there like a big blue Roomba until she sucks up all the information we need?" Xander realized Wesley was looking at him blankly and sighed. "You don't watch much late night television, do you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"She's gonna take it all in like a blood-hound, yeah? Track down the source... Think she can tell if the Hellmouth is opening or just being - siphoned?"

Wesley leaned back in his chair, folded his hands over his stomach and glanced out the window at
"I'm not entirely certain she can track down the source. But she can see the phenomenon for what it is - even this dulled, her senses aren't as easily fooled as ours." There was fondness in his voice - pride - and Xander and Spike exchanged a look.

"What're you here for again?" Xander looked over at Connor and his not-legal-yet beer.

"Field trip," Connor explained. "I'm Wes' favorite intern."

"And I'll bet BatVamp just loved the idea of you comin' up here," Spike drawled, leaning his chair back and grinning at Connor, who grinned back. He still got that odd little frisson off the boy from time to time - Darla and Angelus in the back of his throat. But he'd proved he wasn't them; proved he was more than the sum of his parts - more than his miserable upbringing and the mental fuck that had been Angel's memory spell.

"In fact, I turned my cell-phone off after
call...eleven." Connor checked the call log and flipped his cell phone closed. "That was in Oxnard. Wasn't that in Oxnard?"

"It was. I turned my cell off in Santa Monica," Wesley admitted.

Xander's phone rang.

"I'm not gonna want to answer that, am I?"

"Well..." Wesley started, and Spike jumped up and snatched up the phone - stabbed the 'on' button.

"We're giving Connor whiskey and Wes let Illyria drive and no, they do not want to talk to you, Xander and Wes are snoggin' in the living room and I'm about to join them so fuck off and don't call back." Spike hung the phone up and then leaned next to Xander, holding it out in front of him. "Five...four...three..."

Chirrup
Xander snatched the phone and pressed the on button. "Don't yell! It's - " Xander winced and held the receiver away from his ear. "Tender human eardrums here, Deadboy! Jesus."

"Xander, put Wesley on the line."

And that was the sound of one pissed off Mr. Broody Vamp. Before Xander could answer, Wesley gently pulled the phone from his hand and stood. "Excuse me. I'll take this in the living room."

"Wes, what the fuck?" Angel's voice hissed out at Wesley and he copied Xander, pulling the phone away from his ear for a moment as he walked into the living room - sidestepping the Nest and coming to rest in front of the sliding glass door. "Why haven't you been answering your phone? Why hasn't Connor? I've been calling for hours -"

"Yes, and unnecessarily running up charges. We did warn you, Angel," Wesley said, knowing that a small, fond smile was turning up the corners of his mouth - was warming his voice. Knowing mostly
from the snort of exaggerated disgust from Spike. He put his hand on the cool glass of the door, watching Illyria who seemed to be digging something out of the sand. "We're fine, Angel."

"But you're not here." Angel stopped but not before Wesley heard the plaintive lilt to his voice - or the way Angel tried to suppress it when he went on. "What if you have a vision while you're there?"

"Then I'll call you. I'll be fine, Angel. You know it's not bad when I - when I change. And Spike and Xander are very capable of dealing with pain after..." Wesley stopped and bit his lip and he heard Angel sigh.

"Spike and Xander. Do you have any idea how weird that is?" In his mind, Wesley could see Angel rubbing his face, see the powerful body slump into a chair as if all his energy had been drained away. "You. In Sunnydale. That's weird, too."

"It feels weird to be here. It's... This giant, muddy hole and I can't help remembering...before." His
hand was chilled, and Wesley slowly pulled away from the glass - watched a kestrel dive along the shore, sliding down the air. "I promise I'll be careful, Angel."

Wesley listened to Angel take in a shaky breath, then another. Rare for him and important enough to Angel that Wesley knew what he was going to say before he said it. "Take care of Connor, all right?"

"I will, Angel." Wesley smiled, couldn't keep the fondness from his voice. "We will both be fine and we'll come back to you in a few days, ideally with some better information. We're not here to take foolish risks." Wesley watched Illyria track the kestrel, clockwork tilts to her head that still reminded him of a machine.

Spike listened and shook his head - spun his chair around and straddled it, picking up his beer for a long drink. Xander moved up behind him, hands on his shoulders, kneading lightly. Heat all down Spike's back and he relaxed into it. Looked at
Connor, who was watching him and Xander with a small smile on his face.

"He's worried 'bout you, you know. Your - dad."
Connor shrugged - looked down - looked back up, picking at the label on his bottle.

"Yeah, I know. He does that a lot."

Affection in his tone and long-suffering and Spike grinned. 
*And he's worried about Wes, too. As he should be. We'll take care of him...*

Wesley came back into the room, set the phone on the table and went to the cabinet, noting with some amusement that the supply of Old Speckled had been depleted. "I *had* been wondering why we were drinking this carbonated water." A quick trip to the refrigerator saw fresh beers for them all and Wesley settled comfortably in a chair, frowned at Spike. "Has it been that bad?"

"It hasn't been fun," Xander said softly, and Spike leaned back harder, wanting to feel the solidity of
the man at his back. Remembering the look of uncomprehending fear on Matt's face as he'd stood on their roof and surveyed the flickering lights down in the pit - the look that had changed to horror when he'd insisted on actually walking down into it, and he and Spike had stood there for about five minutes before he'd turned abruptly and marched out, his mouth thinned to a grim line.

"Think it's gettin' worse every night too, Wes. More of 'em or...something. Thicker." Spike's spine had tensed back up against Xander's stomach so Xander slid his arms around to Spike's chest - rubbed where there was once a heartbeat, where he could feel the radiant love you as a constant low-level thrum.

"And all contained within the confines of the pit?"

"Yeah. No manifestations past the old Welcome to Sunnydale sign." And that had been maybe the only ghost image to make Spike smile, seeing that sign flicker into visibility down on the ground - with tire tracks on it. Good times.
"Hmmm..." Wesley's eyes went shuttered as he thought, on hand absently tapping on the table and Connor looked at him, one eyebrow rising.

"You've kicked him over into 'deep thought' mode. Now he'll be collating all the information and coming up with something...brilliant. Or, you know - " Connor grinned. "He'll ask for sushi."

"Call me crazy, but I'm starting to see a pattern in this sushi thing." Xander scratched Spike absently - as he would a cat and smiled when Spike took a light hold on his wrists, shaking with silent laughter. "Either that or a conspiracy. And yes, yes I know it's good for you."

"You'd kill for pizza, wouldn't you?" Connor tilted back his beer sympathetically.

"My own grandma," Xander confirmed.

Connor picked up his own phone and switched it on - held it up in his hand, his eyebrow going up again and a look coming over his face. A look that was so
very familiar and suddenly Spike knew it. It was Angelus' look, when he thought he'd gotten something over on Darla.

"You know you know the number, dude. Meat-lover's, Supreme - whatever. I'm buying."

"And I am liking this family so much more." Xander gave the number and thought back to the basement, thought back to Spike's gripes and grumbles. Back then, he'd always made an effort to order the Anti-Spike Special. He knew it by heart which made ordering the opposite pretty easy. "Meat lovers, no garlic and no Canadian bacon. Side of spicy buffalo wings with extra sauce."

"Oh - sounds good. Two orders of wings and..." Connor and Xander went into the kitchen, plotting, and Spike grinned after them. Some things about Xander had never changed.

"The sushi place delivers, mate - you want some?" he asked Wes, who was looking a little...uncertain about the pizza.
"Yes." Wesley hoped he didn't look too relieved. "Thank you, that would be better."

"Been eatin' a lot of sushi lately, have you? Don't remember you liking it this much before."

"That's 'cause he didn't." Connor returned with Xander in tow and another round of fresh beers for them all. He was ignoring Wesley's look of disapproval and took a hasty swig of beer before Wesley could disapprove out loud.

"There a story here, mate?"

"I...suspect the demon's natural habitat is semi-aquatic with fish as a primary source of food. I have found myself with...odd cravings."

Connor snorted into his beer. "He ate the fish out of the office tank. Andrew's in therapy over it."

Spike laughed out loud, reaching across and squeezing Wes' knee, and Wes blushed. Xander
stopped behind him and ran his fingers through Wes' hair.

"Was that the special salt-water tank that he bought to 'soothe the clients'? I remember Dawnie telling me about it. I guess Andrew told her." Wes - who had leaned into the caress, his eyes going half-shut, sat up straight and nodded, looking down at his hands.

"Yes - the five-thousand dollar tank. With the fifty-dollar fish. I heard about it for days." Wes' voice sounded contrite, but his eyes were sparkling with mirth and Spike wanted to pull him over and kiss him - saw that impulse leap straight across to Xander.

"How'd it taste?" Xander rubbed circles in the back of Wesley's neck with his thumbs, Spike's arousal a warm tingle in his veins as he placed the sushi order.

"I don't recall. I was more focused on keeping it in my mouth than on how it tasted."
"Yeah. It's kinda hard to eat something when it's wiggling around."

"You've eaten live fish?" Wesley twisted, looked at Xander with surprise.

"Pig."

Wesley grimaced. "It sounds...crunchy."

"You know it."

"Oooh...sensing a story here," Connor said, waving his beer and then frowning when Wes leaned forward and snatched it out of his hands, ripple of black through his eyes for one moment.

"That's quite enough, don't you think?" Wes asked, and then twitched when Xander's hands hit the sensitive spot just below his hairline. Xander bent down, his mouth close enough to Wes' ear to touch, and Spike could almost feel that - could feel the want, clear enough.
"Let him have his fun, Wes. You'll have yours later."

Wesley shuddered and set the bottle down with a heavy thunk - tightened his fingers on the edge of the table. "Xander - "

Weak protest and a quick glance at Connor confirmed the worst they had coming was an eye roll. Spike was a steady pulse of wantwantwant and Xander licked his lips. "What? I guarantee Connor isn't gonna hold hormones against you. Right?"

Connor groaned and snatched back his beer. "Yeah. I've got enough of my own."

"Have to find you a bit of something on the side," Spike murmured, watching Xander's fingers in Wes' hair - stroking slowly up and down his neck. "Yeah - right, what was the total? Right, mate." Spike turned off the phone, sushi ordered, all his attention on Wes and Xander.

"Yeah, that'll happen with my dad following me -"
following me! - on my dates. And he's not even sneaky about it! Last time? He tripped over me." Connor stared morosely at his beer and Spike felt laughter trembling through him - his own and Xander's - and they all started just a bit as Illyria stalked through the door, scattering sand.

"I grow tired of speaking to algae. I wish to find an entity more worthy of my time. Perhaps a ficus."

Wesley felt Xander's hands still in his hair as they all watched Illyria pivot and march away, toward the front door. "Did she just make a joke?"

"No. She can talk to plants," Spike said, watching the tick-tock motion of Illyria's hips as she stalked out of the house.

"Actually tripped over me. Almost crushed my foot. I mean - what did he think we were doing? We were having iced chai..." Connor seemed to be suddenly feeling his beers and Xander grinned at him, felt Spike's amusement as a tingle in the back of his head.
"Angel's not a happy vampire unless he's got a loved one to stalk, Connor. Congratulations - you're the lucky guy."

"Xander! That's hardly true. Angel simply looks out for Connor. You can hardly blame his feelings of attachment after - " Wesley stopped, bit his tongue and every muscle under Xander's hands went tense again.

"I keep telling you, Wes. It's cool. It's past." Connor drained the rest of his beer and pointed the empty at Wesley. "I kinda like my fake memories 'cause they come with Maggie Richardson in sixth grade."

"Cute girl?"

"So cute. She'd put out for me every day at lunch."

"Sixth grade?" Wesley's hands thumped down on the table.

"It was only kissing."
"What were they thinking, putting sixth grade kissing into the mind of - "

"Hello, Wes! Evil law firm?"

"That's beside the point."

Xander caught Spike's eye, nodded toward the living room.

Spike raised an eyebrow at Xander - felt the pulse of want and amusement and affection from him and stood up slowly, stretching hard. Jeans riding low, t-shirt riding up, and Wes and Xander were both staring at him. Connor was staring at him, and grinned rather crookedly when Spike turned a look on him.

"Wish they'd have let me remember some make-out action with Jeff Merchison, too. He was hot." Spike rolled his eyes.

"Pizza'll be here in ten or fifteen - let's go pick out a
movie, yeah?"

"Yeah - sounds good." Connor stood up - reeled ever so slightly and went into the living room. Spike swooped down on Wes and kissed him, hard and fast.

"Don't go anywhere, love," he whispered, and followed Connor.

Wesley was gasping still when Spike left and Xander kept combing his fingers through Wesley's hair. "I see he didn't take after his dad with the alcohol."

Xander waited until he saw the frown crease Wesley's brow to grin, enjoyed the confusion in Wesley's eyes. "Angel seldom if ever drinks."

Xander leaned down, put his lips against Wesley's ear and kissed. "I meant you. You are so a father figure to him and he likes it."

Wesley pushed into the caress - lifted his hands from his lap and reached for Xander's - held them
gently on his own shoulders, feeling the calluses and the ragged thumbnail under his own relatively book-soft hands.

"I enjoy...his company. He's a remarkable young man and...I feel it makes up, just a little, for..."

"Don't, Wes," Xander said - came around and took Spike's chair, scooting up close to the older man. "Don't do that. You did what you thought you had to do. And Connor's here, and he's all right." Xander couldn't resist a slow kiss - didn't even try - and for the first time since they'd arrived, Wes seemed to truly relax.

"I have missed you both, so much...what you offer, what you are..."

"Yeah?" Xander watched Wesley's eyes close and his mouth gently curve, leaned in to taste the peppery demon flavor underneath the taste of beer. "Cordy was right," he finally said.

Wesley blinked his eyes open, foggy with confusion.
"Cordelia often was."

Xander shook his head. "Cordelia was right about you. Smart English guys? Are so sexy." Xander enjoyed the blush, tugged Wesley to his feet and led him into the living room. He raised his voice to 'okay to eavesdrop, supernatural hearing guys' levels. "Who picked the movie?"

"Spike did. I wanted to watch...Poltergeist but Spike said it was..." Connor took a stance - as best he could sprawled across the living room Nest - and lifted eyebrow and lip in an exaggerated copy. "Said it was too bloody close to home and said no." Connor slumped, and Spike looked up from where he was poking at the DVD player, grinning.

"Are you pouting, Connor? You know that only works on BatVamp."

Connor shot Spike an incredulous look. "Are you kidding me? I've been offered two hundred bucks on Sunset for this pout."
"You what?"

Xander found himself restraining Wesley while Connor tried to burrow himself a safe haven in the pillows of the Nest. "I didn't say I took it!"

Spike couldn't help himself. He bounced over to Connor and hauled him out of his den - held him up by his shirt front. "Now listen, boy. Prostitution is very, very wrong. It's evil and bad. And that pout's worth four hundred, at least."

"Spike!" It was hard to tell if Wesley were more angry with him or with Connor and Spike bounded back up and snuggled up to the older man, batting his eyelashes.

"'M a bad, bad boy, Wes...gonna make me sorry?" Wes stared - sputtered - blushed. Effectively derailed from haranguing Connor and Spike pulled Wes and Xander down into the Nest, wrapping himself around Wes, kissing his neck. "Missed you too, Wes."
"God." Xander huffed, burrowed into the Nest - didn't have any other options as he was already half under Spike and Wesley. "What is it with you Englishmen and kinky sexual punishments?"

Connor's hand shot up. "Young and impressionable here!" He waited until he had their full attention before making a magnanimous gesture. "Carry on, gentlemen."

Spike kicked Connor's foot. "You need another beer. I need another beer." He happily squashed Wes and Xander, crawling over them with maximum frottage action to the edge of the Nest.

"Spike, do you really think -"

"S'okay, Wes - I'm not so very drunk," Connor said, looking serious and then spoiling it by giggling. "Been drunk before, you know."

"Do I want to know?" Wes asked, tone of long-suffering, and then squeaked as Xander shifted under him, pinching something deliberately.
Connor rolled his eyes. "Hello, Wesley - it's called college."

"Connor, if your father knew - " It was so difficult - and strange - to reprimand Connor for his behavior with Xander wrapped around him from behind like an amorous demon chair - an object which had entered into both fantasies and nightmares in the past. He cleared his throat. "He would not approve."

"I did read the Diaries, Wes. My father spent his entire human life drunk, thinking about being drunk, waiting to be old enough to get drunk, or hung over."

"That's completely different. Your father was -"

"He was a worthless bog-trotting womanizing sot. Didn't get better when he got the demon, and the soul didn't help a bit, either." Spike held a bottle out to Connor who took it slowly, looking... Oh, fuck.
"Was he really -"

"Now, pet, don't do that," Spike said, dropping down cross legged and tugging Connor over to him by a gentle handful of his shaggy, light-brown hair. "Was just takin' the piss, wasn't I? English and Irish, we never did see eye to eye. Nothin' wrong with your dad a bit of ass-stick removal wouldn't cure."

Connor's grin, that had faded somewhat, came back again and he lightly punched Spike's arm. "He said you were a poetry-writing virgin who was still tied to his mama's apron."

Wesley leaned imperiously back against Xander and folded his arms. "He was right."

Spike's eyes went wide and then he pounced, demon's eyes and fangs, snarling - snatching Wesley close by his shirt-front. "Gonna pay for that, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce," he purred, snuffling into Wes' neck and nipping not very gently at the skin there. "Gonna suffer," he whispered, tongue tracing the edge of Wes' ear and they all jumped as Connor
finally figured out the remote and the movie - *Boondock Saints* - blared to life.

Xander took the opportunity to haul on Spike hard, tumble him into the pillows and onto Wesley and got both arms around them. "Get down here, Big Bad. The movie's starting and I haven't seen it." His hands told another story though; one rubbing at Wesley's belly, the other skimming the skin below Spike's waistband. He pressed his lips to Spike's ear, whispered breathlessly. "I can't do this if Connor's watching us." 'This' was explained by a slow wriggle of Xander's hips against Wesley, the demony fig leaf.

"I bloody well can," Spike whispered back. Wes was cradled between Xander's legs, leaning back on his chest and Spike had his own right leg thrown over them, his knee just bumping up into Wes' crotch. He wormed his hand between them and got his fingers into the waist of Xander's pants - grinned as Wes obligingly shifted up just a bit, and Spike could pop the button on Xander's jeans. Xander sucked in a startled breath, *want* and *panic* coming from him,
and Spike sniggered into Wes' neck - got his left hand under Xander's neck and pulled him closer.

"He'll be out in five minutes, love..."

Xander went limp - well most of him did - the parts that weren't pressed intimately to Wesley's spine. He gave himself over to the kiss, the flavor of cigarettes, the smooth sharpness of Spike's fangs and dragged his tongue over the tip with a hiss - humped up against Wesley with a muffled moan when Spike began to suckle.

Wesley dropped his head back onto Xander's shoulder with a sigh, a heavy-lidded look at Connor who was...watching them sleepily but didn't seem to mind - only grinned and turned back to the movie and drained what Wesley belatedly realized had been his beer.

"I'm afraid I share some reservations with Xander," Wesley said quietly, and then Spike was kissing him - fangs gone and human mouth working at his
throat - his lips. Human tongue licking into his mouth and probing - pushing - tasting. Spike was predictable sometimes. For that, Wesley was grateful.

Xander felt Wesley go boneless against him and caught the back of Spike's neck. He rubbed with fingers and thumb, felt the working of Spike's jaw, flex of bone and tendon in the kiss then pulled him close enough to catch an ear in his teeth, muttering around the lobe. "Pizza. Xander gets fed. Then Xander gets fucked."

"Yeah," Spike said, breathless, feeling Wes' hand creeping under his shirt and stroking his belly. "Gonna need the energy, love - gonna fuck you both senseless."

"Hear, hear!" Connor mumbled, but Spike wasn't sure if he was talking to him or to the TV. Didn't matter - just then, the doorbell rang.

Xander let go of Spike and grabbed onto Wesley with both arms. "You go, sweetheart. Don't wanna
be arrested for public indecency today."

Spike watched Xander's hand creep toward Wesley's belt and slip under the moment Wesley sucked in his breath. "Best hope he can't see over the couch then, pet." With a wriggle that made Wesley flinch then *groan*, Spike slid over them both and sauntered to the front door.

Xander listened to the door open, the low murmur of voices and slid his fingers around Wesley - slow stroke up and down.

Wesley suppressed a groan - rolled his head to the side, searching and finding Xander's mouth. Kissing him and repressing the urge to simply turn over and...

"Yes! Food!" Connor's enthusiastic shout made him twitch, and then Spike was sliding back into the nest, opening boxes of pizza and wings and grinning at him.

"You'll both be the death of me," Wesley griped as
Xander wiggled out from underneath him and trotted off for napkins and soda and more beer. "I don't suppose my sushi was coming up the walk?"

"'Fraid not, pet." Spike made short work of a wing with a small groan of pleasure. "Don't know what you're missing out on, love."

Wesley tried not to be obvious in averting his face. "Half a gallon of Tabasco sauce by the smell."

"Don't forget the grease and oil." Xander folded himself into the Nest, handing out drinks and napkins.

"Hey!" Connor protested the bottle of Root Beer.

"Bar's closed." Xander grinned - scrambled up at a second ring of the doorbell.

Xander bounced back to the Nest with sushi and for a while it was just four men doing what men do best - eating and watching mindless blood-shed. Spike surveyed his...family with satisfaction and
drained the last of the beers - pleasantly full, pleasantly buzzed, pleasantly horny. Connor was sprawled out with a dazed expression, his eyes so heavy they were almost shut. Xander and Wes were curled around each other, paying more attention to what their hands and lips were doing than the movie, which had taken a turn for the surreal. Yeah. Family, damn it.

"Think we can trust Blue out on her own?" Spike asked, tidying away the last loose thread before he could start chivvying his lovers into the bedroom, and Wes stirred and looked over at him.

"Hrmmm? Oh. Yes. She'd only be irritable if one of us went with her. Our clumsy mortal bodies are as gnats to her - a continual source of irritation. She revels in even temporary relief from our incessant noise." Wesley creaked open his box of sashimi and ate a piece of glossy yellowtail with satisfaction.

"Okay, Wes? We so need to get you new playmates."
Wesley looked up at Xander - over at Spike, who was sucking the last of the hot-wing sauce of his fingers in a very deliberate manner. "I rather thought I had new...playmates," he said, and watched Xander's gaze go a little more heated - watched Spike do that slow and sultry smile, eyes going half-lidded and dark. "And...I do believe Connor is asleep."

"It'd be polite to go into the other room so we don't wake him up," Xander said, stretched against Wesley until his spine popped and the want want want radiating from Spike cranked up the volume. He shot Spike a playful smirk. "Too bad Spike's too evil to be polite."

"Got that right. But..." Spike pushed himself to his feet - held out greasy hands to Wes and Xander. "I don't think doin' it in front of the BatMite here is the way to set the mood. Although he probably wouldn't mind." Spike grinned as Wes and Xander let him pull them up - and as Wesley grimaced at the feel of chicken-grease on his hand. "Clean up first, then?"
Xander nudged up close behind Wesley and hooked his chin over his shoulder. "You wanna get into our great big bathtub? With the scented oils and the bubbles? Slippery the way we couldn't be in the pool."

"I've been exploring my...other form. The pool could hold some surprises for you now," Wesley murmured. He gasped a little as Xander bit gently at his neck, then Spike was taking their hands - tugging them down the hall, his smile full of wicked delight and promises Wesley fully intended to make him keep.

"Oh Jesus," Xander breathed, looked wide-eyed down into Spike's face, his overlong hair cocooning them from the world outside as Wesley eased slowly into him - hot, hotter than Xander's skin, enough to make him wonder if this was what it was like for Spike with his cock filling him. But he couldn't ask, because every time he tried to string together words, happy encouraging sounds came
out instead and okay - there were worse places to be than the filling in a demon bread and almond oil sandwich.

Spike tried not to move - tried to wait, so that Wesley could find his rhythm - could be ready. But god - it was hard, so hard. Xander leaning above him, flushed and panting, pushed so deep inside... And Wesley's slow movements trembled through Xander as the want need pleasurepleasurepleasure from Xander made Spike writhe - made him arch up and scratch his fingernails down Xander's back - made him tip his head back, silently pleading for more.

In the dim candle-light - Xander's idea, the romantic fool - Wesley's eyes gleamed a cold blue-green, and his peppery scent and intoxicating heat were just fuel to the fire.

"Xander, god..."

The beat of Wesley's pulse inside Xander and the rumble of Spike's purr beneath him were too much
- too much and not enough when Spike tipped his head back, offering. Distantly, he heard Wesley's gasp as he sank his teeth into taut pale skin that tasted of tequila and smoke.

As a Watcher - as a Rogue Demon hunter - Wesley had seen it all. Seen it all save for the languorous descent of a human to a vampire's throat. Had never seen golden eyes roll back in a pale face as the demon emerged - grimace of pleasurepain stamped on his features and a rush of illogical heat through Xander's body wrapped so tightly around him. "God." His hands shook, running them down Xander's trembling back, soothing the red scratches Spike had left behind and feeling Spike's purr rumbling up to him through Xander's bones.

Spike felt the surge that his blood caused - felt it through their strange and wondrous link, felt it in Xander's body - in the hitch of his breath and the harder thrust of his hips. As Xander drank, he watched Wesley - watched his eyes widen in shock and then narrow again, and Spike caught a hand - tugged Wesley closer.
"Wes...it's all right..." Spike murmured, and Wesley leaned impossibly far - pushed Xander tight into Spike, making him hiss in pleasure.

"I know, Spike -" Wesley murmured. His hand cupped Spike's face - one clawed and dark-skinned thumb slipped into Spike's mouth, and Spike felt Xander shudder as Wes bit at his neck - never breaking the skin, but leaving marks.

Xander drank in the rumbling voices, Spike's against his lips and Wesley's against his back. His neck burned with bites, tongue and throat and belly burned with the blood, burned with the feeling of filling and being filled in the cold-warm-hot arrangement of bodies. Skin and blood - skin and blood and teeth and the feeling of falling with a parachute that might not open. It was enough to make his heart pound in his chest, deep and fast and Jesus how the fuck was he supposed to last when he couldn't even talk?

Xander was shivering under Wesley - gasping in
sharp breaths and making small, delighted sounds every time Spike moved under him - or Wesley moved in him. Wesley licked at the flushed and salted skin of Xander's back - gripped Spike's shoulder in his hand and moved, slow then fast. Dragging out every drop of pleasure he could - feeling as if he'd been starving for it, those long weeks in L.A. "Xander...oh...Spike, I..." He couldn't finish that - not even in his head, and Spike's hand was on his cheek - rubbing back over his skull.

"'S all right, love. 'S all right..." Spike sighed, arching and twisting - rumbling growl of pleasure that Wesley found himself answering and Xander cried out, moving faster between them - deeper, with an arm locked beneath Spike's left leg, lifting it and pressing it hard to Spike's chest. Eye shut, now, head going back, neck stretched pale and tight in the gloom. And Spike leaned up and bit, shuddering.

Xander arched, every muscle tight under the electrifying pulling heat of Spike's fangs in his throat. Hard, harder, faster, deeper and the deeper he went, the deeper Spike bit until Xander
shuddered hard, the coiling tension at the base of his spine shattering through throat and cock with a desperate groan, clutching hands, wet against his belly. He could feel the burn of Wesley moving faster and harder inside, pushing softening, too-sensitive flesh into Spike and Xander bit again, sucked hard - drinking Spike's climax from him through his throat and *fuck* everything was hot and frictional and dizzy-good and wet in a good, good way.

Wesley watched the two of them moving in stop-motion jerkiness beneath him. The tight spasm of Xander's flesh around him, the thick, brine-musky scent of Spike's come all stoked the fire in his belly - made him gasp after air and lower his head. Forehead to Xander's back, mouth pressed open and his tongue tasting, tasting, tasting; salt and mint and cloves, sweet and a faint trace of iron and smoke that was Spike, somehow, transmuted through Xander - gliding over Wesley's tongue.

He rode the quaking of flesh and spirit beneath him and then he thrust - five, seven, nine times. Claws
digging into the mattress and Spike's hands on his biceps - Xander's feet on his calves. The champagne tingle of orgasm rushed through him - out of him - and finally he was still, just breathing.

After a moment he slipped back and sideways, and Xander did, and Spike ended up in the middle, pulling them both close, rumbling satisfaction and a gleam of possession and affection in his eyes.

"That was lovely," Spike murmured, and his mouth found Wesley's - kissed him for long, long moments. And then moved away to Xander, and Wesley lay with his head on Spike's shoulder and let the demon go - watched the world shift to different focus and sighed out a long breath of utter repletion.

"Warmth hog," Xander muttered into Spike's lips, biting lazily at them and tracing patterns in the moisture across his stomach - across both of them. But he wriggled closer when Spike tugged and draped over him.

"No point wasting all the heat you two generate,"
Spike pointed out, stretching luxuriously under Wes and Xander's combined warmth and weight, sighing happily into Wes' hair and running his hands up and down sweat-damp flesh.

"We'll be stuck to each other and the bed if we don't get clean," Wes murmured, and Spike shook his head, too sated to want to talk. "And I really must check on Connor." Wes was stirring, slowly, and Spike tightened his grip.

"Just relax, Wes - we can go in a minute," he said softly, and Xander reached across him and tugged on Wes' hand until it was tangled with his over Sipe's heart.

"Yeah, Wes - just a minute," Xander said, and Wes smiled and gave in. "Learn to cuddle," Xander mumbled into Spike's neck, mouthing at the trickle of blood there until he felt Spike jerk in his arms. "Bloody uptight Englishmen."

"Not so uptight as all that, love, considering you just had my knees up around my ears," Spike grumbled,
and twitched again when Xander nipped at his throat.

"Felt plenty tight from where I was," Xander murmured and slid a hand over Spike's thigh, two fingers taking a slow *in and out* slide that made the blood burn in his belly, added a little twist that made Spike hiss.

Wesley watched in disbelief. "You cannot *possibly* be ready to go again."

"Ready, willing and able, English," Xander said, licking a droplet of Spike's blood from the corner of his mouth, and Spike drifted a hand across Wesley's belly.

"It's the blood, you know. Demon blood. Same as you've got inside, Wes," Spike said, and his hand did that, and his tongue in Wesley's mouth did this, and Wesley realized Spike was right. Demon blood inside him, fizzing and *wanting* and far from sated.

"It's my turn," Wesley said around Spike's tongue,
"in the middle." And Xander laughed.

Spike woke abruptly - something he didn't do often in the Nest. But something...was there. Had woken him, as if there'd been a loud sound, or a bright flash. And he'd only registered the fading edge of it because the room was nearly lightless. A single candle guttered on the dresser, the flame low and dark-gold, illuminating the room in a reddish haze when he called up the demon.

*Nothing. Nothing's there.* He waited, scenting. Thick musk of Wes and Xander - the fainter smells of Connor - beer, pizza, the sea. The dust-dry spice and astringent scent that was Illyria. *Maybe she just got in - that's what woke me, door coming open...* Spike lifted his head, looking around the room. The air seemed to shiver and he waited, tense. Finally relaxed, letting his head thump back onto the pillow - squirming a little, getting his body just right under Wes and Xander's enveloping limbs. Sighing, and letting go - relaxing back toward sleep.
And then - on the edge of his hearing - a sizzling sort of pop and thrum, like a fluorescent light edging toward burn-out and something flickered to life at the far side of the room. Pale blue-white, figure of a man, running. Screaming, mouth open in a silent 'O' of shock and fear. Running straight at them and Spike jerked upright, pushing away, Wes and Xander jerking away from him and the thing running through the bed - and something coming after. Demon, like a crouching, malformed ape; loping through the bed with gleaming, insubstantial tusks and a wavering crackle of displaced energy. The air burned over Spike's skin, cold as ice, and his back thumped into the headboard just as Xander sat up, wild-eyed, and Wesley cursed.

'Fearfearfear' rolling off Spike in waves and Xander wasn't going to wait to find out why or what the fuck. The subsonic sizzle raked along his nerves and he was off the bed, hands locked tight around Spike and Wesley's wrists. "Out - out of here!" Because whatever was in here was in here and if there was one thing Xander had gotten good at in his Scooby years, it was running away from the big and scary
until he knew what it was and how to kill it.

Icy skin and prickling nerves were *good* for giving a guy the energy to run away.

"But - what is the - " Wesley choked on his words, the emergence of the figure making his skin crawl despite the stark knowledge that it couldn't hurt him. Couldn't possibly hurt him. Couldn't...take his eyes off it.

"Wes - come *on.*"

"Wait, Xander -" Wesley pulled against the insistent, panicked tug on his wrist - stood knee-locked and breathless as a figure of a man ran screaming through the room - through the bed. And was followed by a slope-shouldered creature, predatory and somehow gleeful. Cold, in their wake - cold and the static-shock of a too-close lightning strike, and Wesley shook his head, trying to clear out the fuzzy sort of low-range hum that lingered there. *Magical signature. Have to remember that* -
"Wes, we're getting out of here," Spike growled, jerking his arm hard when the man emerged again, tick like a light coming on and then the silent rush and more heat drained out of the room - out of them.

"Yes, I think - think you're right."

Xander was the first into the living room and pulled up short with an absolutely not girly shriek when faced with Illyria's cold blue stare. "Jesus - fuck! Wear a bell!"

Illyria's head ticked to the side and unblinking eyes roamed the three of them head to toe. "You reek of each other."

"That's cause we've been shaggin' all night, yeah?" Spike was still human faced, voice returned to calm but his hands shook violently with cigarette and lighter until Xander steadied them with hands almost but not quite as shaky as Spike's.

"What's goin' on?" Connor sat up in the cushions,
flopped - struggled to find his bearings in the strange room and squinted. "Are you guys naked?"

Wesley eased himself onto the other side of the couch from Connor and pretended he hadn't heard - faced Illyria instead and tried to make his grope for a dignity-saving pillow low-key. "What did you learn?"

Illyria's eyes tracked to the bedroom, snapped back to Wesley. "It is no longer confined to the pit."

Square Seventeen

The air smelled different. The sea was there, and sand...Xander, in citrus and sweet and coffee. But there was an overpowering scent of old, dry leather - dust, and aged wood and a warm, peppery scent...something different... Spike's eyes popped
open and he found himself staring at a plaster ceiling - sagging with age, crossed with hair-thin cracks. Water stain in one corner like tea spilt on a linen napkin. The coarse silk of good cotton sheets and light coming in milky-blue through paper blinds. Wes' house... We're in Wes' house... He grinned - stretched - rolled over and looked fondly at Xander, who was curled around a pillow and snoring slightly, one hand stretched out into the empty space where Wes had been. Now...we shagged, we snuggled...Wes had to use the bathroom...

The tricky bastard never came back. Spike leaned in and kissed Xander's sleep-warm cheek, and Xander moved and made a soft sound - kittenish sound. Spike grinned harder - slipped out of the bed and padded down the short hall into the main room of Wes' cottage. And there was Wes, at his desk. Dark hair in messy tufts all over his head, half-empty cup of tea tilting at a dangerous angle in his hand and old, ragged jeans on his body - nothing else. There were books in crooked towers over every inch of the desk, and paper - some scribbled over, some screwed into balls and tossed in drifts on the floor.
A broken pencil, a goose-necked lamp twisted at a strange angle, and the southern-facing window open, letting in a cool, wet breeze and the hypnotic heartbeat of the sea. A gull called, thin creel, and Spike went over to the desk - crouched down next to Wes and smiled up at him - at the lean, stubbled face that was drawn in concentration and blue eyes that were red-rimmed.

"Good morning, love."

"Is it? Morning?" Wesley clattered his teacup into its saucer, left a new stain on a ruffled note pad and rubbed blearily at his eyes beneath his glasses, knocking them askew.

"Been at this all night?" Spike asked gently - snorted and took Wesley's fumbled glasses away from him - put them firmly on the desk.

"No. Only since - " Wesley stretched in an impressive yawn. " - only since perhaps two. There's a fresh pot of tea in the kitchen if you like."
"I don't like." Spike stood up and drew Wes up with him - pulled him away from the desk and then held him, rubbing his hands firmly up and down Wes' back and neck - kissing him with slow, soft kisses. "You're gonna be sore all day, love, and it won't be from bein' shagged senseless, it'll be from sitting hunched over these damn books. Come in the kitchen and get warm," Spike grumbled, ignoring the small protesting noises Wes managed around Spike's insistent mouth. "That hole in the ground's not that important."

"You," Wesley responded breathlessly the moment Spike's lips left his, arms going easily around Spike's waist as he capitulated. "You and Xander are that important." One hand slid the length of Spike's spine, still warm from the bed and Xander's body heat - smooth. "And although I may wish it wasn't, that 'hole in the ground' is your home."

"It's not home. It's just where we live. Difference, Wes." Spike ran a slow hand along Wes' jaw - sank his fingers into the mess of his hair and tugged gently - tipping Wes' head ever so slightly so he
could kiss him lingeringly. "This is as much home as that is. Xander's here. You are. All that matters, love." The glint in Wes' eyes - the slow, incredulous smile - made Spike want to wrap Wes up tight in his arms and take him away - take them both away, somewhere safe, somewhere that wasn't... Here. Or there. Chewed us up, spat us out...still have the fuckin' tooth-marks. Let me keep you safe, love...

"Maybe I'll have some tea after all, then," he added, tapping Wes gently on the tip of his nose. "I knew you'd come around. You are English, after all." Wesley gave Spike a wry smile but the expression of doubt didn't entirely go away. He reluctantly released Spike's waist and led the way into the kitchen, pulled down a clean teacup for Spike and poured. "Does Xander feel the same way? About Sunnydale?"

Spike leaned against the counter, palms flat on crooked, buckling tiles. "Dunno. Think so. He's... He wants to do his job. Wants to do his best. But it's...a grave to him. A memorial." He took the cup from Wes' outstretched hand and took a sip - smiled and
reached out and snagged Wes close. "Lovely, pet. You always did make a good cuppa. You find anything?" Wes was warm and pliable under his arm and Spike snuggled him closer, leaning his head on Wes' shoulder.

Wesley sighed, rested against Spike without a fight, all but asleep on his feet. "Leads, hints, half-recorded prophecies. I suspect the manifestations are only the visible result of the disturbance, a symptom rather than an end unto themselves - like sparks caused by repetitive motion over carpet."

"What's that tell us?"

Wesley lifted his head. "It tells us we know absolutely nothing useful. But it does suggest that the source of the problem lies outside of Sunnydale - and the direction of the energy may well point us in the direction of the culprit."

"Figure out why they moved up out of the pit?" In the barely-contained scramble to pack and get the fuck out, they had all seen more of the phantoms,
flickering into existence down the new streets - in and out of the empty houses. Like something out of an old living dead film and Xander had tried to joke about it, but it had fallen flat. Too many, too fast - too much, and no real clue as to why. Illyria had deliberately walked through one only to tilt her head slightly and announce - 'They taste of nothing. They want nothing. Last synapse firing in a dying brain.' None of them had been comforted.

"The energy is being pulled out of the pit." Wesley leaned back, stretched and beckoned Spike follow him to the computer, folding into the computer chair and dashing a finger across the track pad. The power save screen brightened to reveal a weather map. "These are the current weather conditions for Southern California. And this -" Wesley scrolled down to an array of animated maps. "This is the weather in Southern California during the past twenty four hours." He clicked and they watched in silence, Wesley's head leaning against Spike's hip, Spike's hand in Wesley's hair as the maelstrom of weather over Sunnydale unfurled tendrils southward along the coast throughout the night.
"But you don't know where it's gonna end up, yeah?" Wes' hair was like silk, and Spike just wanted to pull him up and take him back to bed - could smell the fatigue and worry on him. "Is it... Are they gonna just follow along? Or are other places going to have...phantoms, too?"

"I can't say for certain." Wesley's blink was slow, soothed by Spike's petting and he could feel the itchy ripple under the skin of his scalp, his spines aching to slide through the skin to be petted too. With a shiver, he gave in to the impulse. "I haven't found all the answers yet. I haven't found many of the answers at all."

"Mmmm..." Spike suddenly didn't care about the weather in Sunnydale - didn't care that the phantoms were probably swarming their house, or that some secret...being - or group - was siphoning power from the Hellmouth. He just wanted to curl up around Wes and pet him to sleep - make him sigh in pleasure. "C'mon back to bed, love. You're tired, and so am I. Let this be awhile." The demon-
skin was smooth and warm, so very warm, and Spike pressed closer, nearly purring.

"There's - research yet to do, Spike. We don't know how fast it's moving or what it is or what it will do once it reaches Los Angeles and - " Wesley tried - and failed - to continue speaking through a tremendous yawn.

"And it can be done after you've had some sleep, mate. You're no good if you can't focus on the page, yeah?"

This time Wesley mounted no resistance to Spike pulling him up, pulling him out of his chair and back to the bedroom with stumbling steps, asleep so quickly he didn't even feel Xander snuggle up to his back or Spike cuddle close to his chest.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike jerked awake to that damn song plinking tinnily out of Xander's cell-phone. That damn
cowboy song about horses and riding and... Where the fuck is it? He scrabbled at the nightstand - realized it wasn't their nightstand - and lunged for Xander's jeans, where the phone was clipped. He yanked it off, hanging half off the bed, and flipped it open.

"Do you have any bloody idea what time it is?" he snarled, and listened to the indrawn breath from the other end.

"Is this - may I speak to A-alexander Harris, please?" Young voice - girl's voice. Sodding hell. Work or some such. Bugger. He was about to tell them no - about to tell them Xander was dead, don't call back, when warm fingers trailed down his arm and snagged the phone.

Xander flopped, face first and draped over Spike's back, petting vaguely to soothe the savage demon guy - and making a mental note to change his ring tone. "This is Alex Harris."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Harris. Please hold while I put
you through to Mr. Yezzi."

Xander pulled the phone away from his ear - stared at it in sleepy confusion as he felt Spike's irritation melt into vague curiosity.

"Tell 'em sod off. Tell 'em we're shaggin' - who the hell is it?" Spike squirmed mostly back up onto the bed - pulled Xander half onto him and snuggled up against Wes, who was stirring muzzily but not really awake. Not yet.

"It's corporate." Xander's brain was waking slowly - but even at half speed it recognized the potential bad of taking a call with one of the corporate inspectors while in bed with a grouchy Spike. He laid a quick kiss on Spike and wriggled to the side of the bed, groping through his pants pockets for a pen and small note pad.

"Thought you were done with them 'til next year," Spike grumbled, putting his arm around Xander's waist and pulling him backwards. No getting out of bed, damnit...wanna be lazy... Spike hoped the lazy-
sleepy vibe was stronger than the sulky one, but he doubted it. "Tell 'em Wes needs you...I know I do..."

Xander slumped back against Spike, vampire petulance skulking along the edges of his nerves. He wriggled until he got an arm free, pressed a finger awkwardly to Spike's lips.

"Harris?"

"I'm here, Mr. Yezzi. What can I do for you?"

"You can explain to me why you're not here."

A wave of unease and...shock rolled through Spike - confusion and instant tension and he struggled upright - reached for the phone, intending to shut it off and throw it across the room. Only Xander's pleading look and his hand catching and tangling with Spike's made Spike slow down for a moment. Right. Let him talk and then throw the phone. Fuckin' hell. Now listen.

Xander clutched Spike's hand to his chest - kept it
still, and if he was clinging to it that was his business. "After last night's patrol, my partner and I drove to Los Angeles. Is there a problem on the site?" Xander squinted at the time display on his cell phone. "Where's Russ?"

"Mr. Fenwick did not have a review scheduled with me at nine this morning, and he did not miss his review."

Xander felt the bang of his own heart through Spike's hand where it lay over his chest. "Review? What? That's not until next year!"

"Today."

No extra words. No explanation. Nothing but that one cold word that made Xander eighteen and living in the basement again. "Sir, I'm - "

"Our branch office is on Wilshire - meet me there. You have one hour."

Spike felt the rush of angerconfusionshameanger
from Xander and he sat bolt upright, reaching for the phone again and this time pulling it away from Xander's hand. Which was cold, and shaking. "He'll be there," he growled and then snapped it shut - pulled Xander into a hard embrace, tugging Xander's head down so it was in the crook of his neck - roughly petting his hair. "Tell me, love," he murmured. Beside them, Wes was sitting up - moving instinctively closer even though his expression was sleep-fogged and bewildered.

Xander drew a shuddery breath - tasted salt and smoke and Spike over his tongue. There was a buzzing in the back of his head - like there used to be when the big public humiliation was on the way. "Gotta call Russ. Gotta check the papers Yezzi gave me after my last review."

"What? Why?"

"My compliance review was this morning." Xander listened to his words through a filter of *this is not happening* and fought the urge to hit something - or bite. Not violence - comfort. Closeness. And *god* he
could use a dose of big bad. Xander settled for thumping his head down onto Spike's shoulder. *Because that'd go over great, showing up to my review high on vampire blood.* "He was in Sunnydale this morning. And I wasn't."

Spike felt the sudden *craving* go through him, too - snarled silently, crushing Xander close to him. "They said four bloody months, love - I remember. What the fuck do they want? Tell 'em piss off, you don't have to jump to their tune." Wes was rubbing his hand up and down Xander's back, his expression puzzled and a little alarmed.

"What is it, Xander - can we help?"

Xander shook his head - *cleared* his head. "No. I can't tell them off, Spike." He closed his eye and took a deep breath of the smoke-pepper smell that was Spike and Wesley together. "In November, I was put on probation for non-compliance with the company grooming policies - for safety reasons. The paperwork said I had until spring." Xander lifted his head, feeling the *anger* from Spike churn with his
own confusion. "I know the paperwork said my review would be in the spring - before the site re-opened. Fuck this. Fuck. This." Xander wriggled out of Spike's grip and over the side of the bed - started tugging on his jeans. "It's not like I'm gonna be any more in compliance in March, is it?"

Spike eyed the rings in Xander's nipples - the five in his ears and the tattoos that would show if he wore a wife beater on site. The long hair that was too long for corp-rat drones - was just long enough if not a little too short, for Xander's tastes - and his own.

"Want a non-compliant boyfriend along to piss them off, love?" he offered, thrilled at the thought of getting in some corp-rat's face and telling them where to shove their rules...helping them shove their rules, and he hoped it was a really big manual. The angerhurt from Xander - the shame that had been there before was making the demon seethe and wasn't soothed by Xander's pained smile or the shake of his head.
"Xander - I don't understand - what's this review for? Surely you're not - not going to lose your job?" Wes sounded disturbed - looked angry, and Spike reached out squeezed Wes' shoulder.

Xander snorted - jerked on last night's socks and his boots, tied the laces. "The review is to determine whether they're going to renew my contract for another year based on whether I've complied with policy. For the benefit of those following along at home - I haven't." Xander stood and shook the legs of his jeans over his work boots, crawled over the bed on hands and knees to grab his tee shirt off the bed post. "My contract with them is only good until the end of March."

Wes lunged and brought Xander down in a tackle and Spike happily joined the pile, squashing Xander into Wes and grinning over his shoulder when the demon flared up in the ex-Watcher.

"Xander, are you sure that...you want to go like this?" Wes asked quietly, fingertips tapping lightly on the wrinkled t-shirt.
"Maybe Wes could come, too," Spike suggested, and Xander huffed, squirming. He got an elbow into Spike's stomach and managed to wriggle out from under Wesley, giving Spike's belly an apologetic pat. "He gave me an hour. Unless one of Wesley's new demon powers is super fast sewing or business suit materialization, it's pretty much this or naked."

"Well, naked might actually -"

"Wes!"

"I vote for naked, too," Spike said, dragging Xander back down and locking his legs around Xander's - giving Wes a look, and Wes flopped on top of them both, kissing Xander soundly.

"You'll be fine, Xander, really. You're very good at what you do," Wes said seriously, and Spike grinned at him.

Xander rolled his eye. "I'm surrounded by comedians. Where's my patch?" He patted down
the empty pocked of his jeans then crawled over Spike and hung over the side of the bed to look beneath.

"Didn't bring it, love," Spike said, watching Xander slide off the bed with a thump.

"Fuck. I am so not ready to face Yezzi like this." Xander gestured tiredly to his face and slumped.

"Perhaps you can postpone? If you call him -" Wes was changing gears - slipping smoothly into 'calm and in control' mode, all teasing aside. Spike sighed and slithered off the bed - got his coat from the stiffish chair Wes had near the window and dug into an inner pocket.

"Here, love - brought a spare. It'll be all right." He held the patch out by the elastic, loathing the thing but hating what was coming from Xander - the sort of helpless anger that made him want to kill. Or at least maim.

For a moment, Xander felt faint with relief - hated
the need for the scrap of leather and elastic - hated the gratitude he felt for having it and the loathing Spike felt for it. He closed his fingers over it and caught Spike's hand, pressing it to his blind side and looking up at him from the floor. "It's...armor. This is armor."

"Oh, love..." Spike crouched down and pulled Xander close - held him and rubbed slow circles over Xander's back. "You don't need that, Xander. Don't need any armor..." Xander did - but Spike...didn't want him to have to. Wanted Xander to see the brave and beautiful man that he was. Getting there, love. I'll make you see yet. Wes was looking troubled and Spike got Xander up and on his feet. "C'mon, love, time for coffee, at least."

"Teeth," Xander mumbled and broke away to disappear into the bathroom, foggy-eyed and rumpled.

Wesley slid more slowly out of bed, followed Spike to the kitchen. Lines of worry etched themselves between his eyebrows and he couldn't take his eyes
from the bathroom door for more than a moment at a time. "Do you think he'll be all right? I thought his employers were satisfied with his performance."

"They think he's doin' a grand job. Just want him to do it lookin' like a good little corp-rat drone. As if it matters." Spike started poking through Wes' cupboards, looking for coffee and Wes gently pushed him aside - pulled out a tiny two-cup coffee maker and a bag of coffee from the depths of his freezer.

"I keep this for Angel - he comes over sometimes and likes to drink a cup," Wes said, and Spike successfully kept a sneer off his face.

"Didn't think he did food and beverages much," he mumbled instead. Wes turned, starting to say something, and Xander slammed out of the bathroom, his face damp and the ends of his hair dripping - a rather vicious-looking love-bite visible above the edge of his t-shirt.

"Wes! Band-Aids?"
"Mirrored cabinet, Xander. Really it doesn't look that - "

Xander slammed back into the bathroom.

Wesley sighed. "I'm not entirely convinced coffee is the best drink to give him right now."

"He'll be worse without it," Spike said, and started making tea. Wes considered and then nodded - got the coffee brewing. They both listened to increasingly louder cursing coming from the bathroom - a thump and a small crash and string of curses that made Spike grin. Then Xander was stomping out again, the band-aids apparently a no-go.

"Coffee." Xander held out his hand.

Wesley poured the coffee into a travel mug and pressed it into Xander's hand.

"Kiss." Xander caught Wesley by the shoulder and
Wesley thought he saw the barest flicker of a smile before Xander's lips pressed to his. Then it was gone and Xander turned to Spike, kissed Spike - then out the door after a brief tussle to get away from the vampire.

They watched him go.

In the truck, Xander slammed his coffee into the cup holder and cursed at the slosh of hot liquid over his hand.

*Okay, Harris. Breath in. Breath out.*

He pushed his key into the ignition and flipped open his phone, dialing by memory and holding the phone to his ear.

"Russell of Sunnydale's Wild Kingdom."

"Hi, Russ. I'm in LA. Can you go to my place and check out some paperwork I left in my office? I need some dates." Xander leaned back against the soft leather - breathed deeply, taking comfort from
the scent and the distant thread of 
loveprideangermine that was Spike. Xander wasn't 
quite ready yet to drive out of its range.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike felt him when the truck was still half a block away. Anger and irritation, confusion and still that tiny thread of shameshame. Spike vamped, snarling - started to struggle up from his place on the couch. Head in Wes' lap and throw over his legs and Wes - who had been reading, hand slowly petting through Spike's hair - jumped, startled. Dropping his book with a thud and going half-way to the demon before he calmed himself down and tugged Spike back.

"Let's not gang up on him the minute he walks through the door, Spike. Let's...give him a moment." Spike struggled a moment longer and then relented, sighing - slumping back against Wes and rubbing a hand back through his hair.

"Yeah, all right. Fuck..."
"Is it bad?"

"I - dunno. He just feels... I don't like how they made him feel," Spike muttered, and they both tensed as the truck-door banged - as Xander walked slowly up to the door and let himself in and then just stood there for a moment, leaning on the door-jamb and staring at them. They watched as he pulled off his patch with a shaky hand and dropped it on the floor. Watched him cross the room in silence, slide onto the couch in front of Spike and press his face into the vampire's shoulder, exuding sluggish waves of emotional exhaustion. "Love?" Spike's fingers crept up, tangled in the soft hair at the nape of Xander's neck.

"I am so fuckin' tired of this shit," Xander said, muffled by Spike's shoulder, Spike's neck. He felt Wesley's hand slide over his shoulder and down his arm and lifted his hand until he could catch Wesley's fingers in his. Wes' jean-clad thigh was warm against his shoulder as he pushed closer into the crook of Spike's neck - Spike's legs tangled with
his and kept him from rolling backwards off the edge of the couch.

Spike was silent for a moment but he knew Xander felt the surge of rage - and triumph - that flared through him. "That's it, then. No more Hellmouth, no more...graves. We'll pack up and be gone in two days, love -"

"Hey! Whoah!" Xander's head came up, rush of *panic* and *want* that made his heart pound. "No."

"What d'you *mean* 'no'? Contract's over. We're leavin' that cesspit for good, you and me."

"I suspect what Xander means is that this contract isn't *over*. You said you're under contract until - ?"

"March," Xander confirmed miserably, lifting his gaze to Spike's. "Sorry sweetheart. It's...I can't just *leave*..." No matter how much part of him wanted to. Okay - most of him wanted to. He wasn't sure yet how he felt about that.
"Bloody hell, Xander, you don't -" Spike cut his shout - himself - off. Clamped his jaw shut and closed his eyes for just a moment. "No, no, all right...all right. Yeah. Gotta...stay." Trying to only let the love and the pride he felt for Xander come through - trying to stop the demon's fury and instinct to protect - to fix. Wes' hand, warm and firm, squeezed his shoulder, and he turned his head on Wes' thigh and smiled at the older man - shaky smile. Leaned his forehead into Xander's. "Just tell me what I can do, love. Just...want to help."

"You're sexy when you want to rip somebody's head off. And scary. Sexy and scary and there is something so wrong with me." Xander relaxed against Spike, relaxed into Wesley's warm touches, soothing presence. "You help," he said finally. "Right now - you're helping. This is what I need."

"Good, love." Spike kissed his mouth, just feathery kisses - got his hand over Wes' on Xander's shoulder and just held on. "Always scary for you, Xan," he murmured, grinning.
Xander snorted and took the opportunity to burrow back into Spike's neck, *smugloved* sitting like a squat and grinning gargoyle in the center of Xander's moil of *frustration exhaustion*.

"But *why* would they dismiss you over poor grooming? It does seem excessive, Xander."

Xander rolled his head until he could see Wesley. "You've never worked for an American corporation, have you?"

"Well, no but - "

"If they make an exception for me, they have to make an exception for everyone." Xander quoted from memory of what felt like a hundred fast food managers. "Long hair and piercings are a safety hazard on the site."

"What about that bloke - Indian bloke? You said he had a braid down to there, love?" Spike ran the tip of his finger across Xander's lower back and Xander sighed. His stomach was tight with tension.
and...anger.

"He gets a special 'being Native American' exception. Religious thing or...something, I dunno. I was too pissed to pay attention 'cause they made some fuckin'...remarks about you. About...'propriety'."

"What the fuck do they know about it?" Spike snarled, fury rising white-hot and dangerous. *Got to get him away from this shite!*

Xander closed his eye, shivering under the prickling wash of Spike's fury - felt the hairs on his arms stand up. "They know I've been taking you on site with me - big no-no." He licked his lips. "They also mentioned letting a 'punk girlfriend' run loose in dangerous terrain and do I know how much she could sue them for if anything happened to her out there?"

"Illyria?"

"Probably. Someone needs an eye exam if they
meant Spike."

"Do you think that could be...trouble? They won't try to - find her, will they?"

"You mean trouble like getting me fired?" Xander waved a hand, dropped it back onto Spike's flank and closed his eye. "No. No trouble. I can say without a doubt in my mind that there is no further risk to the Xan-man from Illyria being spotted on site." He burrowed into Wes' warm thigh, trying the ostrich approach.

Wesley rubbed his hand slowly up and down Xander's arm, trying to soothe him. He could smell Spike's growing rage and frustration and his own demon was shivering - snarling. Wanting to hurt what had hurt it's own - what had hurt... Family. Lovers...mine. I don't care...what they think. They are! "We're here, Xander..."

Xander lifted his head and stretched - used his hand to tug at Wes' shirt until he could press his lips to Wesley's. "You gonna be my scary sexy demon guy
too?"

Wesley slid his hand upward, cupped the back of Xander's head carefully. "I am."

Xander smiled at that - went on smiling even as his cell rang and Spike huffed out a curse at the song. *Change that, change that...*

"Hello?"

"Hey, Alex - it's Russ. I've got the papers."

"Okay - hit me. What's the date? March, right?"
There was a long pause and Xander heard Russ take in a breath - and he knew. *Fuck.*

"Xan?" Xander had gone still and Spike was so tense now he was about to scream. *Gotta go and kill something. Soon. Or fuck my boys through the mattress. Damnit...*

Xander kept his eye closed. "December 23, 2004." Russ took another deep breath, let it out slowly and
finished reading. "Nine in the morning at the Sunnydale site headquarters."

"Fuck."

"And your dated signature's on the bottom, man."

"Fuck," Xander repeated, with feeling.

~*~*~*~*~

Wes had gotten back up an hour earlier - and even though Spike hadn't fucked him quite through the mattress, he'd done his best. And done his best with Xander, and now he had a warm and sleepy human sprawled over him, rough finger tracing patterns on Spike's chest as his own hand stroked up and down over Xander's back.

"It's some kind of crazy...Hellmouth thing. Has to be," Xander said, fifth time or maybe the sixth and Spike kissed his hair.
"Course it is, love. You'd never forget something like that and I know you told me March, too. And Russ and Carl. We'll figure it out. Don't worry about it." Spike slowly rubbed his cheek over Xander's hair, listening to Wes turning pages - scribbling notes. Wishing the other man had stayed, but knowing he wanted to do something - to be useful. He just didn't realize that lying in bed with your lovers was useful, too. Gotta teach him...that should be fun...

"You're humoring me," Xander accused without lifting his head but Spike could feel the smile - and feel the overwhelming well-fucked contentment that was a welcome replacement for Xander's earlier shame and frustration. "God. Even when I worked for Dog On A Stick I never missed a performance review."

"What in bloody hell is 'Dog on a Stick'?" The first mental image - grayish meat on a skewer, much like what was sold in the streets of Saigon - made Spike look down, wide-eyed, at Xander. "Some Vietnamese bloke have a cart? You sold Lassie to the kiddies?"
Xander snorted, jabbed his elbow into Spike's ribs to haul himself up far enough to look into Spike's eyes. "Hot dogs, Spike. Technically, of the species *Corn Doggus Americanus*. You know the place with the striped hats?" He gestured above his head. "I must've worked there before your sojourn in Casa Harris because you would *never* forget me in that stupid hat."

"Nothin' wrong with eating a little *canis lupus*, pet. Tastes...well..." Spike thought a moment. "Tasted mostly like that damn hot sauce they drowned it in. And you're right. You should never wear a hat."

"I thought you liked me in my manly yellow hard hat." Xander resettled himself over Spike's chest, wriggled around until they lay thigh to thigh, cock to cock - raised an eyebrow and wriggled more. "Okay. You like something."

"Like everything," Spike said, arching up into Xander and kissing him. Xander kissed back for a minute and then he was wiggling free and sauntering to the
bathroom, a look of wicked glee on his face. Spike reveled in the wantlovewant from him and then stretched - bounced up off the bed and wandered out into the main room. Wes was buried in a book, nose far too close to the crackly pages, his hand moving rapidly over a pad of paper as he took notes. He didn't even glance up when Spike walked past, rampant and trailing a finger down his back. Snorting in disgust, Spike grabbed a beer out of the 'fridge - opened it and took a long drink. And then someone knocked on the front door.

"Spike, would you mind...?" Wesley didn't lift his head from his research and Spike wondered if Wes even realized Spike was naked. With a snort, he decided Wesley probably wouldn't notice if Spike was wearing nothing but stockings and a garter belt. He crossed the room and threw the door open to reveal Gunn - Gunn with a sheaf of papers, a cane and eyebrows raised high over his sunglasses.

"It's blondie bear." Gunn removed his sunglasses, looking Spike's nudity up and down with amusement. "It's a whole lot of blondie bear. Who
ain't no natural blond. What're you doing here?"

"Charlie-boy!" Spike reached out and gave Gunn a buffeting sort of punch to his shoulder. Wes' front step was deeply shadowed by a wisteria plant that had grown out of all proportion to it's trellis and was currently climbing the roof. Gunn wobbled a bit on his cane and Spike stepped back, making a grand sort of 'come in' gesture. "What're you doing here? Don't remember Wes callin' you."

"You and Xander were indisposed." Wesley had set his book aside and circled the desk, taking the sheaf of papers from Gunn. "Please. Come in, Charles."

Gunn stepped over the threshold with a little smirk on his lips. "You're losing your touch in your old age, Wes."

"What makes you say that?"

"Time was, you'd never invite anybody into your home like that. You forget there's still vamps out there who ain't your friends?"
Wesley forced a smile. "Of course not. A vampire may not enter a human's home without invitation of one who lives there. I haven't forgotten anything." He licked his lips - took the sheaf of proffered papers. "Thank you for coming, Charles. Did you find what I asked for?"

"Yeah. You coulda found any of this - it's all public record." Gunn shuffled his stance, stood more heavily on his left leg than his right and didn't follow when Wesley retreated to his desk.

"Aren't you going to ask what it's for?"

"No way, man. I told you - I'm done with Angel's freaky shit. I know my place in this world and that ain't it."

Spike watched Gunn's halting progress over the threshold - listened to him chide Wes for his invitation and had to stop a minute and think. *Wes hasn't talked 'bout Charlie-boy much... Fuck, he hasn't told him! Not my place...* Spike felt a sort of
angry frustration at that, but shrugged it off. Things had been...bad, for a while between the two. Best to go slow.

"Sun's still up, Charlie-boy - you were hardly a threat," Spike said, going to flop on couch and taking another long drink from his beer. Gunn grinned at him, totally unmoved by his naked, mostly-hard state - limped over to the couch.

"I gotta admit, you look like one unthreatened guy." Gunn eased himself carefully down next to Spike and rested his cane against the side table. "What brought you back to town? Last time I saw you, you were headed for anywhere but here."

"Me." Xander wandered from the bedroom to the kitchen in a pair of jogging pants and harvested four beers from the refrigerator, passing them out before slouching onto the floor at Spike's feet and offering Gunn a hand. "Xander Harris."

"Charles Gunn."
"It's a long damn story," Spike said, finishing his first beer in one long gulp and opening the fresh one Xander had brought him. His fingertips absently skimmed the pale scars still visible across his torso. "I'll tell you...some other time. Hear you left Angel's little happy family. How's that workin' out for you?" He watched for a moment as Wes shuffled through the papers Gunn had brought, then turned his attention back to the other man, stroking his fingers over Xander's hair.

"It's workin'." Gunn uncapped his beer and took a drink, glanced at Wesley before going on. "A friend of mine runs a charity on Crenshaw. I've been workin' with her. I figure a few hundred more years doin' pro bono charity work and I might put a dent in the bad karma I earned on the Wolfram and Hart payroll. How's life workin' out for you? You look like you're doin' all right." Gunn's eyes settled pointedly on Xander and on Spike's hand that had settled onto Xander's chest, fingers possessively splayed.

"Oh yeah. I am Spike's one eyed sex machine," Xander mumbled under his breath, and grinned.
Spike tugged on Xander's hair, smirking at him. "Yeah - I've got my harem-boy, here - you wouldn't believe how flexible -" Spike snorted laughter as Xander whapped him on the thigh, flushed and open-mouthed. "Shouldn't tempt me, love," he snickered.

"Yeah - he's evil, I hear." Gunn gestured to Spike with the neck of his beer bottle.

Xander gave in and relaxed against Spike's thigh. "Yeah. I've heard the rumors about that, too."

"Charles, are you certain this is everything?" Wes called, frowning.

"Everything your man on the street can get his hands on."

"What can my lawyer on the street get his hands on?"

"What? No way!" Gunn set his beer carefully on the
"I told you - unless you're a poor teenager needing legal advice, the law offices of Charles Gunn are *closed.*"

"Charles, really - I wouldn't ask if this weren't a matter of some importance." Wesley took off his glasses and leaned forward, his expression earnest and intense. "There's someone - or something - trying to use the power of the Hellmouth -"

"Man, you're not *listening.*" Gunn shook his head, struggled to his feet from the depths of the couch. "I am *retired.* Look - I'm sorry there's shit goin' down in Sunnydale but if there's two things working for Wolfram and Hart taught me its shit goes down everyplace, and all I can deal with is the shit in my own neighborhood. Got that?"

"Now, Charlie - no need to get tetchity on our boy," Spike said, the beginnings of discontent clear in his voice. Wesley smiled faintly at Spike, leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

"I'm sorry, Charles - I don't mean to...to push you."
But...the potential for real harm is very clear, here. Many lives could be at stake if - if what I believe is happening is correct."

"Hey - wait a minute. You believe something?"
Xander twisted around to get a good look at Wesley.

"I believe many things."

"Do they give classes in cryptic at Watcher School?"

"I don't have enough information. Charles - please."

Gunn sighed - rubbed his hand over his scalp and looked from Wesley to Xander to Spike. "I've gotta think about it, man. Listen, Anne's expecting me at the shelter - we could use some extra help Christmas Eve, servin' up food, makin' sure everybody's got a bed or a piece of floor to sleep on. You come down there and help out and I'll let you talk some more. Then I'll make up my mind. We got a deal?"
Spike made an inarticulate sound and Xander did *something* to distract him. Wesley smiled, getting up from his chair to cross to Gunn. After a moment's hesitation he warmly squeezed Gunn's shoulder, feeling a wave of relief go through him. "Of course we will, Charles - anything to help. Please tell Anne we'll be there and...thank you."

"I haven't agreed to anything yet."

"Of course not."

"And I might *not* agree."

"I understand."

Wesley and Gunn stood there a moment, still and silent before Gunn smiled. "Be good to have you visiting for Christmas Eve, English."

"Yes - yes it will, Charles. I'm looking forward to it - we all are."

"I'm not," Spike grumbled, and suffered a pointed
stare from Wes.

"Blondie-bear, you do know you have to get dressed to come down there, right?" Gunn asked, turning carefully to face Spike, who stretched languidly and lay one hand suggestively on his belly.

"Might be more fun if I didn't."

"Might be less painful if you did," Wes muttered, and Xander sniggered into Spike's knee.

"We'll be there."

"They'll be there," Spike corrected, earning another whap from Xander.

"Thanks for - listening," Xander said.

"Agreeing to listen."

"Yes. Agreeing to listen. Never fear - we'll have you on our side by the end," Wes said, and his smile was full of challenge.
"Bring it, man." Gunn straightened, grinned back full of teeth and confidence. "Bring it."

~*~*~*~*~

It was pouring again when they finally made it out of the house and into the truck. Wes, of course, had a proper brolly, all black, knobbly, and looking like it was hiding a sword or at least a tranquilizer dart in the tip. Xander just ducked and dodged, grinning like a loon and hopping one puddle to splash through another. Once in the truck he shook his head like a dog and splashed all three of them.

"Xander, really," Wes grumped, but he was grinning - grinned harder when Xander leaned over and kissed him.

"Sorry Wes," Xander laughed. Spike started the truck - poked Xander's thigh.

"Gonna say sorry to me, too?"
"Sorry, Spike," Xander muttered, head down, peeking up through wet hair, laughter in his eyes. Spike growled - grabbed - and kissed, then put the truck into gear with a jerk. Xander clutched at Spike, feeling the roll of suppressed laughter and jumpy energy that didn't show on Spike's face and fell back into his seat with a snort. "Why am I apologizing to you? You're as wet as I am."

"You're apologizing for bein' a git. Inside of the window's all wet, now - drivin' me nuts to see the little drops." Spike swiped at the windshield - shifted gears and lanes and slapped the horn, growling. "Fuckin' gobshites don't know what side of the road to drive on. Oi!"

"Spike - Xander is still a fragile mortal. Perhaps if you..."

Xander glanced at Wesley to find him clutching the door frame with white knuckles and gently disengaged Wes' fingers, folding his own around them. "This is nothing. You should take a
motorcycle ride with him."

"'M a vampire, Wes - got the reflexes an' all. Been drivin' since the bloody turn of the - bloody hell! Fuckin' SUV's make me wanna - did you see that? Fuckin' bastard didn't even - Oi!" Xander reached out and snapped on the stereo - loud. Leaned in close to Wes.

"Sometimes it's better to try and lose yourself in the music," he whispered.

"Heard that!"

black leather
babe's gonna get to you

Xander grinned and cranked up the volume - sang along, feeling like he wanted to bounce right out of the truck.

stormy weather
you know heaven's rain is due
"I can't hear you, Spike! You'll have to speak louder!"

Spike snarled and jerked the wheel hard to the left, threw a laughing Xander into Wesley and jabbed at the button on the CD changer. "Wanker."

"Hey, buddy - that's a classic."

Suddenly a chaotic, synthetic - *noise* - was blasting out of the speakers and Wesley felt himself actually wince away from it as the speakers crackled. Spike's finger was pressing 'up' on the volume and Wesley found himself huddling *away* in stunned disbelief that anything could be that...horrifically...awful. Spike was singing along to the rasping, droning, unintelligible voice of the singer, pounding his fists on the steering-wheel.

"...we've taken it somewhere from far away the voices echo from yesterday behind the crack behind the image on the wall I see you curled up tightly hiding from it all -"
Xander jabbed the soft mute button and caught Spike's hand before he could turn it back up. "We're about to lose Wes out the window, sweetheart." He could still feel Wesley trembling faintly - vibration under the skin where their thighs pressed together and the fluttering of Wesley's fingers in Xander's grip.

"I - it's quite all right." Wesley sagged against the door frame, unable to take his wary gaze from the glowing display of the CD changer.

Spike took a hard right - hit a puddle and fishtailed, correcting absently while reaching over to stroke Wes' thigh. "Sorry, love, I forgot. We'll - we'll just talk, yeah? Or - let you recover, old man." Letting his lips curl up into a wicked grin and feeling Xander stifle laughter - *feeling* it coil through him like bubbles and sparks.

"That was absolutely *horrible*, Spike!"

"Not the topic of conversation I had in mind, mate."
Xander couldn't hold it in anymore and collapsed into the seat, laughing - felt the roll and echo of Spike's suppressed laughter and the shift of Spike's thigh beneath his hand. "Sorry. Sorry. God - " And Wesley was giving him such a Watcher look of disapproval, it set him off all over again.

"Watcher - shut him up, would you? Kiss him or he'll start hiccupping. Can't abide that," Spike said, lighting up and cracking his window and steering with his knees and Wesley watched for a split second in horrified fascination and then he yanked Xander to him by his shirt-front and did as Spike had asked. Why not? I'd rather die wrapped around Xander than a lamp post.

Xander only subsided half into Wesley's lap, all the way into Wes' sweater which was bunched up around his ribs, hands fitting into the small of Wes' back where the skin was soft and hot enough to leave an achy burn against his palms. "I don't hiccup." Words mumbled into Wesley's mouth and a peek to the side to find Spike looking at them. "Aren't you supposed to be watching the road?"
"I am," Spike insisted - looked up and fiddled the steering wheel left and then right, just to prove it. Then he went back to watching Wes and Xander kiss, heat and sweet and want. "Isn't there an underground garage right across the street from BatVamp headquarters?" he asked, letting his hand go out and stroke up Xander's back - slide along Wes' arm where it was rucking Xander's shirt right up his spine.

"Under the bank building - " Wesley tried to say before Xander swallowed the words, swarmed into his lap to straddle his thighs and jam a knee between the seat and the door frame, panting. Wesley's eyes flickered to the fresh fresh bite on the left side of Xander's neck - then over to the newly healed bite on Spike's and groaned. "Dear god. You're both high, aren't you?"

"Only way to face a bloody houseful of Slayers, BatVamp and Andrew. Thank Christ," Spike added, seeing the bank building sign and cutting across three lanes to just barely make the turn into the
building. He drove straight back - slammed the truck into 'park' - yanked the parking brake on and was on Wes and Xander before either of them had recovered from the sudden stop. Wes' mouth was coffee and whiskey and lemon-pepper-sweet, Xander's was sugar and ginger and spice - Wes had fancy Christmas biscuits - and he groaned as he felt hands on him - mouths on him. "Ah, god..."

"Let's stay in here - fuck for a couple of hours instead." Xander wormed his fingers into Spike's jeans, *lust* and the strain of the upcoming parties rolling off him in a swirl of *needneed*, drinking in the taste of whiskey and Christmas cookies on Spike's lips.

"You know we can't. Angel is - *god!*" Wesley jerked at the feeling of Xander's hand through his opened zipper, trapped between Spike's cool and Xander's warmth.

"Angel's got low expectations for us anyway."

"Tosser hasn't had a good shag since that Nina chit
fled the country - a good coring'd do him some good." Spike slid back - *pulled* Wes, pushed Xander, and had Wes' trousers open and down. Impulse and image in his head - *some* of it getting through to Xander and in a moment he was licking up one side of Wes' cock while Xander licked down the other and the ex-Watcher writhed above them, suddenly-clawed hands clutching at hair and shoulders, deeply plum skin of his cock glistening in the hazed sodium glare of a nearby street-light. Arching and then sinking carefully back, the spines flexible enough to bend and not punch right through the leather of the seat-back.

Vibrations of a deep moan - maybe Xander, maybe Spike - slid through his flesh, scattered thought and *god* he was supposed to be the *responsible* one, not the one with - with his trousers down around his knees and *oh dear god*. Slide of warm tongue - cool tongue around his glans, twining and meeting - sharing him like a bloody ice lolly and fighting for the taste - the - "God!" Wesley's fingers spasmed on the door handle, in Spike's hair when one wriggled a tongue into him for *more*. 
Taste of salt, taste of iron, peppery demon taste on Spike's tongue and Xander chased it back into Spike's mouth, velvety slickness of Wesley's cock against the corner of his mouth and want want want beating like tribal drums between them.

Yeah, fuck yeah, beats any party any day, god... Spike pulled at Wes' thigh, wanting them open, wanting to push up into fever-heat - wanting to make Wes say their names in the soft, breaking voice he had, when it was all too much and the demon had shimmered to the surface. Xander's hand was with his, stroking the velvet skin of Wes' sac - pushing farther back and Wes was twisting under them - making small sounds of approval and encouragement and Spike looked up, for one moment, catching Xander's eye - seeing everything he was feeling and grinning before taking Wes deep into the back of his throat.

"Christ! Spike!" Wesley bucked beneath them, scalp spines digging hard into the leather of the head rest, heart beat a steady thrum thrum thrum
through all three of them - moaned his release into Xander's lips, Xander's tongue, riding hard on Xander's clever fingers, slick with Fucking hell lubricant? and closed warm and slick around his balls, pushing pushing the tight skin behind until Wesley shook with the aftershocks. He looked down, dazed into three hazy eyes - hungry eyes and shivered, watching the play of tongues, slide of - of... A dry shudder ran the length of Wesley's spine and tingled in spent balls.

Xander closed his lips around Spike's tongue, suckled pepper-sea taste, lust thickening the air of the cab, unconsciously kneading, kneading the flesh of Wesley's thigh.

"Fuck - Wes - taste so damn -" Spike was interrupted by Xander's mouth and Wesley watched hungrily as they kissed - watched Spike yank and squirm, fighting tight jeans until they were past his knees - jerking up on the seat-latch so that the whole bench shot backwards and juddered to a stop at the end of its track. "Xanderrr..." Spike growled, and Xander was shimmying - scrambling - and yes,
dear god, that was lube. Wes watched, panting lightly, as Xander settled on Spike's lap, back to chest - as he positioned himself over Spike - brief glimpse of the thick ring in Spike's cock - and then slid down, hard and fast. Both bodies arched - both necks curved back in sheer delight and then Spike was pulling Xander back onto his chest, shirt up high under Xander's armpits, Spike's hand pale on Xander's tight-trembling belly, just brushing the base of Xander's cock.

"Wanna taste, Wes? Make him sit here so still and you just..." Wes moved - and Xander was warm and spicy-sweet on his tongue.

Xander jerked at Spike's words - held still by the hand on his belly, only able to squirm, panting; lust and need and Spike's blood fizzing through his veins. "Oh fuck - fuck, no way you bastard!" Muscles strained as he fought to rock, thrust - anything as he felt Wesley's throat close around him and whined. "Spi-ike!"

"Shhh, shhh, shhh..." Spike let his fingers play over
Xander's nipples, tugging at the jewelry - rocked up and back slowly, slowly - shivering at the fierce clasp of muscle around his cock - at Xander's hand digging into his hair and yanking - skittering over Wes' back. Xander's belly rippled and heaved under his other hand and Spike bent his head to Xander's throat - licked and worried the fresh bite-mark while Xander writhed - begged - panted.

"Doesn't Wes feel good?" he murmured, licking. "So fuckin' hot around you - so fuckin'...wet... Wes, love...you're so damn...gorgeous..." Spike let his hand trail down Xander's body to Wes' spined scalp - petted there while Wes moved over Xander and Xander gasped for air.

Wesley heard Spike's bones shift - heard his fangs pierce Xander's flesh and Xander groan and then all was heat, salt-musk and hammering human heartbeat and the cool swirl of Spike's fingertips over his scalp. And Wesley - on his knees in a pick-up truck, trousers down, spines up and a hard column of human flesh spearing open his throat - moaned when Xander came.
"Jesus - fucking..." Xander's voice trailed off and Wesley looked up to see Spike kissing him, fangs and one hand tight in Xander's hair - the other still stroking over Wesley's scalp and he shivered and pushed the demon away - hoisted himself back up into the seat. And was immediately grabbed and pulled and then Spike was kissing him and moaning into the kiss.

"Taste so fuckin' good, Wes, the two of you..." Spike leaned his forehead on Wes' - tugged Xander in close and for a moment there was just heat and flesh, spice and blood-scent and a closeness that made Wesley shiver. Then Xander was making 'I'm getting up' motions and Spike was looking as if he might not let him.

Wesley straightened his clothes, checked his watch and glanced back at Spike and Xander only to find Xander giving in, sagging into Spike's grasp with his head tipped blissfully back onto Spike's shoulder and the vampire's lips mouthing over the fresh bite. "If we don't go in soon, Andrew may come looking
for us, you realize."

"Mealy-mouthed little git," Spike muttered indistinctly, and Xander only tensed for a moment and then arched his hips up, one hand curving up behind Spike's neck, the other reaching out and snagging the sleeve of Wesley's sweater.

"You could get on top, Wes, there's room - aah...Ssspike..."

Wesley gently disengaged Xander's fingers, kissed his open mouth lingeringly, then Spike's. "Or I could leave the two of you to enjoy yourselves and let our host know you've been delayed before he comes looking."

"Not as fun - Wes -" Spike moved and Xander lost his breath - his eyes fluttered shut and Spike's - golden and fierce and wanting - were fixed on Wesley then. "Wesss..." he breathed, and Wesley shuddered.

**God, worse than Lilah in all the right ways.** The
thought made Wesley smile, inch backward on the seat and pop open the door. "Going. Now." And the resolve almost crumbled with Xander's shuddering moan, a glimpse of Spike's cock hard and slick sliding oh so slowly out of him then in with a wet slap of skin on skin. Then Spike's wrist lifted to Xander's mouth, ecstatic expression on Xander's face as he bit and Wesley cleared his throat. "Now," he said and fled, darting across the rain-lashed street with his jacket over his head rather than retreating to retrieve his umbrella from the truck's back seat.

He'd be lucky to arrive at the party in time for New Year's Eve if he did.

"Damnit -" Spike tugged Xander's head over until he could kiss him - stop him talking because right now - right now the blood was fizzing through them both, and the link was a humming, living thing, and Spike just wanted to sink into Xander's heat and sweet, tight hold and never surface. Certainly didn't want to stare down a double-handful of snot-nosed almost-Slayers who didn't hold a candle to the ones
that had come before. Or deal with Andrew's effusive babble, or Angel's black looks.

Although he'll have a hell of a time ignoring us... Spike grinned - rescued his arm from Xander's bite and started fucking in earnest as Xander scrambled to brace himself with both hands on the steering wheel. Don't actually want to leave Wes to face BatVamp all alone...

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Wesley shivered, dripping under the sodden awning of the Hotel Ali Baba - raked his fingers through his hair and hoped to whichever gods looked out for his breed of demon that he was presentable enough for Angel.

Not oh bugger it that Angel wouldn't be able to smell every guilty transgression the moment he walked through the door. Well...happy Christmas then, Angel. With a last deep breath, Wesley pushed the doors open and entered a world of
garish seasonal confusion. *Or possibly happy Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Solstice, Ramadan and Chok-taar mating season.*

"Wesley!" Wesley winced slightly from the volume of Andrew's hail, then stiffened his spine and turned from the coat-rack, smiling. Andrew barreled into him, grinning. Dressed in dark slacks, shiny shoes, a white shirt and tie and a thickly quilted jacket that was a cross between a bed-jacket for the Dowager Empress of China and Carey Grant's smoking jacket, Andrew hugged him hard, pounding his back. Then he stepped back, grinning, and flourished an un-lit pipe.

"What do you think? Isn't it great? Angel told me I could do whatever I wanted to, so I thought a thoughtful display of the many cultures and beliefs represented by the Council and the Slayers -" Andrew glanced around and then leaned closer, his voice dropping. "Except for the Chok-taar thing. That was a mistake on the store's part and they wouldn't take it back, but Connor likes the little balls, so..." Andrew straightened up again, shoving
the pipe away into a pocket. "There's water, juice, organic eggnog with range-free eggs, all-natural punch with sparkling soda water, non-alcoholic cham-pag-nee -" Andrew chuckled at his little joke and Wesley winced again and smiled faintly. "And - there's the eggnog Connor made." Andrew frowned, and Wesley patted his shoulder.

"No good, then?"

"No, it's fine, it's just...I think he put alcohol in it," Andrew said, and Wesley heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, then, let's sample it and find out."

"I'm afraid that is a no-can-do, Wesley." Andrew held up his hands, palms out and took a token step back. "A watcher must be in full control of his faculties in the presence of his Slayer."

Wesley glanced over - at the pairs and threesomes of giggling girls and a handful of awkward boyfriends - the scattering of parents. "And of course that applies ten-fold to you?" He suppressed
the smile that wanted to surface, mentally counting down the seconds until Andrew took him fully, completely, charmingly seriously.

"Indeed, for my duty is to all of them, my friend. In this modern age, the Watcher must be especially vigilant over the welfare of his charges."

Wesley waited for Andrew to give some indication that it was a joke - an innuendo - anything but pompous sincerity and felt an irrational wave of fondness for his ridiculous adherence to rules Wesley still knew by heart. He clasped Andrew's shoulder briefly. "Good man. I'll just sample the eggnog now."

Wesley made his way across the hotel lobby, exchanging greetings with the girls and shaking hands with one or two clammy-handed boys - nodding to the parents. He came to rest at the refreshments table and scooped up some eggnog - took a long pull of it and promptly had a coughing fit. Dear gods. Have to keep the girls away from this.
"He made it a little strong," Angel said, materializing beside him, and Wesley wiped his mouth on a red and gold spangled paper napkin.

"And you *let* him?" Wesley wasn't certain whether to laugh or stare at his friend in amazement.

"We'll probably need it. Where are -" Angel took a deep breath and his eyes sparked something, deep and dark. "Spike and Xander?"

Wesley cleared his throat and took a smaller sip this time, the eggnog going down much more smoothly when the fiery burn was expected. "They'll be along."

"They wanted another go in the truck, huh?" Angel wasn't looking at Wesley - was instead refilling a cup for himself.

Wesley watched Angel's profile carefully. "You're taking this extraordinarily well."

"Not like I have a choice, is it?" Angel snapped, and
then immediately looked sorry. He took his own sip of eggnog and watched a Slayer and boyfriend revolve unsteadily past, trying for an elegant quasi-waltz and not quite hitting the mark. Andrew had brought his own stereo down and currently it was playing Frank Sinatra. "Wes, I just don't...get it," Angel said finally, and Wesley sighed softly.

*I know you don't... I'm not sure you ever will. You see Spike - and Xander, as well - through the lens of the past...* Wesley laid a hand on Angel's arm, left it there until Angel looked at him. "Perhaps you should try to accept it instead." He tried to gentle his voice, didn't allow Angel to look away until he nodded, then dropped his hand and took another cup of eggnog for himself.

"I am so sick of having to *accept* things." Angel muttered under his breath but Wesley relaxed. Knew. It was a start.

"You'll be surprised how fast they...grow on you," Wesley murmured, taking a crab-puff and nibbling. Angel snorted and then stiffened, and Wesley saw
motion near the door - then Spike and Xander came in. Rush of darkness and wind and rain, cigarette smoke and leather. Profanity and laughter and Wesley felt himself grinning. *Mine, both of them...somehow, in some small way...mine.*

"Supposed to bloody *snow* at Christmas, typical California shite, all this rain, nothing like Christmases back home -" Spike shook off his duster and hung it up - took a deep drag of his cigarette and then snagged Xander close with his arm as soon as Xander had his own jacket hung. "Wes! There you are." Spike hauled Xander across the room, dodging Slayers and growling at boyfriends - eyeing the alarmed-looking parents as if they were aliens. Andrew drew them aside - up to the Mezzanine - talking softly, and Spike grinned as the two of them ended up on the other side of Wes.

"Here I am," Wesley agreed, easily taking Spike's arm and Spike's kiss because really, Angel needed to begin accepting right *now*. And if he noticed how strongly Xander's kiss tasted of all three of them and felt a brief rush of disappointment that he'd
missed the last of the fun in Xander's truck...he didn't feel a need to mention it out loud.

"It's - uh - quite the party." Xander hadn't moved more than an inch from Spike since coming in but looked relaxed enough even if he was eyeing the potent eggnog with longing.

"Xander! Spike! So glad you could make it!" Andrew swept down from on high and warmly hugged the two of them. Spike patted his sateen shoulder awkwardly, caught between shoving him away and humoring the little git. "Oh, you're all wet, Xander - would you like a towel? Spike - Illyria has been asking after you. Oh, look, the crudites platter is running low, let me fix that -" Andrew whipped a platter off the table and disappeared kitchen-wards, leaving them all blinking in his wake. Connor ambled over, grinning - a gallon of eggnog in one hand, bottles of rum and brandy in the other.

"I think he's secretly hittin' the crack-pipe, man," he said - uncapped all three and poured them into the punch bowl.
Angel snatched the alcohol away from Connor, glaring. "You're underage," he hissed. "How did you get this?"

Connor blinked at him - grinned again. "Do you really wanna know, dad?" Angel opened his mouth to reply and was roughly shouldered aside by Spike, who dunked two glasses into the bowl and handed one - dripping and brimful - to Xander.

"Who cares where he got it? And Christ, Angelus - what's with this - National Lampoon Christmas decor, anyway?" He waved his hand around the room, gulping the eggnog as Xander took a drink and choked, coughing. Wesley patted Xander's back, smiling.

"Andrew organized all of this, actually," Wes said, waving his hand around at the multi-colored twinkle-lights, the tinsel garlands and the gigantic tree that was all but breaking under the weight of the ornaments. "Fortunately, Connor was in charge of the eggnog - refills, anyone?" Four cups were
thrust forward and Wes blinked in surprise.

Connor grinned - brandished the ladle in a spray of fifty proof droplets. "And I didn't even use a recipe."

"Just fill the damn thing," Angel growled and Xander found himself in the very very rare position of agreeing one hundred percent with Angel.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander staggered through the blue doorway and collapsed onto an ancient couch that smelled of Gunn's cologne - something like a low-key spice bazaar with something sweetly musky beneath. Nice. But not helpful to Xander's aching head. He closed his eye for just five minutes and wished - again - that he'd had a few more helpings of Connor's eggnog while he could get away with it.

The teen center was nice - clean - and loud, full of every kid in East LA and god, he was so fucking tired of answering questions about surviving his 'vampire
attack' and passing out made up stories about how he lost his eye. He heard the door open again and found Gunn himself standing there, damp towel in hand. "Hey, man. Wes said you're not much of a party guy."

Xander accepted the towel gratefully and sank his face into its blissfully cool folds. "Wes would be right."

"Have a little Christmas spirit."

Xander lifted his head and forced a smile. "Unless the Christmas spirit comes in a bottle, I'll pass."

"So how was the get-together over at A.I.?" Gunn asked, and Xander wiped the towel slowly over the back of his neck, shivering just a little when it brushed the bite-mark.

"It was...a little tense. Angel and Spike 'had words'." Xander made little finger-quotes - flopped back onto the couch with a sigh. "And the Slayers were all kinda...tense." The Slayer 'buzz' had grated on
Spike bad enough that he'd actually *growled* at the ones that insisted on getting too close - demon to the fore and his whole bearing screaming *predator*. More 'words' were had after that, although privately Xander thought Angel was affected by it, too.

"And Andrew was doing his best Martha Stewart meets Hugh Hefner, complete with pipe." Gunn snorted laughter and Xander smiled - a real smile, tired and a little shaky. "Thank god for Connor's eggnog." Xander folded the cool towel and draped it around his neck, chilling the radiant heat surrounding Spike's bite with a soft moan.

"You and Spike looked buzzed on more than eggnog, man."

Xander opened his eye slowly to find Gunn watching him steadily - none of the embarrassed flickering glances Willow used to give him. "Why be coy about it?"

"Why be *dumb* about it?"
"I am so not having this conversation. Do the words 'consenting adults' mean anything to you?"

"Do the words 'undead corpse' mean anything to you?"

"Souled."

"Dead."

"In love."

"They say love's blind - I guess it's kinda thick-headed, too." Gunn limped over to his desk and leaned there, cane in both hands across his knees. "I can get the love, man. I mean - Cordy and Angel... But - this -" Gunn gestured at his own neck and Xander closed his eye for a moment, wishing he were home with Spike - in the truck with Spike - out fighting demons with Spike, because anything was better than a heart-to-heart with a veteran vampire-killer who'd dusted his own sister and survived Angelus.
"It's not... It's just part of it, Gunn. It's - part of being in love with a vampire. I can feel him, because of that. When he's close. He can feel me. Inside, I mean," Xander added, as Gunn's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "It's like...Spike-radio, all day and all night and I'm the only one who can get the frequency."

"Better be some good radio for that kinda price."

Xander kept his eye closed, remembered the last tingle of Spike before he drove off - love, want sure but all shimmering and jittering with mine mine mine and the pent up aggression that always followed time with Angel. Xander fought the urge to drape the towel modestly over his lap and felt the blood flowing into his cheeks. "What would you pay...to know how much you're wanted? To never doubt it for a second?"

Gunn just looked at him, his dark eyes brimming with some emotion - some knowledge or some memory, and after a moment he slowly nodded his
head.

"Yeah, okay. I get that. It's just... Man, I've been fighting and killing vamps for years - I just can't see that -" hand to throat again, and Xander's own hand mirrored the gesture, touching sensitive flesh and skittering away. "I can't see that and feel...comfortable. Yet. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I - get it." Xander scrubbed the warming towel back over his head - stood up and stretched hard, wincing a little as muscles pulled and twanged. He'd done a days worth of heavy lifting in the last couple of hours, and on top of Connor's eggnog and the wavering edge of blood-crash, he was really, really wanting to go home. Something across the room caught his eye and he grinned tiredly. "Hey - no way that's a model of the VF-17D Nightmare!"

"Sure is. I've got the rest of the Macross 7 set at home. Bought it with my first paycheck." Gunn's expression softened into something wistful and he eased his way off the desk, limped to the book case
and took down the model, turned it in his hands. "Evil money, sure - but I went right from the office to the comic shop, you know? Been watching that set behind the counter for years like a kid lookin' into the ice cream parlor and then it was mine."

"Babylon-5 collector plates," Xander admitted.

"You're shitting me."

"Nuh." Xander shook his head, folded and re-folded the towel - remembering. "First paycheck at the Happy Egg Roll and next thing I knew, I was calling the one-eight-hundred number at three in the morning."

Gunn laughed softly, fingertip just brushing over the poised, painted turret of the gatling gun. "Yeah. When it gets you, it gets you good." He set the model back on the shelf - glanced at the two others that shared the space and then sighed, turning back to Xander with a tired look on his face. "Man, I might not understand - everything, but... I get love, and I get...feeling wanted. Spike - chose a side, way
back when, as far as I can tell, and... That's good enough for me." Xander smiled - nodded, rubbing his hand back through his damp, rumpled hair.

"Good. I'm...glad. I didn't want... Wes really thinks a lot of you, and Connor, so - I'm glad we can..." Small shrug, and Gunn nodded, and Xander felt a little coil of tension unwind in him. Then someone knocked and the door opened, fast. A kid stood there, baggy Salvation Army clothes and a Santa hat, plate of cookies in his hand.

"Anne says she needs you, Gunn - both of you," the kid said, and irritation frustration amusement want mine. Xander turned to Gunn.

"I think my ride's here."

"Radio Spike?" Gunn asked, set down the model and traded it for his cane.

"All Spike, all the time."

Xander's own relief all but overwhelmed Spike's
"Bloody hell, woman, ask the Watcher! I promise not to touch a single one of your little soon-to-be-incarcerated pets."

"That's our Blondie Bear." Gunn raised his voice. "He's okay, Anne! He's with Xander."

Xander felt the prickle of eyes on him at that. "Come on, guys - the free show's over," he mumbled. And then Spike was inside and Xander's mental self was doing the Snoopy dance his physical self was way too tired to join in on.

Spike stalked across the room, dodging gormless orphans and second-hand furniture - wrapped himself around Xander and just held on. Tired hurt want love in pulsing waves, and Spike snarled unconsciously as Gunn limped a couple of steps closer, hand held up palm out.

"Hey, hey - just wanted to..."

"It's okay, sweetheart," Xander mumbled, face in Spike's neck and hands under the duster - under the
t-shirt, fingers digging in.

"Sorry, Charlie-boy. Didn't mean... We're goin' home. Tell Wes, yeah?"

"Yeah," Gunn said softly and dropped his hand - looked across the room where Wesley was speaking earnestly to a group of three young men, a cookie in one hand and a pencil in the other, pieces of paper scattered across the low-lying table between them. "I'll get him home."

Xander listened to the ritualized exchange of thanks and mumbled something that was either a 'see you later and thanks for the turkey' or possibly 'who let the guys with jackhammers into my skull?' but he didn't miss the closed-off unhappy look on Anne's face or the way she kept her eyes on Spike until they were out and the door was firmly shut behind them.

"What was wrong with Anne?" Xander hauled himself into the truck - yelped when Spike's helping hands turned out to be groping hands and swatted
at him until he was jerked into a hard and fast kiss. "Spike - what was - ?" Xander tried to mumble before losing the thread of the conversation.

Spike kissed until Xander was a pliant rope of muscle and bone, lying against him. The rain had slacked to a drizzle and Spike leaned against the door-frame and palmed Xander's hair back off his forehead - cupped a scratchy cheek. Mist pearled on Xander's eyelashes and thickened the air, and Spike took in a long, deep breath, scenting the night air - mostly just scenting Xander.

"Apparently I tried to eat her once in Sunnydale. Only got away 'cause the Slayer had Dru by the throat. So - we're not well met by moonlight, yeah?"

Xander looked back at Spike for silent moments of Spike petting his hair - pulling off his patch and feathering chill fingertips over the reddened skin where the band dug in. He leaned his face into the touch, eye closed. "Speaking as one of your escaped snack packs myself, I'm pretty sure she'll get over
"Think so, love?" Spike rubbed Xander's forehead - temples - in slow circles with the tips of his fingers, feeling the tension in Xander break and flow away, feeling the hurt that was there easing back. Tired hungry love, and Spike pulled him back for a short, soft kiss. "Let's get back to the Watcher's house - let me scrub the stink of all those people off you and wrap you up warm and soft in bed, yeah? Let me take care of you, love."

"You know," Xander said and followed Spike with his eye as he circled the truck because turning his head was way too much energy, "once, I was a manly man who would have put up a fight. Who would have insisted on a quick shower and a brisk rub down with a bar of Irish Spring."

"And now?" The truck bounced on its axles as Spike hopped in, slammed his door and cranked the ignition.

"Now, take me home. Feed me. Massage me."
Pamper me." Xander leaned over, shut his truck door solidly and buckled his seat belt. "For I am super girly-man Xander and I sold my shame years ago for a chocolate bar and a foot rub from Anya. So count your lucky stars, buddy."

"I count 'em every day, love."

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The sand was damp, dense - lumpy, under the old blanket. It exuded a wet-earth and brine smell that was sharp in the heavy air. The breeze coming off the sea - chill and thick with salt and mist - was fresh in Spike's nose and mouth, and he closed his eyes and leaned back into Xander's embrace. Felt the contentment and happiness like a purr - like a small and lightless sun, right in the middle of his back. Warmth and love and he could sit there all night. The repeating shhssss and torn-paper roar of the sea made a bubble around them, blocking out traffic sounds and making it seem they were the only two alive for miles. Spike liked that. A lot.
Spike's skin was cool - but not yet *cold*, still warmed from the meal Spike had helped himself to on the way to the center and warm under the spot where Xander's palm had been resting since they settled onto the sand. Under Spike's shirt, and over his heart - over the pulse and glow Xander could feel when he closed his eye and concentrated. He bit lightly at the skin beneath Spike's ear, smiled into the shiver. "Wes called you from the Center, didn't he?"

"Course he did, love. Said you looked like the ragged end of a chain-gang, come and get you." Spike sighed and *snuggled*, *And I don't bloody well care who knows...* and settled his head more comfortably on Xander's shoulder - closed his eyes to the fast-moving swirl of gray-glowing clouds above them. Somewhere, the moon was struggling to be seen, faint glimmers through the storm-wrack. "Aren't you glad he did?"
"Fuck, yes." Xander felt Spike's chuckle under his palm and traced a tin man heart over the warmed skin. "Where did you go after the party at the hotel?"

"Oh, went for a drink - found a couple fights. Played some pool. Won 'bout...five hundred bucks. Oh. Got you something." Spike squirmed around, digging into various pockets until he found what he was looking for. Cowrie shells and beads made of opalescent mussel shells, strung between two leather thongs and long enough to wrap twice around Xander's left wrist. Spike tied it off and patted it gently, then smiled up at Xander. "Happy Christmas. Looks a bit like the one that bloke wears in that show you like - 'member? The one we rented. Queer as -?"

Spike didn't get to finish - was spun and kissed with ardent fervor and the faint flavor of Christmas cookies. "I remember." In the faintly reflected glow of the city lights on the low clouds, Spike's face was a study in black and white - deep shadow and pale
arches Xander had to touch with light brushes of fingertips over cheekbones, nose, lips. The shells were cool against his wrist and scratched pleasantly - *would* scratch every time he moved his hand and - remind him.

And that gave him the last push of courage he needed to dive off the deep end into girly presents land. "The last time I gave one of these, it didn't go so well." Xander dipped his hand into his pocket and when he pulled it out, a silver ring lay in his palm - subtle baroque design not unlike the garland around his neck. "But you chose the design - so I kinda thought you'd like it."

Spike plucked the ring slowly out of Xander's palm - turned it in the weak light, studying it. Slid it, finally, over the first finger of his left hand. It's clasp was chilly and strange and he flexed his hand - turned and took Xander's face gently between his palms. "It's lovely, pet. Perfect." And thanked his boy with a long and loving kiss, the pulse of Xander's *love want love* almost overwhelming.
"Is it selfish? That I want to look at you and see something I gave you on your hand?" Xander closed his eye - lay his forehead against Spike's, gentle roll side to side. "Nice hands. Great hands. *Naughty* hands - especially naughty hands."

"Why do you think I bite you here -" Spike ghosted his fingertips over the marks on Xander's neck, pushing into Xander's push. "When I could bite you a half-dozen places that don't show? I want to see my mark on you - want everyone *else* to see it. My mark, my gifts..." Tug at the bracelet, and Spike slipped his hands under Xander's shirt, caressing his ribs. "*Mine*..."

"You're a demon," Xander murmured, relaxing into the touch - the scent - the heady nearness and the intangible caress of the link. "What's my excuse?"

"You love me."

~*~*~*~*~
Xander woke to...something.

He ran down the mental list:

Spike?

Dead weight with his ear pressed to the center of Xander's chest. Xander flexed his fingers through the riot of black and white curls at the back of Spike's head and earned a sleepy grunt but no further response.

Phone?

Silent and charged, sitting on the nearest night table.

Doorbell?

Xander considered getting up for a moment before deciding anyone who came ringing the doorbell on Christmas morning could go away and come back Christmas afternoon like a decent person.
Wesley?

Still absent and Xander frowned, scooting back in bed until he could sit up, dislodging Spike to his lap where a warm arm was thrown over his legs and Spike made himself comfortable again, radiating \textit{fuck off} and sleepy comfort.

Then Xander heard voices in the kitchen - Wesley and Gunn - and was still rubbing the sleep out of his eye when Wesley appeared in the doorway, still wearing the clothes he'd had on the day before, Gunn standing behind him.

"The party got better after I left?"

"Well, if by \textit{better} you mean one pre-adolescent throwing up in a potted fern and two others found...err...\textit{compromised} in the broom-closet then yes, better." Wesley couldn't help but smile at the picture Spike and Xander presented - tousled and sleep-dazed and utterly appealing. He sighed and mentally took hold - physically straightened his
shoulders. "Actually, Gunn and I talked and then - he had an idea so we -"

"You researched," Xander accused - and when Wesley looked the tiniest bit guilty, went on. "On Christmas Eve. Doesn't that mean you killed an angel or something?"

"Lawyers and evil, man - we never sleep." Gunn smirked.

"Lawyers and evil?"

"Okay, okay. The point is that Wes here mentioned something that got me thinkin'."

Wesley came all the way into the bedroom - dislodged Spike's feet from the end of the bed and sat. "He called up a contact from his tenure at Wolfram and Hart who got us into a cross-species business database."

"Cross-species?"
"Demons, man."

Awake and unhappy about it slammed through Xander as every muscle in Spike's back tensed. "Did you find a clue?"

"We found better than a clue." Gunn limped further into the room, passed a yellow legal pad to Xander. "We found a name."

Xander squinted at Gunn's handwriting - scanned down to the bottom where one name was circled. "Cardinal Ottaviano of the Otonius Clan?"

"That's our man. Uh - demon," Gunn said, nodding - grinning - and Xander grinned back. Gunn looked tired, and Wesley did, but they both seemed to think they'd found something good.

"Oo-kay. Now that's not a normal name. So - how is he - it - whatever, connected? I mean - we'd have noticed a Cardinal."

"Oh, Cardinal Ottaviano is a major player. The guy
has another name he uses when he's doin' the do with human businesses." Gunn limped closer and flipped a page or two, pointing, and Xander read aloud again.

"Mr. O. Antonello? Oh...fuck."

"What is it, pet?" Spike finally gave up pretending to sleep and rolled over - sat up and looked at the pad - followed Xander's shaking finger and got an arm around Xander when he let go of the pad and dropped his face to Spike's shoulder.

"Chairman of the board and majority shareholder of Antonello and Sons, the parent company of - " Spike stopped reading and Xander finished for him, words muffled into Spike's neck.

"Parent company of Sunnydale Southwest."
"Really?" Xander asked, and Spike straightened from his perusal of the 'fridge.

"Really, love. There's mustard and soy sauce and duck sauce and some...something green. And an egg but it's cracked and..." Spike shuddered delicately and opened the little door to the freezer that was inside the 'fridge. "And this. It's...it's..." Spike frowned - scraped impatiently at fuzzy ice crystals with his nails and then dug under the little cardboard box. It took actual vampiric strength to wrest the box from the floor of the freezer compartment.

"It think it's a pot pie," Spike said, and tossed it into the sink where it clanged off the porcelain. "One of those kind, yeah?"

"You mean - entrails and eyeballs and...'natural flavor' kind?" Xander asked, looking pitifully at the
sink and the crumpled box.

"Yeah. One of those. And sushi, but it's...gone off." Spike shut the fridge and slumped. Wes' kitchen was bare - unless you counted a tin of leeks and a box of stale Saltines. Which Spike didn't.

"Fuck," Xander said.

"Proper fucked," Spike agreed.

"All in favor of a tasty and delicious fast food meal from the mass-produced burger establishment on the corner?" Xander raised his hand.

Xander's stomach added its noisy two cents.

"Onion rings," Spike said, peering out the kitchen window. The sky was palely blue behind thin, racing clouds and sunlight chased shadow over the handkerchief-sized yard and the stretch of beach that he could see. Too much sun. "I'll just...lounge in the bed until you get back," he added, grinning over at Xander - sidling up close and draping himself over
Xander's body. Nibbling at bite-marks and love-bites and smooth, sweet skin until Xander shifted and slid warm hands over his back.

"Fu-uck, sweetheart." Xander closed his eye and slid a hand around Spike's hip to grasp hardening flesh - stroke slow and sweet in the close, warm space between their bodies. "Gonna save this for me until I get back?" Xander felt Spike's quiet chuckle as much as he heard it - nearly lost his resolve for a meal entirely when he heard the quiet noise of shifting bone, and tipped Spike's face into the crook of his neck with a grin.

"Course I will, love. Lay myself out on the bed, hard and ready for you...won't even touch myself 'til you get back. Just...think about you..." Spike bit down lightly on Xander's neck - didn't break the skin. Just held him for a moment, tongue fluttering against heat and pulse, gathering salt-sweet taste.

Xander licked his lips, raking fingernails over the nape of Spike's neck. He turned his head to brush his lips against Spike's ear, feeling the double pulse -
cock and shivery Radio Spike-lust in reaction. "Gonna hold you to that," he grinned. He stepped back reluctantly and raked his eyes down Spike to linger over the thick ring of blue-gray metal through hard, hard flesh. "So gonna hold you to that." He dragged Spike close again by the back of his neck, brushed his lips over rough ridges - down to the point of Spike's nose and over his lips, short and soft. "Onion rings," he said and determinedly turned his back and marched into the bedroom in search of jeans and a shirt.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander looked away from the snow-pale figure framed in Wes' window and strode away down the walk - turned right and started the three-block walk to the burger place. In-N-Out burger, if he remembered right. Or Rally's? He shrugged. Didn't matter - hot, salty and greasy, that was all he cared about. The sea rushed in and out across the street - beyond the sand - and Xander walked quickly, head up - grinning. Couldn't help it. Spike was waiting for
him and that...would make anybody grin.

Winter sunshine and Spike waiting for him at home - naked and hard. Enough to make a person crash trucks off the road which was why Xander was walking.

Walking and grinning, Xander took in the day - *let* it in, the way there never seemed to be time to, lately. The breeze was coming straight from the sea; kelp, salt and the metallic tang of the storm but with a the parting of the clouds, it wasn't cold. He stepped over a wide grassy crack in the uneven concrete and tipped his face up to the winter sunshine, drinking in the warmth on both eyelids - on the exposed bite high on his neck that made him shiver every time his hair whipped over it.

The salt sea breeze took on the unmistakable scent of french fries and Xander's happy fantasies of a naked Spike sprawled out on Wesley's bed - hard, wet, *thinking* - were almost overwhelmed by that burger commercial. The one that ran all the time on late night television featuring the kind of

He could still feel, very faintly, the fluttery vibration that was Spike - lust and love - fading as he walked, but there. He bounced a little with each step - nodded along with something - Eminem? - that was blasting from the stereo of a car passing on the street. Sniffed appreciatively at a puff of cooked-beef-and-cheese-laden air. Oh yeah. Bring it on. Extra everything and the biggest soda they got.

Xander cut off the sidewalk into scraggly grass, hopped the low wall into the parking lot and skirted the late afternoon mill of parents with their little soccer players and high school kids hanging out and filling up on greasy, sugary goodness. Pushing through the doors, he weighed up the length of the lines then chose the one with three girls who reminded him of the Cordettes.

Cordettes never had big orders. It was a reliable fact of life, one Xander had counted on many times in
his years at Sunnydale High.

Unless the food was expensive. Because then they ordered all five courses and a bottle of exclusive mineral water.

He watched one flirting with a guy in a letter jacket. *Run, kid! Run while you've still got your dignity and your allowance.* He snickered, earning a glare and a flip of sunny blonde hair.

*Ladies and gentlemen, still the grand champion of turning off the ladies.*

Of course, with a sexy, naked Spike waiting for him at home, who cared?

The line moved moderately quickly and Xander spent most of the next fifteen minutes zoning happily on Spike - trying to catch the elusive hum of the link and wondering if they'd eat first or... *Yeah, that first... 'cept onion rings taste nasty when they're cold and Spike knows that... Onion rings and sex? Ring toss...* Xander snorted softly to himself, trying
to shove that image back where it belonged. Ordered, paid, waited, collected, and made his way to the condiments bar to load up on ketchup and napkins and a straw. Someone bumped him - bumped his thigh - and he turned and looked down at a kid with a tray who was probably about eight.

"S-sorry," the kid muttered.

"That's okay. What'll it be for you? Ketchup? Mayonnaise? A spicy yet refreshing Dijon mustard?" Xander waved his hand over the condiments bar - earned a grin and a cocked head.

"Ketchup."

He grabbed a handful and dropped them onto her tray. With fish fillets. And good thing Spike isn't here to see the fried fish with ketchup show. "Here." He dropped a packet of vinegar onto her tray too and waited for the 'ewww vinegar on fish!' he knew was coming.

It didn't.
"What happened to your eye?"

Script changed, Xander stared back. "Huh?"

"Does it hurt to not have one?"

"Um - n-n-no most of the time it doesn't - "

"Laura!" A flustered-looking woman appeared, tray in one hand and toddler in the other, smiling nervously at Xander. "Come on and sit down right now - I'll get our ketchup and stuff. I'm sorry," she added, smiling again at Xander - bright, bright smile and her eyes flickering here, there, everywhere.

"Oh, that's -"

"Now, Laura." The woman herded her daughter away, leaning over her and saying - fierce whisper that Xander heard, anyway: "Don't ask people about their - their handicaps, that's rude!"

The Cordettes stopped giggling over their salads
and diet sodas - turned and stared - and suddenly, high school wasn't so funny anymore.

Flash of coming to school the day after a breakup. Pointing and giggling. Ice in the gut, spreading numbness. Pointing and whispering.

They were - staring.

And Xander really wished he was invisible.

He stopped his hand half way to his face and snatched up his soda, ducking behind his hair to get out of there.

Xander strode out of the restaurant, shouldering through a group of high-school boys, 'Whoa, dude, did you see -?' following in his wake. He pushed outside and nearly ran to the sidewalk - stopped and just breathed and tried to make his hands stop shaking and his stomach unclench and... And make the feeling of having exposed himself - of having done something dirty - go away.
Shouldn't - shouldn't feel like he'd *flashed* the kid - and everyone else in the restaurant.

A car honked as it passed him, ruffling dry leaves and crumpled fast food wrappers at his feet and he turned his face away - turned his face *down* until his hair screened everything. He hopped the low wall again and cut across the street and someone's yard, out onto the beach. Clutching the cooling bag of fast food against his chest with one arm and the soda with the other. *God. It's not like nobody would notice an eye missing. Come on, Harris. Pull it the fuck together.*

His stomach rolled at the scent of grease, and he dropped the bag to the sand - dropped down next to it and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids and felt the sun go back behind the clouds. *Breathed.*

Felt dirty.

*Jesus. *F**uck. *This is so wrong.*
Needed - to get home.

In a minute - just a few more minutes to pull himself together first.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike ran his hands down this thighs - up over his hips to his nipples and touched there, lightly. Down again, ribs and belly and thighs, avoiding his erection. Waiting. *Come on love, where are you? Hungry, me... Starving for you...* He shivered voluptuously as a breeze puffed in past the curtains, cool air stroking his skin. And then...

*Anger*guilt*shame*shame and he was up and off the bed - pelting out into the front room and yanking the door open - wincing back from scattered sunlight - searching.

*Xander! Jesus fucking Christ! Come home - come home now!* Hoping something of that got through.
He couldn't see Xander anywhere, just feel the guilt and sorrow like hammer-blows. Xander!

~*~*~*~*~

Tidal pull. Fierce. Fearful. Panic love nownownow ripped into Xander's chest and he curled around it, clasped it and breathed deep - wanted. Then up, out of the sand and - not running - as if that spot in the sand called him back as Spike called him forward.

Or the dirty weighed him down into the sand.

Walking, head down, Xander knew the moment Wesley's porch was in view. Knew Spike was there - trapped by the sunshine - waiting, calling. And he lifted his face, tangled hair hiding Spike completely for just a second. Wantguiltdirty aching in his belly, comecomecome a raging draw on his chest.
Spike could hear the growl rattling up out of his chest as he watched Xander move up the walk - awkward, shuffling gait and the feelings - the sick, fucked up feelings that he couldn't even begin to imagine the source of. Waited, and snatched Xander in over the threshold and slammed the door - wrapped himself around heat and sweat and sorry love shameshame.

"Love, what is it? Are you hurt? What is it?"

"I should be used to this by now." Soft and strained. The bag of fast food dropped to the floor, drink abandoned somewhere on the beach and Xander clutched Spike fiercely, shaking his head against his shoulder. He opened his mouth, words like 'patch' and 'normal' jamming up in his throat and emerging as a wordless creak. His socket ached and he took a hard breath of the angerfear rolling off Spike. "It's - just an eye."
Just an - what in bloody hell -! Spike wanted to crush Xander to him - wanted to go out and kill whoever had made him feel this - this shame. Glared at the warm light glowing behind Wes' flimsy curtains and stroked Xander's back - pushed his chin and mouth into the wind-knotted hair and closed his eyes. Tried to rein in the raging hate anger kill that surged up. "Love, love...Xander...fuckin' kill 'em, I'll..." He couldn't talk - he was shaking as hard as Xander was now so he just held on. *I love you, I love you, you've nothing to be ashamed of, nothing, nothing...fucking bastards, fucking...*

Wash of *love* and *anger* so strong Xander swayed on his feet, held onto Spike's solidity and listened to him breathe. He licked his lips and breathed in the lingering sex musk on Spike's skin and let it out in words. "It's not - fuck - they're not wrong." Because that's what he'd realized on the beach. That was - god, that was the worst of it. They weren't wrong. "Can't change the world, right?"

"They are wrong, damnit - they're so fucking wrong."
Xander, don't -" Spike pushed Xander back, just a little - looked at him. At his beautiful face and his eye - dark and troubled, sheened with moisture. At the empty socket that was, to Spike's way of thinking - a badge of honor.

A war-wound that announced Xander had fought and lived. Like Spike's scar from the Chinese Slayer. Proudly won - proudly worn. Not a disfigurement. Humans don't see it that way. Humans see the sunken lid and the hole underneath and...

"Fuck humans," he growled, and pulled Xander back into a hard, hard kiss. Passionate kiss. Love and want and the burning urge to protect. "Change the world one fucking corpse at a time, love."

So...hard to argue his way around a kiss that made it hard to breathe - hard to think. Xander licked his lips again and tasted Spike, smoke and blood, and breathed against his lips. "I am human. Don't want to fuck them when I've got you. Which I guess - y'know - means I'm fucking a corpse and one at a time is a pretty good idea unless we're talking you
and Wesley..." Xander gave up and slid his hand up Spike's back - curled his fingers over one bony shoulder and leaned there. *Cue laugh track for forced humor.*

Xander tried again. "This kid - god, maybe eight years old - came up to me at the In-N-Out. I was - playing around, gave her the ketchup packets she couldn't reach." He felt Spike's anger and frustration ebb and flow with his breath and shuffled closer until he could press his aching socket to a cool shoulder. "She asked what happened to my eye and... I don't mind that, Spike. I - don't. I'm *not* ashamed of it."

"Don't be. Damnit, Xan, it's - it's a fucking - *scar* is all - says you lived! It's not -" He could feel the ache beginning in the socket - could feel the hunched tension of Xander's shoulders and began moving his fingers in small, soothing circles. Stepped backwards until the couch was there and they could both collapse onto it. "It's not bad. It's...you."

Xander rose on his hands, arms framing Spike's face
looking down at him. Had to smile because under the anger, nothing but love, love you mine. He dipped, kissed one eyelid then the other, eyelashes fluttering against his chin, then kissed Spike's mouth and settled. Shifted until he and Spike were a tangle of arms and legs and lovemine and tried to let it go. "Yeah. The kid's mom acted like it - like I was something...dirty. And then it felt like something dirty."

"Fuck her, then. I'll fuckin' gut her," Spike muttered, winding closer around the heat and solidity of Xander's body. The thing - the person - that kept him from slipping away. From going back, to solitude and defeat. "She's wrong, love. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Nothing dirty about what you did - how you fought... If you were wearin' damn pips on your shoulder she'd have thanked you."

"I don't expect thanks." Xander lifted his head, close range eye to eyes with Spike and traced the scar in Spike's eyebrow, then tracked down to the barely-there lines scoring Spike's chest - traced one down to the point where Spike's body pressed against his
and flattened his hand over Spike's ribs. "There's not a lot of thanks going on for heroes these days. Pretty thankless, heroing. I accept that."

"Don't *accept*, Xander." Spike looked up at his boy - no, *man*. Lover. Love. Pushed *pride* and *love* and *joy* at him, hard and strong. "*Fight!* Always fight, love. Never give in - never give up. Never be anything but your own man." Spike lifted his hand and let his fingers trail so, so gently over Xander's face - around the empty socket and across the sunken lid - brushed the long lashes that lay still on the tanned cheek.

"So fuckin' gorgeous. So brave. So damn *smart*. Fuck the world, love, if they can't see it - it fuckin' *blinds* me."

Xander opened his mouth to say the things he was used to - make the joke that Spike must have him mixed up with somebody else, or 'who spiked Spike's blood?' - but mouths were better for kissing than they were for talking. Better for wrapping around that wonderful tongue that said wonderful
things that went straight to Xander's numb heart and made it ache. Ache good.

Until the ache became more than kissing and Xander was wearing way too many clothes for the way Spike was touching him, holding him, kissing him back, as eloquent without words as with and -

'Save a horse, ride a cowboy,' jangled the phone in Xander's pocket.

"Don't - don't - bloody hell !" Spike scowled as Xander squirmed and got his phone and - most importantly - stopped kissing, stopped groping, and stopped trying to get his jeans off one-handed. He growled as Xander lay there, staring at the screen - grabbed him and held him and rolled them both over into the back of Wes' couch and then he was straddling Xander's knees and getting his pants down - shirt up - exposing the bits of flesh he most wanted to the air and to his mouth and hands. See if he can talk through this...

Xander couldn't - the phone fell to the floor with a
clatter Xander hoped didn't press any *bad* buttons - for all of two seconds before Spike was reminding him why call: *bad*, lips and tongue of Spike: *good* and vampires who didn't need to breathe: mindblowing. Which was his only excuse for palming the riotous curls and waves of Spike's bed head hair and gasping "W-willow!"

"What? Where?" Spike jerked upright - tried to - and growled again when Xander's fingers pulled his hair, hard. "Damnit, love -" He put both hands on Xander's hips and held him down - went down, power dive onto Xander's cock, taking him in and humming in satisfaction and glee.

Xander answered with a heartfelt groan - caught Spike with a knee wriggling out of his jeans and kicked them off all the way, panting. He scrounged for brain cells and threw an arm over his head, gripped the end table for leverage. "W-willow was on the phone."

Spike lifted his head but not his hands, pinning Xander's squirming hips to the upholstery. "You're
askin' me to *stop* because Red called you?"

"*Fuck* no," Xander replied - with feeling.

"'S what I thought," Spike smirked, and went back to work, fingers digging into Xander's hips and his mouth sucking and licking and biting - *enjoying*, and savoring. "Taste so fuckin' good," he muttered, and Xander arched and squirmed. Spike grinned.

"F-fuck...Wes -" Xander stuttered out, and Spike took one of Xander's balls into his mouth and rolled it over his tongue - let it slide out.

"Phone didn't make a noise, love - you sure you know what you're sayin'?" he chuckled - lapped his way along Xander's length to seal his lips around the head with a self-satisfied hum.

"N-nuh - " Xander tried before his brain dribbled out his ears. Wes was a *guy*. Wes would understand. Wes had been on the receiving end of that fucking mouth... *Oh Jesus - oh fuck that feels good!*
Wesley walked into his home and found Xander sprawled on his couch in nothing but a tee shirt rucked high around his ribs, a horny vampire attached to Xander's prick and the air thick with musk that made him groan before he came back to himself.

Gunn whistled. "Man, I thought you said you didn't subscribe to Showtime."

Spike concentrated on making sure Xander couldn't say anything. *Wes and Gunn can...go in the kitchen. I can smell hot wings and...Thai? Chinese? And sushi - they need plates....* Xander writhed under him and he grinned and hummed and pressed his own erection into Xander's thigh, rubbing.

"Do I have to get a bucket of cold water to get those dogs off the couch?"

"It wouldn't do any good, Charles. Come help me with the plates."
"God! Spike!"

"Sounds like Xander finally found religion." Gunn leaned hard on his cane, limping into the kitchen accompanied by the soft sound of a growling vampire, the patter-stagger of feet and the slam of Wesley's bedroom door.

"Spike has a knack for inspiring worship." Wesley felt the blood trickling into his cheeks, into his cock and the stronger beat of his heart, listening to Xander's frantically gasped 'lube - lube - fuck where - ohhhh fuck yes' and Spike's equally passionate 'bloody hell - yes.'

"Is that what that is?" Gunn asked, rolling his eyes as a rhythmic thumping started up and the moans and growls got louder. Wesley just shook his head, piling books and papers onto the end table in the living room. Gunn got busy opening boxes of take-out and selecting some chop-sticks from a bag - looked eagerly over the feast they'd brought.

"Damn booty-call without the phone is what that is. Jesus!" A particularly loud...noise...made them both
jump, and then there was silence. And '...save a horse...ride a cowboy...' as Xander's cell phone rang.

"Xander! Damnit!" Spike yelled.

A laugh escaped Wesley and he reached for the phone, checking the display before muting the ringtone. A low moan broke the renewed silence and Wesley looked thoughtfully from the closed bedroom door to the phone he held. "I'm not sure which is worse."

"I know which is worse, English." Gunn settled himself awkwardly into a chair, balancing plate, fork and cane and trying not to spill anything down his front. He leaned the cane against the table and then shoveled up some rice and shoved it into his mouth. Wesley put the phone on the end table and joined him, serving himself a huge plateful of mostly-raw fish.

There was a murmur from the bedroom and a laugh - Spike - and then Xander stumbled out, hair in the backwards-through-a-hedge state and his jeans not
done up all the way. His t-shirt was inside-out.

"Ah - Wes...Gunn..." he muttered - glared back into the bedroom. "Spike!"

"Comin'," Spike said - no, Wesley thought, that was smirked - and Spike strolled out after Xander, sporting a rather impressive bite on his collarbone, jeans only buttoned up to the third button. He sprawled on the couch, one leg on the floor and one on the seat. His fingers brushed the line of just barely visible dark hair under his navel and his eyes followed Xander possessively.

*Xander's* eye was dark and wide, hazy-dazed, and he looked like he'd walk out into traffic with a smile on his face without guidance. He blindly grabbed up one of the still-closed containers of Chinese and his own chopsticks and flopped down between Spike's legs on the couch.

Kicking his feet up onto the cushions, Xander leaned bonelessly against Spike's chest and dug into the mystery contents of his container with enthusiasm
and the high buzz of *minewantmine* singing through his veins.

"I see you've worked up an appetite," Wesley said dryly.

"You have *no* idea."

"We got all *kinds* of ideas. I think the *neighbors* got ideas. Thank god I never had to listen to *Angel* do that." Gunn ate an enormous bite of beef rendang, grinning, and Spike grinned back, lazily stroking his hand over Xander's belly and opening his mouth for a proffered bite of...

"That thoseâ€™ glass noodles with the red bean paste? Can't abide the slimy...lumps," Spike said, eyeing the overloaded chopsticks.

Xander snorted. "It's good. It's spicy. Pretend they're spicy eyeballs in gooey entrails. You said Dru liked the eyeballs and entrails best, right?" And darted the chopsticks into Spike's mouth when he opened it to frame some retort. "What are the slimy
black lumps anyway?"

"Eyeballs," Gunn said immediately.

"Mushrooms," Wesley corrected in the kind of voice that made Xander homesick for Giles.

"Eyeball mushrooms," Gunn said, and searched for the other box of Szechuan glass noodles with mushroom, plucking out a lump and eating it.

"Really, must we have such discussions while eating?" Wesley delicately picked up a slice of yellowtail and dipped it - ate it - while Gunn smirked at him and Spike chewed furiously, obviously wanting to say...something, but not willing to spit bits of mushroom-eyeballs all over Xander. Thank heavens for small mercies.

"We must. Unless you got something better, English?" Gunn reached across the table and grabbed a slice of tuna with his chopsticks.

"Anything is better than eyeball mushrooms. Have
you seen eyeball mushrooms?"

Xander looked a little pale. "There really are eyeball mushrooms?"

"Course there are, pet. Except they're really Vree demons, aren't they? Live in the mushroom, look like little spores - if you eat 'em they attach to the lining of the stomach and -"

"Yeah, right, ooo-kay! Enough. I need a drink." Xander attempted to get up and Spike pulled him back and Gunn snuffled over his rendang, trying not to spray Wesley with bits of rice as he smothered his laughter. Wesley looked around primly and wiped his mouth - took a long drink of the beer they'd brought.

"Actually, I have some more information for Angel that we should go over."

"Can I have one of those beers first?" Xander reached out plaintively, pinned around the waist by Spike.
"Come and get one." Wesley held one out in Xander's direction, far, far out of reach.

"English bastard. Spike - sweetheart - if you let me go, we'll have beer. You like beer." Xander coaxed, wriggling around until he could get a hand between them, down into Spike's unbuttoned fly. "I'll be grateful for beer."

"Aw, come on. Yo - Blondie." Gunn tossed a bottle to Spike - neat pass and catch.

"Ta, mate."

"Actually..." Wesley paused to nibble a California roll - wiped his mouth again and waited until Xander and Spike's attention was on him rather than on the beer. "Actually I had a - a vision, about Sunnydale. So - Angel Investigations is officially taking the case." He paused, watching Xander and Spike - waiting. Wondering just what they would say.

"What happened? Did the Powers run out of little
old ladies to rescue from speeding demon cars and cats to help down out of vampire trees?" Xander snarked. "That warning would have been a little more *useful* a month ago."

"Yes, it probably would," Wesley said, and Xander made a small gesture, frowning.

"It's... I'm sorry, Wes. Not your fault. I'm just -"

"Just fuckin' tired of bein' jerked around," Spike muttered. He ran a hand through Xander's hair and looked over at Wesley, a small smile on his face. "Hope Angel got riled up good and proper. So what's the new news, pet?"

"That *was* the new news." Wesley swirled his beer around the bottle thoughtfully. "As for Angel, you'll be able to find out for yourselves how...riled...he is. He needs the information Charles and I have - "

"Hey - hey man. Not 'you and Charles'. *You*. I'm not workin' for AI."
Wesley set his bottle down with an impatient sigh. "Charles, if it wasn't for you we'd still be looking in all the wrong places -" Wesley cut himself off when Gunn raised a hand.

"I'm not sayin' I had nothing to do with this. I'm sayin' I didn't do it for Al. I did it for you."

"And he's very, very grateful, and he's not going to push it, is he Wes?" Spike said, and Wesley opened his mouth and then closed it - looked for a long moment at Spike and Xander entwined on the couch, then looked at Gunn, whose face was a study in resolve and irritation - and affection.

"Yes - yes he is. Very grateful. And grateful that his other two friends are going to courier this file to Angel and also pick up a rare book for him?" Wesley asked, a small smile on his face.

Xander and Spike exchanged a long look, half skeptical and the other half resolved. As the resolved half, Xander shrugged and nodded. He felt a growl - both physical along his spine and mental in
his belly and dropped his head against Spike's shoulder. "I'm trained. He could ask me to pick up tampons at the Mega Mart and I'd do it. Not that Wesley would be asking for tampons, because he's a guy and all. But I'd do it."

"Thank god we don't need any bloody - any sodding...female...things," Spike grumbled. "What we need around here is food. Wes - you have a tin of leeks in your cabinet. What in fuck do you propose to do with a tin of leeks?"

"Leave them in the cabinet. I don't like leeks. And you're hardly in a position to criticize my pantry, Spike. All the two of you have in your cabinets is Pop Tarts and Old Speckled Hen."

"Hey, not true pal!" Xander half sat up and jabbed the beer at Wesley to make a point. "All that shit and Connor visiting before we left Sunnydale? We finished the Old Speckled."

~*~*~*~*~
Spike drove roughly north, heading for the bookshop in Pasadena first - The Golden Hinde - because the owner was meticulous and twitchy and closed at nine o'clock precisely every night. Traffic was already clogging like a bad artery and Spike just knew he'd be kicking some ass before their drive was through. He settled his shoulders under his duster and checked to make sure Xander was buckled in, then took the ramp to the freeway with a snarl on his lips.

Chrome and metallic paint as far as the eye could see, and everything gleaming with the rain that had returned in force while they'd eaten and showered. Xander flipped through the file Wes had given them again and then took out his cell phone - stared at it for a long moment.

"Problems, pet?"

"Someone turned my ringtone off. I missed a bunch of calls." Xander gave Spike a hard look, a suspicious wave of smug satisfaction rolling through the cab.
He glanced down to page through his contact list for Russ' number and found it under 'Russ' instead of 'Fenwick'.

"Not my fault the Watcher hates that plinkity racket as much as I do," Spike said, then swerved violently to avoid a woman who was apparently driving, chatting, eating, and changing radio stations at the same time. Spike slapped his palm down on the horn and flipped the woman off as they passed, then he braked, fuming, as the traffic slowed to a crawl.

"Must be out of my mind, drivin' to Pasadena this time of day. Wesley'd better have something nice for us when we're done with this," he muttered. Xander just rolled his eyes, waiting for Russ to pick up.

"Yessss?" Cautious, cat-like sibilance and the quiet click of claws on plastic. Xander closed his eyes and grinned - he'd seen Sol answer the phone before, creeping up on it sideways like it might jump and run.
"It's Alex. Is Russ home?"

"He iss bathing, yes? I am not let him on the couch so muddy." Sol sniffed and Xander hoped he couldn't hear Spike's muttering and swearing.

"Oh, right. He just got off," Xander said, trying to wrest his mind back into work-schedule mode.

"Not yet, he hasn't," Sol said, deadpan, and then gave in to hissing, bubbling laughter that Xander had to join. "I not let him on me so muddy too."

"TMI, man. Okay - tell him call me when he's done? I need to talk to him. It's about - the Hellmouth. We found out some stuff." Sol took in a sharp breath and muttered something in his own language, and Xander sighed, wishing... *Wish I didn't have to do this. Damnit. They don't need this...*

"I tell. Is...bad, out there. Sso bad." Sol's voice was low and a little shaky and Xander nodded, unthinking, then cleared his throat.
"Yeah. Thanks, Sol. Bye." Only the click and deadness of disconnection answered him and he scrolled the menu again. Carl was next. Spike - was still cursing, steady monotone that made Xander smile briefly, until the phone began to ring.

"Hello - Mariel - hey! Not while I'm on the phone! I said - " Whatever Carl 'said' was in Spanish - Spanish Xander would have to look up later from Mariel's wicked giggle. He was tempted to call back at a better time. Which would be a worse time.

He groaned.

Carl stopped laughing. "Alex?"

"It's either Alex or a zombie who wants to eat your brains. Since I'm talking, I guess it's me and since it's Sunnydale, I guess I shouldn't joke about zombies eating brains." Xander twisted in his seat until he could see Spike; jaw clenched, cigarette bitten through and hands tight on the wheel. Xander laid a hand on Spike's thigh, hoping Spike could feel the
A rush of calm love beautiful mine.

Spike twitched - muttered something - then looked over at Xander and smiled slightly, the anger frustration kill of his emotions easing off a bit.

"So to what do I owe this pleasure?" Carl said, all mock-serious and a little breathless and Mariel squealed something in the background. Xander had to smile - kneading Spike's thigh and leaning his head back on the headrest - but it faded quickly.

"I've got Hellmouth news."

"Aw, shit."

Xander could hear Mariel stop giggling and ask something quiet in the background that made Spike glance at him quickly. "What?"

"She asked him if it was time to pack the car, pet." Spike turned his eyes back to the road in spite of the crawling traffic, flutter of resignation, roll of hate for Sunnydale. "They know."
"What's your news, Alex?"

"It's time to get out of Dodge for a while. Do you have some place you can take the family?"

A pause, then: "My place outside of San Bernardino is big enough for the family. What's going on?"

Xander slid down in the seat and gave Spike a grateful smile when he felt a cool hand settle over his on the truck seat. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try."

Spike listened to Xander fill Carl in on the Hellmouth going's on - gently squeezed Xander's hand in his, hating the almost apologetic tone Xander had. As if he were responsible for what was going on back in Sunnydale. Spike snarled silently - contemplated honking the horn again as a sleek little Italian sport car cut him off. But he didn't want to make Xander any nervier, so he restrained himself. The demon
sulked and muttered, and Spike did his best to ignore it. Xander finally said goodbye and clicked the phone shut, looking out the window for a long moment.

"Not your fault, love," Spike murmured. *Love love love you*...

Xander closed his eye and basked in the warmth of Spike's emotions with a grin. "I thought it might be my fault once - demon magnet, you know? But I hate being the messenger when it's bad news." He tugged his hand free only to turn it over beneath Spike's, clutching back palm to palm. Outside the window, the Italian sports car had wedged itself in between two SUVs. "And there is no way that guy is gonna make it to the right lane before the exit."

Spike snorted softly, agreeing with Xander - listening to the *tick tick* of the windshield-wipers going over and over the glass - to the patter of rain on metal. Twilight was coming down, blue-grey and soft as down, and the long line of brake lights blurred into a scarlet snake, stretching for miles.
Spike felt a sudden wave of tiredness. Not physical, but...other. *Soul* tired.

*Another fight...another enemy...another fucking crisis. Never bloody ends and it's not fair, Xander having to go through this again. I don't want to...go through this again.* "No more calls to make now, though," Spike said, in what he hoped was an encouraging voice.

"Except maybe I should call Willow..." Xander sounded less than enthusiastic about that, and Spike squeezed his hand again - inched forward with the traffic. Xander shook his head and turned off the phone. "Later." He watched Spike's eyebrows go up and shrugged. "It's one in the morning there now. She's probably asleep. And if it was important Council news, Giles would have called Wes." Spike's exhaustion was palpable - the kind of tiredness *he'd* felt on the way to Africa and it tied his stomach in knots. "Feels like we've been here before."

"Been here, done it - got the bloody scars to prove
it, love. Rather have had a soddin' t-shirt." Spike felt his own exhaustion mirrored in Xander and he hated it. Hated that hopeless, helpless feeling of never, ever being quite enough. *Burned alive on the Hellmouth and it wasn't enough... Xander lost an eye - lost his family - it wasn't enough... Nothing's ever enough...*

"We need to get away from this, love. Go someplace warm - turn the bloody phone off and shag each other unconscious. Shag Wes until he's too fucked out to even talk, never mind read..." Spike grinned over at Xander and felt after his pack of smokes, feeling a little lift from that idea. Good idea.

"That's gonna take a *lot* of fucking." Xander paused thoughtfully - grinned at the lift of want and promise of normality. "I am so on board with that plan." Xander let go of Spike's hand long enough to let him light up and looked out the window, into the back seat of a minivan full of laughing teenagers. A moment later, one pointed - then all were turning to stare back at him and Xander turned his head
away, back to Spike. "We need to get away from this," he echoed.

Spike felt the twitch of something go through him - stomped on the brake and glared at the gridlocked lanes, then turned and tugged Xander over, leaning close himself - kissed him, tangling his free hand in Xander's hair and getting lost, for one blissful moment, in the heat and scent of his love.

"Take you anywhere you want to go, pet. Name it. Got the money - can do anything." He leaned forehead to forehead for a moment and then sat back, taking in a long pull of smoke and eyeing the minivan beside them whose occupants seemed to be having trouble with man-on-man kissing. Or something. Wankers. He contemplated vamping and scaring the piss out of them, but what he really felt like doing was stomping something into a bloody pulp and letting the demon up and out would only make that impulse stronger.

Xander watched the scowl form and melt on Spike's face through kiss-hazy vision - felt the wave of
suppressed violence that stirred a sleeping echo of the hyena. Something wild and caged. And he got that. Got it enough that knowing he could go anywhere because he'd been fired only caused a small pain - an ache; twinge of indignant *fuck you* anger at the corporation. "Anywhere but here," he answered with feeling that surprised him.

"Yeah?" Spike grinned, then, feeling the indignant anger that, to him, meant Xander was starting to realize something. Realize that he was too *good* for the corp-rats, and that he could have any life he chose. "Let's think about that, then. Someplace warm, someplace wet so you and Wes can swim..."

"Someplace with twenty-four-seven room-service? 'Cause I dunno about that whole 'servant' thing - that cook was scary." Xander slumped comfortably down in the seat, pulling a little at the seat-belt and putting his hand on Spike's thigh.

"She was a bloody *good* cook. And she'd make us anything we wanted - didn't have to stick to a menu."
"Yeah, but not at three in the morning."

"We'll get two cooks - day shift and night shift."
Spike reached out and turned on the CD player, the lifting mood making him want music. *Anything for you, love - hotel, house - fucking island, if you want.*

"I want privacy," Xander said, unbuckling his seatbelt and sliding across the seat to where he wanted to be. "And I want lots and lots of gratuitous nudity." Xander slid his hand all the way up Spike's inseam, rough fabric warming his fingertips by the time they closed over Spike's groin. "'K?" He squeezed - felt the *lust* like a shock - felt it shudder and coil inside and he reluctantly let Spike go.

"Bloody hell. Put that back."

"And I want the world not to end," Xander finished, putting his hand back on Spike's leg, high on the thigh - contact.
Spike turned his head enough to catch Xander's mouth - kiss him. Nibbled at Xander's lower lip and pressed thigh to thigh. He fed his cigarette out the window and then made good use of two free hands by twisting and getting his left hand over Xander's own groin - pressed the hardening flesh, kneading it - and got his other hand in Xander's hair so he could tilt his head a little - kiss him right.

"World's not gonna end, love. We'll see to that, and Wes will...the bloody Angelus might even do some good..." he murmured between kisses, and Xander felt so damn good. The want - the need coming from him was enough to make Spike vamp - make him grumble low in his chest, pleasure-sound and growl together.

"Not goin' anywhere...let me just get your jeans down..." he muttered, fumbling at button and fly.

The grumble, the growl went straight to Xander's cock, hardening twitch under Spike's fingers that made Xander spread his legs encouragingly. "Fuck yes." Xander arched, groaned and rolled his head
against the seat. Movement in the next car over caught his eye and he jerked upright, catching Spike's wrist. "No!"

"Yes, yes - fuckin' hell, love, not actually moving, here -" Spike ducked under Xander's chin and sucked at his neck - at the bite from earlier in the day and grinned to himself at the whole-body shudder that caused.

*Thinking - thinking so optional. Think Xander! Think!* Xander had a hand in Spike's hair but he wasn't sure if it was to pull him away or push him closer until a honking horn made up his mind. He tugged at Spike's hair, hard and slammed their lips together, tasting copper and salt, smoke and *Spike* - fed all that want into the *kiss* until he was dizzy. "Too light out," he gasped, once he had enough air.

*Fuck, fuck - bloody traffic, what the fuck is that horn?* Spike gave in to Xander's manhandling - let himself be kissed and bloodied and drew back licking his lips, eyes half-shut and his whole body thrumming with *wantwantwant*
"Be dark in twenty minutes -" Spike said, and then that damn *horn* again, and a voice -

"Get a room, fucking queers!"

And that *shame* feeling from Xander, for just a second, and Spike didn't hesitate. In one liquid movement he pulled away from Xander - pushed his door open and was out of the truck - around it - reaching in through a still-open window to grab a shirt collar and yank. Barely remembering to be human for this, but not letting that stop the snarl. Oblivious to the rain that slanted into his eyes and soaked the front of his shirt - beaded on his duster.

*What the fuck?* turned into *Fuck, fuck fuck!* and Xander dove for the parking brake before scrambling out of the truck and into the downpour, jacket pulled over his head against the rain.

"Fuckin' call the cops! This guy's - " The driver placed his hands against Spike's chest and *shoved* - choking on Spike's grip on his collar, choking on the
water running down his face.

"Miserable little shit, I'm gonna use your fuckin' rib bones for soup if you so much as look at me and mine again -" Spike could smell the terror and it was like sweet-spicy smoke over his tongue. He ached to simply snap necks and be done and the nonono from Xander made him growl. The kid went white.

Already on edge from the steady throb of kill kill kill rolling through Spike like a heartbeat, Xander took one of those deep, cleansing breaths of wet and ozone and searched for quick quips guy.

He found him some place warm and dry with a beer and thank god a quip. Xander ran a hand up Spike's spine - rigid beneath his duster. He raised his voice to be heard over engines, horns and steady rain. "I kinda liked it better when he was kissing me and you were minding your own business. How about you guys?"

"Yeah - y-yeah! Th-that's better -" the kid gibbered, blinking rain out of his eyes and another one - in the
back: "Let him **go**!" and "That's guys crazy!" Spike grinned - a slow and evil thing that made the kid he was holding go from white to slightly greenish.

"You little fucks are lucky. I'd rather my boy any day than a pack of useless wankers like yourself. In future, keep your filthy mouths shut." Spike shoved the kid backward - noticed, finally, a chorus of honks and reached for Xander's arm - pulled him close and kissed him, hard and fast. "Sorry, love - lost my head," he smirked.

"Nice head." Xander's kiss was soft and slow and wet and cold. He backed Spike all the way into the passenger side of the truck and pulled back to ran a hand over Spike's hair, curled now by the rain - mouthed a drop of rainwater from his jaw. "I like it where it belongs." A police siren cut through the horns and Xander gave Spike a shove. "And that's behind the wheel of the truck driving us out of here before we're arrested for assault and whatever they arrest you for when you make out in the middle of a freeway."
Spike blinked - scowled at the world in general and scrambled in and across - checked to be sure Xander had clicked the seatbelt shut and then took advantage of the slowly shuffling traffic to cut across three lanes to the shoulder while Xander fished under the seat for towels. He trundled along at a fair clip and took the next exit.

"Fuck that mess, love - let's find some other way. Might have to kill somebody, next, traffic makes me that edgy."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander double checked the wrappings on Wesley's book, which had turned out to be thick and bound in a smooth-grained leather that made Xander's skin crawl to touch it.

The trip to The Golden Hinde hadn't gone well. Spike had been barred from entering, and Xander had caught a glimpse of a cot and sink in the back room behind the register.
The owner hadn't invited either one of them in.

Now, they sat and stared across the street at the Hotel Ali Baba. "I don't know about you but I'm not expecting a warm welcome." It was that kind of day.

"Sod it," Spike said, lighting up and grabbing the book, leaving the file for Xander. He shoved the truck keys into a deep pocket and got out of the vehicle - waited for Xander to join him in crossing the street, dodging puddles and getting even wetter. The rain was pouring down now - slashing, spangled curtain in the sodium-glow of the street lights.

Waiting outside under an inadequate awning at the bookstore had not improved Spike's over all snappish mood, and the owner had been short and condescending with Xander. *Just want to get back to Wes' place, damnit.* On the way to the shop Xander had made an appointment with a rental agency, and tomorrow they were shopping for someplace to stay for a while.
Someplace to kidnap Wes to, and to decompress from the monster headache that the Sunnydale mess was becoming.

"Don't come any closer!"

Xander stumbled over the thick rugs and towels piled in front of the doors at Andrew's yell and watched in disbelief as the young man approached them under a burden of more towels.

"Sorry guys. I just mopped and I am not mopping again." Andrew tried to reach up to dry Spike's hair for him but Spike growled and he let go of the towel immediately, taking a step back. "Every Slayer has been through here at least twice in the last two hours and none of them know how to wipe their feet!"

Andrew looked ruffled and put-upon and flushed, and Spike scrubbed violently at his hair for a moment and then flung the towel sideways into the sodden pile that was against the wall. Feeling too
on edge for his own good, really - he knew he was winding Xander up tight as a drum, and any moment Angel would stomp in and then... **Bloody fucking Blitzkrieg**, Spike thought, looking at his too-wet-to-burn cigarette and throwing it after the towel.

"Not a bloody idiot, Andrew - know how to wipe my fucking boots off. Not that I will," he added, striding across the lobby toward the offices, sure he was leaving foot prints and not caring. "C'mon, Xander, let's get this nonsense done with, yeah? Need a drink."

Xander gave his hair a quick scrub with the towel, squeezing the ends into it until he wasn't dripping anymore and handed the towel back to Andrew with a grimace. He wanted to lift his patch - dry the irritating trickle of cold water under it but Andrew wouldn't stop...hovering. "Thanks." He abandoned the towels instead, trying to rub under the patch without taking it off and made his unsteady way across the lobby after Spike.
He could have found Spike blindfolded and in the dark with the *disgust* pouring off him. Oh. Good. Angel was in.

"What took you so long? Wes said you left hours ago," Angel said, coming out of his office with a stack of folders and a scowl. Spike slapped the book down on the counter and reached for his cigarettes, wishing like *fuck* he'd remembered to bring his flask from Wes'. But he'd meant to refill it and left it lying on the kitchen counter instead.

"Fuck off, Angelus," Spike snapped, and then Xander was there, hand on his back and Spike took a hard, hard hit of his smoke, biting back the rest of what he wanted to say.

"Why don't you hand over what you came here to *bring* me and fuck off yourself? That's what the messenger boy does."

Xander felt each bump of Spike's spine beneath his hand stiffen and creak under muscle tension. "We're all professionals *here*, yes sir."
"I knocked you on your ass and had you dead to rights, you miserable bog-trotter, so keep your smart mouth shut." Spike hadn't felt anything quite this...murderous toward Angel in long a while, and the demon leapt up and out, snarling. He felt Xander shiver and felt Xander's fingers sink into his shoulder - death-grip that he barely acknowledged.

"Uh - as much as I would love to watch you kick Angel's ass again, it's gonna be hard to fuck Wes deaf and blind if you're recovering from the fight of the year." Xander didn't even try to hide the satisfaction he felt when Angel flinched. It must just eat you up that we got there first, Angel.

Spike smirked at the gotcha! feeling of glee coming off Xander and plucked the file from Xander's hand - tossed it down by the book, sending the contents fanning over the counter. "That's Wes' latest info. Now it's yours. And we've gotta go." He started to turn - twisted away with a snarl as Angel's hand came down on his shoulder.
"Spike - I've got something to tell the both of you."
Angel let go as Spike angrily shrugged him away - reached for Wes' folder and the spill of papers that had slid out of it. "This is bigger than just a few demons in some back room, you know," Angel said, and Spike couldn't stop the snort of amusement that puffed out of his nose. Angel shook his head - tapped the papers back into true and slipped them back into the folder. "It's Wolfram and Hart big and... And I want the two of you out of it."

"Good." Xander felt the pulse of anger turn to a roar of fuckyes! and laughed - every ounce of the weight of Sunnydale, Hellmouth, duty evaporating into someone else's problem. He held up a hand to Angel, said "I'll be right with you," and then picked Spike up and drove him into the wall with a kiss that made his lips ache and body hum with the champagne bubbles of pure freedom.

Between the wall and Xander, Spike couldn't get a breath for a proper howl of utter joy, but it didn't matter. Xander felt - felt like a bird in flight. Lifting, swooping - heart-stopping loops high in the ether
and Spike was happy to join him - got a leg and both arms wrapped around Xander and kissed back with abandon, ignoring the increasingly frustrated noises coming from Angel.

"Hey, dad, what's up?" Connor ambled in from somewhere, glancing at Spike and Xander with a grin. Spike winked back and then shifted to kiss Xander's neck so he could watch the 'Connor and Angel' show.

Angel cut him off. "I do not want to hear 'besides Spike and Xander' from your mouth."

Connor shrugged a shoulder, showing more interest in Spike and Xander's public celebration than Angel looked comfortable with. "They're happy guys. Why are they happy guys?"

"I have no idea," Angel muttered. "Cut it out!" He reached over and slapped the back of Xander's head and a moment later was up against the wall, Spike's fingers digging into his throat and Xander right behind him, fury in his eye, patch askew and a look
that was too much like Spike's own to be comfortable.

"You wanker. Don't." Spike rapped Angel's head into the wall. "Touch. Got it?" Spike let go and stepped back - shot a look at Connor. Connor lifted both hands in a 'don't look at me' gesture.

"Hey, he shouldn't have done that - right there with ya."

Xander fumbled with the band of his patch, gave up and yanked it off, jammed it into his pocket.

Angel didn't move from the wall, head down, teeth bared. "Get out, Spike. You're not welcome here."

"Fuck you, Angelus. You ever wonder why Gunn is off doing his own gig - why Wes'd rather work at home than here? Why Blue is out all hours of the day and night, and not here? You get one bloody guess." Spike settled his duster - looked over at Connor, hoping that Connor got it. Connor gave a slow nod, and Spike felt a tiny loosening of some
tension. "You want to be the grand champion of this fuckin' rat race? Be our guest. We both gave everything we were to this fuckin' fight. And now? We're done. Have at it." He reached blindly for Xander's hand - found it and folded his own around it - turned and walked out.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley wanted to be angry - he wanted to be angry and irritated and deliver his carefully crafted speech about calling home so he won't worry when Spike and Xander go for hours without contact in dangerous times. Or after visiting Angel Investigations which was a dangerous time every time when Spike was there. But when they came stumbling in well after one - stumbling and swearing and giggling, drunk and happy-stupid and determined, it seemed, to touch every inch of Wesley's body - his speech, anger, irritation and worry crumbled away. Crumbled beneath the attentions of two warm bodies who tangled themselves around him the moment he opened the
door and kisses that tasted of beer and whiskey, cigarettes and salt. And he moaned when Spike manhandled him into Xander's grasp and arched when warm human hands unfastened his belt and fly.

"Love how you tas', Wesss...you go gooooood with JD..." Spike slurred, sliding down Wesley's body and pushing his trousers down - rubbing his cheek along Wesley's rapidly hardening cock and then licking in long, flat strokes.

"You both - you both made me very...I was -" Wesley tried to talk, but Xander was kissing his neck - his jaw - was rubbing callused hands over his belly and then up under his shirt to his nipples. Was grinding his erection into Wesley and muttering something about 'Wes...so warm...love how you feel...' and really - what could he do? And then Spike - cool mouth, clever tongue - quick and wicked glance up with gleaming golden eyes and Wesley let his head loll back on Xander's shoulder - got one hand in Spike's hair and one in Xander's and just held on.
Xander's mouth was moving against his ear, warm and wet, lips and tongue, and his fingers were sliding down, down - holding Wesley's aching cock for Spike to swallow whole, leaving him trembling between them. Wesley realized Xander was speaking.
"We're done, Wes. Retired. God - you feel good like that - " Xander slurred, shuddered, *breathed* against the damp skin of Wesley's neck and nibbled. "We're gonna *celebrate* - take a couple days - drive t'Ojai tomorrow - " Xander's liquor-fogged voice deepened, rasped when he moaned and Spike echoed the sound. "Come back..."

Wesley tugged at Xander's neck - at his hair - turned his head so he could kiss him, tasting hops and the sour bite of whiskey - salt and lemon. Spike was teasing - nibbling - sucking and kissing and his fingers were moving here and there - back and forth. Wesley's legs were shaking and he was glad Xander was holding him up.

He pulled away from Xander's mouth, panting for
breath - looked down at Spike, who looked up at him - bit at his belly and grinned, eyes glinting gold.

"Gonna come back, Wes, an' then you're gonna come with us. Jus' for a little while!" Spike added when Wesley opened his mouth to - to what? "Jus' a few days, love... Need to relax, you do." Spike ran his tongue up the underside of Wesley's cock and blew across the damp tip. Wesley shuddered.

"Keep you tied to the bed, maybe - nothin' to do but...entertain me an' Xan..." Then Spike took him in again, cool mouth sliding down and down and Wesley arched into him - gripped Xander's neck and leaned against him and just...let go.

"Want that, Wes? Me an' Spike using you an' making you feel good all weekend? Take away your...choice." Xander's teeth dragged a fiery-cool trail down to Wesley's shoulder and bit and Wesley thrust his hips at Spike with a helpless moan because yes - yes god he wanted it. "Gonna think about it while we're gone?"
"G-god...thinking about it...now -" Wes gasped, and Xander slid a finger into Wes' mouth - let him mouth it - suck it - then trailed his hand down, between them - slid in as Spike did something that was probably very nice, and Wes cried out, his hips bucking forward, his hand painfully tight in Xander's hair. Spike's hands were tight on Wes' hips and Xander crooked his finger and bit at Wes' neck - felt Wes' body shudder and arch and finally fall bonelessly still, only his chest heaving as he panted for air.

"I think he likes that idea, love," Spike said. Then he giggled and climbed Wes' body and kissed Xander over Wes' shoulder - musk-salt-pepper taste canceling out the whiskey and smoke. "Let's get him to bed." Whirling, floating feeling swimming back and forth through the link, drunkenness doubled as they shared it.

"Yeah," Xander breathed, alcohol and lemon, sweet and bitter and he rode Wes' groan with a slow grind of hard cock against Wes' arse, sending an ache of want skittering up and down his spine. "Gonna feel
us till we come *back*, Wes." Xander didn't wait for an answer before sliding an arm around Wesley's waist above Spike's and leading the three of them unsteadily into the bedroom. "Gonna *make* you miss us."

There'd be time for soberness and thinking *tomorrow*.

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Spike drove to the insistent scream of Randy Rhoades' guitar and Ozzy's demon voice. Hands clenched so tightly on the steering wheel that they ached, golden eyes practically burning holes through the rain-washed night. His fangs had cut through two cigarette filters and he'd given up on them completely. Occasionally, he'd glance over at Xander.

Between them was a miasma of emotion - fury and shame, *fuck him* and *kill him* and *lovelovelove* under it all and Spike shook and Xander rested his
forehead against the window, face pale and tight and reflected against the rain.

The rental appointment had gone as badly as their trip to Angel Investigations - or worse.

An hour on, they'd driven past houses too big and houses too small. Houses owned by famous people Xander had never heard of. Then: "See that office up there?"

"Yeah." Xander looked in the direction their rental agent was pointing and saw a lot of offices. Brand new offices. Classy old offices. Some of them covered in so much ivy they looked like gigantic chia pets.

"There's a doctor up there who has a team of specialists from Hollywood. They've done things to people - he told me they had Nicole Kidman up there, fixing some sun-damage. Can you believe it? And - he's got prosthetic specialists, too. Remember when Mark Hamill was hurt? They put him back, good as new. He could fix that damage - nobody
would suspect a thing, I guarantee it."

Xander stared at the agent and felt the names wash over him in a tide of *huh?* and *'what?* and then it clicked and he almost choked on the word "*Damage?*"

Xander thumped his head back against the truck's seat and raked his hands through his hair - frustrated gesture, tangled, tired of strangers looking at him and seeing damage and disfigurement. Tired of being a - a *handicap*.

* Fucking bastard. Had no right. Find him, hurt him, kill him...* Spike pushed down a little harder on the gas - edged the speedometer over 120 and listened to the hiss of water as it fanned out from the wheels. Couldn't get away fast enough and he glared for a moment at the fading glow of L.A. in the rear-view. *Fucking gobshite. Love you so much, Xander... God...fucker...* 

Xander dropped his hand and Spike stole a glance at him, found him raising a forefinger to touch his
reflection in the glass; tracing around the missing eye, tracing up the side of his nose, over the dark arch of his eyebrow and around, fingers feathering down his cheek, resting at his jaw. Spike reached out and turned the music down to a murmur. "You're not *damaged*, love. You know that, don't you?"

Xander traced the pattern again, trying to see it. "War wound. Scar. I'm on board. I don't want to hide it." He twisted away from the window so he could see Spike, see his decision written in Spike's expression. "I want to *decorate* it. I want it to say: 'This is mine - I fought hard and I *won*'."

"Yeah?" Spike stared at Xander for a long moment - hastily looked away and back toward the road as the truck shimmied through an extended puddle. Grinning, the demon suddenly gone as he contemplated what Xander said. "You've been... Have you been *planning* this, love?" *Excitement* fear and something like a bouncing rubber ball that was *yes yes yes* and Spike laughed aloud - reached over and blindly found Xander's cheek - cupped it, his
thumb delicately rubbing over the thin skin just under the empty socket. "Tell me, Xander."

That yes yes yes fluttered around Xander's heart and belly and he shivered - leaned into Spike's touch and licked his lips - and god - felt shy. "Leaves." He touched the skin over his collarbone, where the leaves peeked out between his shirt collars. "I like that. But here too - all the way around so that when people look at me, they don't see a guy trying to hide a deformity. They see a guy with a great tattoo and maybe a little wound he's proud of surviving."

"Yet once more, O ye laurels... Always gave a wreath to the champion, Xander. To the victor. That's...exactly right." Xander was smiling - absent sort of smile as he looked at Spike and Spike tugged at him - waited impatiently while Xander undid his seat belt and scooted over - under Spike's arm and against his side, warmth and love and solidity. "It'll be beautiful," he murmured - kissed Xander's temple and peered out at the pitch-black of the storm. Ahead, very faintly, was a streak of lighter
sky and Spike thought that maybe, it wasn't raining in Ojai. That would be...kind of nice.

Xander leaned against Spike and worked an arm behind the small of his back to circle his waist, possessive and possessed. "If I don't like it, Phantom of the Opera is always a good look." Xander dodged out of the way of a half-hearted smack before his cell phone rang - tinny and small performance of Rebel Yell.

Spike groaned softly, shaking his head. "I do not look like Billy Idol, you wanker," he muttered. But fuck - it was better than cowboys.

"Yeah, yeah. Tell it to the wardrobe department." Xander flipped open his cell phone to find Dawn's number instead of Willow's on the display. Grinning, he started to answer but as soon as he switched on, she cut him off.

"God, Xander! Will you please call Willow back? She's driving me crazy!"
"Hello, Dawn, how are you? I'm fine, thanks for asking," Xander snarked, and Dawn sighed gustily down the line. Xander could practically hear her eyes rolling.

"Fine, fine. Hi Xander, how are you? I'm fine! That's great! Anything new? Nope, you? Nope! There - satisfied?"

"Yeah, yeah - satisfied. You young'uns - no manners," Xander said, and leaned his cheek on Spike's shoulder. "So what's up with Willow?"

"What's up with Willow? She hasn't heard from you in days. And Angel called Giles and told him all about the Hellmouth going Hellmouthy and you still couldn't call?"

"Was that you or Willow?"

"Duh. Willow. I know you and Spike were too busy fucking to pick up the phone."

"Dawn!"
"Well she's driving me crazy so unless you want to pick her up at the airport, call her back."

"Christ," Spike muttered, and Xander squeezed him a little - frowned out at the dark, rain-spangled landscape.

"Okay, okay. Fine. I'll call her back. I just..."

"I know, Xander. I have to listen to her practice her little speeches. Just...talk to her, okay? You guys can work it out."

"Yeah, okay," Xander sighed, and smiled as Dawn's mood immediately lightened and she chattered for fifteen more minutes about boys and school, shopping and houses and a tour of haunted buildings she'd gone on. By the time they disconnected, Xander was back into feeling something like happy. And Spike was, too, if his slowly stroking hand on Xander's collarbone and chest were any indication.
Spike watched Xander carefully turn his phone off and toss it into the glove box. "Not gonna call Red then?"

"I'm gonna call." Xander leaned back and settled into the cradle of Spike's arm and shoulder, shifting around to get comfortable against Spike. "I promised Dawnie I'd call."

Spike snorted, and ghosted his hand up into Xander's hair to lazy waves of satisfaction. He raked his fingers and nails through the mussed strands and enjoyed the animal sound of contentment from Xander. "But not when."

"Nah. She'll talk to Dawn and Dawn will crack like a dropped egg and tell her all about the phone call. That'll buy me a few more days."

"You're evil, pet," Spike said, combing and combing through Xander's hair - pleased when Xander yawned and closed his eyes. *Rest, love. Just rest. I'll get us there...* The windshield wipers *ticktickticked* like a metronome and Spike reached across himself
and hit the scan button on the CD player until it clicked to number four. As the low, soaring sounds of Ritchie Blackmoor's *Snowman* spiraled out into the cab he sighed and settled himself, and hugged Xander close.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke to the scent of leather and cigarettes, soft hands and softer lips, feather touches over his nose, his cheeks, his empty socket and sighed into the kiss, trading breath for the cooler brush of Spike's words whispering him awake. And awake, he traded the flutter in his heart for one in his belly because the sky was a brilliantly clear scatter of moon and stars. "Not in L.A. anymore, Toto."

"No we're not, love. We're at the Iguana." Xander just blinked sleepily and Spike resumed kissing him, basking in the relaxed, happy feelings that radiated out from Xander like heat from a fireplace. *Love* and *want* and possessiveness and something sweet and tender and muddled. Half-asleep and emoting all
over the place and Spike soaked it up like a sponge. Broke away, finally, as Xander's belly rumbled and Xander himself giggled. "Figured we could drop off our bag, walk downtown and find you something to eat an' then go see Seb. Sound good?"

"Eat. The word 'eat' sounds like heaven." Xander pushed himself reluctantly upright and stretched with a groan. "The word 'walk' sounds pretty good too." Xander scrubbed his hands over his face until he felt less foggy and crawled back across the seat and over Spike. "Eat. Walk. Blood. Needles. Sex." He counted them off on his fingers and popped open Spike's door, filling the cab with fresh, green-scented valley air. "I think we have a plan. Or a government warning against risky behavior."

"Mmmm..." Spike grabbed the parts of Xander that he could as Xander slithered out of the truck - snatched their bag from the back seat and locked the truck up, and followed Xander down the walk to the now-familiar and welcoming Peacock suite. And a sip or two of blood for you, love, to make the visit to Seb go a little smoother.
Dinner was a steaming platter of chile rellenos and blistering carne asada that put pink in Xander's cheeks. Even after glasses of frosty cool orange soda, his kisses were spicy and tingling when they stepped out into the cooler Ojai night. And Spike tasted like lime, salt, tequila, and the big bowl of corn chips he hadn't been able to keep his hands out of.

They walked lazily toward Seb's, breathing in the cool, green-scented air, hands loosely entwined. Not speaking, just...feeling. Calm, finally - settled and content. Two blocks from Seb's Spike glanced over at Xander and grinned - stepped back into the shadows of an alley and yanked Xander after him, catching him and pinning him neatly to the still-warm brick wall.

"Want a little dessert, love?" Spike purred, and tipped his chin a little, baring the long, pale sweep of his throat. Xander grinned - leaned forward and licked - nibbled - bit. God...love you...so much... Spike thought, and did the same.
Xander groaned with the *achepull* of sharp fangs and strong mouth and the effervescent burn that radiated through his veins, made his heart beat harder, hotter. Every draw, every swallow, every grind of Spike's hips against his and every scrape of brick and stucco against his back fed and felt that overwhelming all-consuming *lovelovemine* - so much stronger with Spike *in* him.

Should have been *too much*.

Wasn't.

Xander's heart fluttered, skipped and he threw his head back, into Spike's hand that was suddenly there to catch him before he hit the wall. He stood, staring up at the stars and breathing hard, clutching Spike to his throat for sips, licks, tender tingling kisses. "I used t - to think too *much* love and too much *need* scared me away - that I didn't know what to do with that kind of passion. And you've got s-so much." Xander felt Spike shift and held him where he was, determined to finish. "And now that
I have it...now it's mine... God, I... I just want more. Every day, Spike." Spike made a small, pleased sound against his neck - pulled slowly away and met Xander's gaze. "I feel like - like I'm the vampire. Just - taking everything you give me and wanting more. Never thought I could - be enough -"

"More than enough, love. Everything. All. Mine."

Xander felt the words vibrate through Spike's skull - felt them prickle against his palm and in his eye and leave him breathless with the enormity. "Don't change your mind."

"Never happen, love," Spike said, his hands cradling Xander's face - his mouth so close Xander could feel his lips moving. "Built for eternity, me," Spike added, drawing back, and Xander looked into the demon's face and smiled.

They made their way slowly through the night, the Indian Summer's blooming trellises dormant for the winter and casting spidery shadows in the promenades.
Seb's was a little crowded, but Seb himself had an empty chair and an expectant look, and Xander felt the first flutters of nervous excitement in his belly as Seb methodically squeezed ink out into little caps and arranged his work-space just so. It had taken nearly an hour to finalize the design and make sure it looked right, and now Xander lay back in the chair, a padded, adjustable rest under his head and Spike's hand tight in his. Spike's blood fuming and bubbling in his veins and making him shiver. Seb settled onto his saddle-shaped stool, tail curling around the central leg. The green gloves he wore were a bizarre contrast to his ink-black skin, and he picked up his machine and depressed the foot-switch, making minute adjustments.

*Love safe love* from Spike and Xander squeezed his hand tighter - closed his eye as Seb leaned close and the needle touched the hollow of his left cheek. Bee-sting burn and the warmth of Seb's hand - vibration all through his skull.

*Love you too, Spike...*
Sunnydale smelled like storms and dust and mud - and a little bit like Wesley when he changed, the pepper-sharp scent of *here there be demons* that made Xander's hair stand on end. Kinda turned him on too, but he was long past the age of his confusion about demons. Demons could be pretty sexy when they weren't trying to eat him or rip his head off to mate with him.

Xander paused in his packing and glanced through the office door at Spike, who was sprawled out on the living room floor and sorting his music collection into an acceptable pile that was coming with them to L.A. and a bigger pile that Xander had little hope of ever hearing again. Spike had Xander's lone Alice Cooper CD playing, cranked up loud and unholy. *Yesyesyes* and *strength* and *mine* leapt from Spike to Xander like a livewire. Then Spike looked up with a wicked curl of his tongue and Xander's heartbeat picked up a notch.
Oh yeah - the demon magnetism mojo was working for *him* now.

Xander bit off a piece of tape and wrestled the box closed. It was labeled *office*. It'd join the box labeled *bathroom* and the one labeled *bedroom*.

This time, he wasn't leaving anything important behind on the Hellmouth. Or under it.

'*I wear lace and I wear black leather...'* Alice sang, and Spike tossed a badly scratched *ELO* CD into the 'discard' pile. Tracking Xander through the link; want and possessiveness and *yes*, and a skein of bittersweetness through it all as Xander sorted his things. The linens and throws of the Nests had already been stacked in the truck, along with a number of pillows. The rest were crammed as tightly into garbage bags as vampiric strength and industrial plastic allowed. Only eight garbage bags - probably more bags then there would be boxes. Spike looked up as Xander carried his 'office' box into the denuded kitchen.
'Tell me where the hell I'm going...let my bones fall in the dust. Can't you hear that ghost that's calling...as my Colt begins to rust...'

"All right, love?" Spike had to ask, and Xander patted the 'office' box and looked over at him, tiny frown creasing his forehead. Spike turned down the music as Xander crossed the room - sat up between the 'keep' and 'throw into the bloody ocean' piles of CDs.

"I was going to put in a loft where the roof peaks and the windows look inland and at the ocean. I thought I could put a mattress up there and it'd be warm in the winter and cool in the summer." Xander settled onto the floor, feeling the home/not home pull of the house. "I don't like it when a window's just for decoration. I wanted to replace them with something that'd open and let in the breeze."

"We can find another house, Xander. One that's not -" They both froze then, as something - stutter
phantasm like a bleached photograph - faded in through the fireplace and was gone again, leaving a chill in its wake. Darkly slate-green clouds outside and the seemingly endless rain pattering on the roof and windows and if the ghosts were out and about during the day, it was one more reason to get the hell out.

"That doesn't have those things in it," Spike muttered and Xander poked at the CD discard pile, still frowning just a little. Sad and something complicated that was home and nostalgia and mine notmine from him, and Spike reached out and combed his fingers gently through Xander's hair. "Be all right, love," he said helplessly.

"Yeah - if it's got you in it, it'll be home. I just - god, I was so...happy. I had so many plans. I was so proud this place was mine and I could paint the walls with palm trees and parrots if I wanted to." Xander felt a blast of horror, swiftly muffled, and tipped into Spike's embrace with a snicker. "I don't want to. Relax, sweetheart."
"Bloody shirts scarred you forever, Xander. No parrots," Spike added, kissing whatever he could reach and tugging Xander gradually down until he was on his back and Xander was half sprawled over him, heat and weight that was home and love no matter what. "We'll find something better. Do it up right. Promise, love."

'Promise - love'. Two words that were rapidly creeping into Xander's heart and twisting it around their little pale fingers in a nice way. He could get used to sharing the caretaking duties in the relationship. Besides, Spike's hands felt so nice on his back and his skin was so cool on the tender skin around his eye. "A crypt for two? With the home improvement vampire?"

"Twenty-room mansion, if you like, or a bloody yurt. I don't care." Spike rubbed his chin slowly back and forth over Xander's skull, the long, silky hair lying across Spike's throat and smelling faintly of orange and smoke. "Me an' Dru, we stayed some places for months and some places for only days... I'll leave the house-picking up to you." Another ghost
shivered into existence near the kitchen thru-way and Spike jerked then frowned, angry at himself for flinching. "Should get this done, yeah? Get the fuck out of here."

"Yeah. Break time's over, Harris. Get back to work." Xander tipped his face up to brush his lips over Spike's then sat up and looked around the living room. Furniture. Big electronics. Xander poked at his emotions surrounding their loss because face it, relief hadn't been on his expected short list. "Let's load up. I'm done." Happy, when all was said and done. Happy to feel the weight of the place slide off his shoulders. The weight of the Hellmouth, it seemed, finally letting him go.

~*~*~*~*~

It hadn't rained too much that day but the air was still wet - thick with moisture and chilly enough to make Wesley shiver as he stood on his front step, looking down the street. Looking for Xander's truck, and not seeing it. Trying not to worry, because that
felt... Stupid. And a bit helpless, and entirely
too...wet. *Spike can take care of any threat the
Hellmouth has to offer...and the greater Los Angeles
area, for that matter. And Xander won't let him do
anything...rash* Wesley thought back to the stories
Xander had told him - midnight motorcycle drives
and sex on truck-stop picnic tables and fights in the
demon underground of Sunnydale - and slumped.
*Or maybe he will.*

Sighing softly, Wesley went back inside and settled
at his desk - found a translation he had been
laboring over and got to work, determined to wait
Spike and Xander out and *not* to worry.

Something was...bumping. Thumping? *Rapping at
my chamber door? No, no...* Wesley stood up and
hissed, back stiff and legs half asleep. A glance at
the clock showed him nearly two hours had passed
and *thump thump* at the front door. He moved
stiffly to open it and was confronted by a wall of
wrinkled black plastic.

"Open the bloody door, Wes!" Spike's voice, from
somewhere behind the wall and Wesley stepped back, pulling the door wide. The plastic heaved forward - stuck for a moment - and then burst inward, shredding itself on the jamb. Wesley jumped back but it was too late - a shower of pillows pelted him and he grabbed at them, trying to save them from hitting the floor.

"God damn-it! Fuck - sorry, Wes," Spike stood in the doorway, more bulging garbage-bags in his arms and the shreds of at least two hanging from his fingers. Wesley couldn't stop his grin and Spike grinned back. Then Wesley schooled his features to a frown and snatched at pillows.

"Just why are you assaulting me with pillows, Spike?" he asked, and Spike pushed forward, shredding another bag and kicking pillows out of the way.

"Brought the Nest down, didn't we? You don't have a Nest, love."

"Oh, for heaven's sake - you're getting them wet!"
Wesley rescued more pillows before Spike could get his sodden boots on them and heard Xander coming up the walk.

"Blind man coming through!" Xander announced and Wesley heard the telltale rustling of more black plastic. He cast a nervous glance back at the bedroom.

"You do realize this is a one bedroom cottage, not a three bedroom, full sized - "

"Stucco and chicken wire monstrosity," Spike finished, lobbing his last bag onto the couch and turning to recover Xander's from him. "Mind the step, pet."

Wesley waited for Xander's defense of his home - which failed to come. Instead, he found himself with an armful of Xander and a mouthful of Xander tongue that tasted of rain and smoke and the unmistakable tang of Spike's blood. Which - oh! - explained everything, really.
Wesley's back met the wall solidly, making their teeth clack together and he tipped his head back, breathing hard - but not quite ready to remove his hands from Xander's arse just yet.

"Hey," Xander said.

"Hey," Wesley murmured, feeling a little dazed and moving in for more of those sweet-spicy kisses. Xander made an incoherent sound against his lips and leaned into him, pressing Wesley back into the wall and kissing as if it had been months and not days since they'd last seen each other.

"Still got a whole truck to unload," Spike said and Xander pulled back. Turned to Spike who simply shouldered in and now Wesley was kissing Spike, who had one fist in Wesley's shirt, crumpling it. And one on Xander, it seemed, since Xander squeaked and jumped, pushing his hip into Wesley's thigh.

"Hey, I don't want to make Wesley feel unloved." Xander worked a hand between them, sliding up the thick inner seam of Wesley's jeans leg and
feeling the narrow muscles twitch and jump under his palm - heat and cold between Spike and Wes' touch. "Feeling loved yet?" Xander's teeth closed with remarkable accuracy over Wes' neck and Wes jumped - moaned into Spike's mouth helplessly. "He sounds loved."

"Is loved," Spike said, leaning one shoulder into the wall and mimicking Xander - nibbling his way down Wes' neck to the collar of his shirt - undoing a button and finding the fever-warm ridge of Wes' collarbone with his tongue. Wes' head thumped gently into the wall and Xander chuckled. Spike undid another button on Wes' shirt and arched in pleasure as Wes' hand finally fumbled under Spike's duster and found skin - ran his hand and his nails up Spike's back.

"Bloody hell." Wesley curled his fingers over the sharp angle of Spike's shoulder blade, fighting the change that would bring out his claws. He shivered in the cool rain-scented breeze curling in the door and clutched at Spike when Xander's fingers closed, warm and strong, around his cock, rubbing, rubbing
through his jeans - and then not through his jeans in a move too quick for his lust-fogged brain to follow.

"Can't argue with that," Xander agreed, fleeting kiss to Wesley's cheek and then warm, mobile lips sliding down to Wesley's cock - making him jump and clutch at Spike with unsteady hands.

"The - d-door is - open - oh god - Xander -" Wesley stammered, giving up and giving in and letting the change come - moaning as Spike immediately caressed his scalp - ran cool hands over his back, nudging the spines and sending shivers through him. "S-sspike, the do-or..."

Spike growled - disengaged for mere seconds to slam the door shut and then he was sliding down Wesley's body and his mouth was joining Xander's, cool and warm together and Wesley just closed his eyes and grabbed - hung on.

Hot, slick and pepper-salty, with the cool brush and slide of Spike's tongue and the lusty pulse that was Spike himself. Xander chuckled around Wesley's
flesh - savored the strangled groan from above them and wondered if Wes was watching. Wondered if he could see the play of tongues teasing swollen skin, plum-purple tender and slick or if his eyes were squeezed shut, like Xander's. Xander opened his eye to find Spike's gaze hazy and upturned, watching.

Spike blinked - looked at Xander for one moment and then back up at Wesley - watched as Wes' claws scored the plaster of the wall. Then he turned his concentration onto Wes' cock - onto the orgasm he could feel, brimming and trembling just under the surface.

"Isn't he fuckin' lovely, Xan, when he's like this? So turned on he can't talk..." Spike kissed Xander around Wes' hot, succulent flesh - tugged at Wes' jeans and got his hand up and behind, to press and stroke sensitive, secret skin. Wes writhed and Xander's teeth nipped gently at him, and Spike had to wind his other hand in Xander's hair - sink into the lust that was like an electric current from Xander and that was pure, sweet-salt musk from
"Let's make him come, Xan...take the edge off so we can give him a proper 'we missed you' shag..."

"Give him lots of orgasms," Xander mumbled and ducked - lips barely brushing the drawn-up skin of Wesley's balls, hot breath that made him tremble. Xander gave him thirty seconds. "Check."

Voices blurred into wordless buzzing and Wesley let go, arching into the wall with a growl that was all demon and a roar in his ears like the sea, all rushing white along his nerves; tingling, floating numbness in its wake. The aftershocks rippled through his skin - under his skin and under his scalp and he pressed his cheek to the wall to gain his breath, shivering.

Spike trailed his tongue a last time up the softening flesh of Wes' cock - grabbed Xander and hauled him upright, kissing him along the way. Sharing Wes' sweet-pepper taste and sharing the iron-tang of blood as Xander bit Spike's still-healing lip. Casualty of rush-hour dead-stop almost-sex. They both
leaned into Wes and Spike turned to look at the older man - blinked, and nudged Xander.

"Look, Xan. That's -"

"New," Xander said, wide-eyed. The spines along Wes' scalp were lifting and lowering - shimmering through a rainbow of colors. Like a cuttlefish but faint, so faint.

"What?" Wes asked, looked dazedly around at them - the demon shifting away as he got his breath and his senses back.

"Change back." Xander pushed his fingers through Wesley's hair and watched as the spines shivered into existence again before brushing them with his fingertips and watching them ripple in his wake. "They move."

"I - oh..." Wesley shook again, a tremor that shivered away the demon and left him sagging against the wall. "They seem - seem to have become somewhat more sensitive as well."
"That right?" Spike asked, and the glee and *promise* - in his voice made Wesley shiver again in anticipation.

"Yes, they - Xander? My - god, you -" Wesley stood up straight, his hands going out automatically to cradle Xander's face - turn him toward the light. The graceful arabesque of rich, reddish ink that curled around the empty socket of Xander's face still looked a bit sore, and Wesley traced the line that curved down onto Xander's cheekbone - watched the younger man shiver under his touch. "Oh, it's..."

Xander couldn't hide his grin - *didn't* hide the shivers Wesley's warm, dry fingers over the sore skin sent through him. "New?"

"Stunning. But are you certain -?" Wesley realized Xander was staring at him and flushed. "Yes, of course you're certain. I'm sorry."

"Kinda permanent." Xander leaned his face into Wesley's touch, leaned into *Wesley*. 
"There are many tribes, both demon and human, where young warriors do fierce battle for the right to this sort of decoration." Wesley waited until Xander's eye opened and focused on him. "I don't believe any of them would find you lacking."

*You always know what to say, Wes. Always say the right thing. Warrior is right...* Spike stroked Wes' chest in appreciation and affection - watched a huge smile bloom across Xander's face even as he blushed.

"Really?" Xander asked, and Wes smiled back - touched the tattoo again and then slid his hand back into Xander's hair.

"Really, Xander. You've earned such a thing. And...it's beautiful."

"You said that," Spike murmured, pulling Xander closer - wanting them skin on skin, in the bed - in the Nest they were going to construct.
"It bore repeating," Wesley said, and kissed Xander's forehead - nose - eyelid and then the tattoo, gently.

Xander breathed in the mingled scents - peppermusk lust and Spike's tequila-smoke - and nuzzled his way to Wesley's ear. "Spike got a couple of new toys in Ojai." He felt Wesley's jolt and stepped back with a grin and a stretch. "All in favor of building the Nest and getting naked?"

"Aye."

"Too fuckin' right."

"The people have reached a consensus!"

~*~*~*~*~

Spike gunned the motorcycle's engine - blasted away from the intersection and down the street, grinning. Hearing the appreciative yells from other cruisers, admiring his custom bike. Or maybe
admiring the luscious human draped over his back like a second skin. Either was good. Xander's arms tightened around his ribs and Spike went a little faster, whipping around a corner and taking deep breaths of the rain-washed air. Heading downtown - going to find a nest of vamps. Going to kick a little ass and not worry about the policy of it, or the politics, or if it was right. Just doing it, for the sheer thrill of the dance. And for Wes, of course.

"Turn here!" Xander freed an arm from Spike's waist, squinting into the wind at the street signs, Spike's back a comfortable and solid warmth beneath him - still holding on to the heat from the bath. The bath that had been interrupted by the highlight reel of a vampire attack about to happen. "Wes said off Seventh and Mateo. Near the bus station." Xander's hair was still wet but there was a live current under his skin - a jump of adrenaline like he used to feel before patrols in high school, knowing the big gun was on his side.

"Ta!" Spike yelled back, leaning into the curve and sweeping neatly around a slow-moving Honda.
Ahead, still several blocks away he could see the Greyhound Bus sign, glowing against a backdrop of seedy buildings. *Stupid fledges, picking such a shite neighborhood.* Spike pressed back into Xander, shivering slightly. Wes' vision had come, and he'd said something dazedly about calling Angel. And Xander had asked what he'd seen and then... And then he'd told them, and then - the vision had stopped. It wasn't supposed to stop cycling until Wes had told 'the Champion'. Spike couldn't help wondering - aloud, and slightly desperately, if that meant Xander were a Champion.

*Stupid fucking Powers. I didn't volunteer for any bloody martyrdom.* But Wes...had been so happy. *Pillock,* Spike thought fondly, and ducked into the station parking lot.

Get the vamps before the vamps get on a bus and turn it into their all night buffet. Simple enough, in theory - but why? What made the people on this bus any more important than all Xander's classmates who had nasty accidents with barbeque forks?
That was one of the questions Xander planned to ask if he ever had an audience with the Powers, right after 'Have you always been such sadistic fucks, or have you improved with age?'

Xander didn't plan on surviving that meeting if it ever happened, but he hoped they'd deign to answer before he died.

"Wes said there was green light but all I see is red and blue - and street lights."

"We'll find it," Spike said. "Rather be clearing out a nest on Rodeo - better pickings after." Spike parked the bike and turned it off - searched for a cigarette and lighter while Xander climbed off and stretched a little, patting himself down for the pair of stakes he'd stashed in his coat. Spike lit up and inhaled deeply - got off the bike as well and sauntered toward the station. *Green light...shouldn't be too hard..." Sodding visions...need to find a way out of that for Wes. He can't be doing this forever."
"The job does have a higher turnover rate than the Doublemeat Palace. And we know what that meant now." Xander passed Spike a stake. A bus rumbled by on its way into the back lot, blowing Xander's hair across his face before he pushed it away. No patch - no patch now ever, and it was probably his imagination but it was like he could see better now, without it. "It was outside, so let's check the alleys."

Years of trailing safely behind the Slayer were not wasted on Xander; he was sticking to the walls and the safe places behind Spike, ready to lend the pointy end of his stake. "I think they only transferred 'cause Doyle was about to die - and I kinda - okay I really like Wes alive. It seems like a lifetime gig."

"Yeah, Wes said." Spike sighed - squinted through smoke and the misty air. There was nothing remotely green in this alley. "Let's try one over, yeah?" He caught Xander's hand this time - squeezed it lightly before letting go, grinning over at the man. Xander grinned back and they walked briskly out of the alley, going in search of another
"Bingo," Xander said softly behind him, and Spike let the demon rise - felt the tingling pop of demon as the vamps they were searching for came into view. Beside him, Xander shivered - feeling that pop in the link, Spike was sure.

"Time to play," Spike replied softly.

At the end of the alley, a go-light flickered green; intermittent cast of a malfunctioning bulb. Xander stepped forward in the time-honored tradition of bait guy. "Hey guys - are you taking the 9:40 to Escondido? Cause I hate to break it to you but - you're gonna miss it." So, it wasn't up to Slayer standards. Xander couldn't let a Slay go by in silence - it was the principle of the thing.

"Huh," Spike said, and then he was moving, leather and spiky-haired blur and two vamps were bowled over backwards, one crashing into a wall, the other going down hard on his tailbone. Xander thought he might have heard a crack.
"What, you didn't like my preslay quippage?" Xander asked, moving forward - stalking the tailbone vamp who was moving in a crablike manner across the alley floor. Spike staked a third vamp and ducked a kick from a fourth. Xander readied his stake for tail-bone vamp.

"Slayer's had better, love. You need more practice," Spike said - growled and did a spinning kick into a gangly vamp with a length of chain in his hand - vamp number five.

"It's not like my life is overrun with vamp stakeage." Xander paused, straddling tailbone vamp and looking up at Spike. "Well - not this kind of vamp stakeage."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me!" Tailbone vamp yelped - squirmed, wriggled and pounced Xander onto his back. The stake went flying and Xander remembered why the quips were for preslay and postslay and not midslay. Trying to hold a vampire's fangs away from his jugular was a great
reminder. Super reminder. Kinda *late* reminder!

"You know - you could probably still make your bus if you left right now."

And holy hounds of Hades, the vamp actually checked his watch! *Grab stake. Stake with stake!* *And the crowd goes wild!* Xander dropped back onto the pavement, coughing on vampire dust. Oh yeah - just like old times.

"Christ, love," Spike stretched out his hand and hauled Xander to his feet, brushing at Xander's shirt. "That shite's harder on your lungs than cigarettes." There was a clatter and a sixth vamp lunged from behind a defunct soda machine, heading for the alley entrance. Spike made a disgusted noise and hefted his stake - aimed and let fly and smirked in satisfaction as the vamp exploded into particles. Xander winced and touched his tattoo.

"It didn't get messed up, did it?" he asked anxiously, and Spike tilted his head toward the light,
examining him critically.

"Nah, looks fine. Let's go get a drink, yeah?"

"You said something about going up to Rodeo for good postslay pickings...?" Xander slipped an arm around Spike's waist, under the duster, where the skin was still holding the last of its borrowed heat.

"Probably a nest or a lair or something we could toss. Unless you care if I break into that shop - the one with the weird spy stuff?"

"Sharper Image?" Xander asked, and Spike felt around for another cigarette - lit up and pulled Xander closer. Xander leaned into the pull and bumped them off a wall, kissing. "Get a few drinks in me before we talk about knocking over Sharper Image."

"Whatever you like, pet," Spike said - leaned in to press his nose into the skin behind Xander's ear, taking in a deep breath and letting Xander's scent saturate his lungs. "Find a nice present for Wes," he
added, thumb caressing the silver ring Xander had given him.

Cool lips on warm skin - Pavlov's dog was never better trained than Xander. He tilted his head away, sliding his hand up the back of Spike's neck. "There's that adult shop on Olympic - " Spike nipped and he shivered " - where we can get something very nice for Wesley. And then we'll go somewhere Cordelia-approved to get something nice he can show off at work."

"Mmmm...like that idea. Bloody brilliant." Spike nipped again and enjoyed the shiver that ran through Xander's body - leaned back, finally, and tugged Xander into a faster walk. "Got to find something else to do first, though - Wes needs a few hours alone with his books."

"Hussy," Xander muttered, and then giggled, and Spike bumped him with his hip.

"Let's go cheat some wankers outta their paychecks. I know a bar with a couple good pool
"You want to hustle pool with a man with no depth perception?"

"They'll think you're an easy mark, love," Spike grinned. "We'll make a bloody fortune."

~*~*~*~*~

"Where's Wes?" Xander asked the pillow, too tired and sore to contemplate lifting his head.

Or possibly too hung over to contemplate lifting his head.

In either case, no head-lifting was happening soon.

But that was no reason for Spike's fingers to stop with the rubbing. Nice rubbing and clearly Spike and holy god was Xander glad they'd made the Nest before getting hammered.
Xander remembered slayage in there somewhere too.

He also remembered why he didn't drink.

"Wes is getting water. Or aspirin. Or both. Or...more alcohol. I'm not sure," Spike muttered, pushing a little harder into the warm flesh of Xander's back - pushing his face into silken, wind-knotted hair that still held the faint tang of bar-smoke and lemons and pre-dawn mist off the sea. Xander groaned.

There was the sound of water running and then shutting off and then Wes was back, walking carefully across the floor. Carefully because there was no floor. All the architectural knowledge that Xander possessed - and all the growled expletives that Spike had unleashed - had not made Wes' bed any bigger, or the pillows stack any better. About a third of the Nest was on the floor. It made the floor Nesty, as well, which was good. Spike distinctly remembered falling to the floor with a Wesley attached to him and being grateful for the over-spill.
Wes lowered himself to the bed with two bottles - water and aspirin. Immediately, Spike reached over and pulled him close, squishing Xander and making the man groan again, a little louder.

Wesley swayed close to Spike, tempted by the swollen gloss of his lower lip that still tasted faintly of cigarettes and whiskey and the raw vampire flavor of sex and blood. "I was only gone a moment," he protested, feeling himself grabbed and held and kissed with greedy hunger he couldn't help but return.

"Water, aspirin, alcohol or a gun to the head. Now, please." Xander gave up his struggle before it began, boneless between two bodies.

"Can't resist you, Wes - mmm...cinnamon..." Spike kissed Wes until the toothpaste taste was fading and Xander was groaning loudly, a sulky edge to his voice and something like whimper in the link. Spike let Wes up for air and looked down at Xander, who had turned over and was staring pitifully up at them.
"Water? Aspirin?" he pleaded, and Spike patted him on the cheek.

"No more tequila shots for you, love." Wes made a snorting sound and fished for the bottles - cracked one and then the other and solicitously helped Xander up, cradling Xander between his thighs and doling out pills. Xander swallowed and then swallowed some more, until half the water was gone.

"At least Wes loves me enough to help me," he pouted, snuggling back into the older man's arms. Wes grinned over the dark head and winked at Spike.

Xander's hair was soft and warm and silky - and did smell of clubs, wind and smog and he pushed into Wesley's combing fingers like a furry pet. "It isn't love, I assure you. It's empathy." Wesley pressed a kiss to the crown of Xander's head with the careful gentleness of a man who has been to hell in a hangover many times.
"I'll take what I can get," Xander mumbled, trying not to snicker at Spike's cocktail of amusement affection lust and the knowledge that Spike was sharing his headache - and maybe the nice good scratch-scratch of Wesley's fingernails over his scalp.

"Wait - you don't love me?" Xander turned a bloodshot and half-closed eye on Wes - not his best effort at 'big, sad, and teary' - and Wesley stared for one horrified moment before breaking into wheezing snickers. Xander humphed and wormed away, burying his face in the pillows again. Spike leaned on Xander's buttocks - somehow, they look affronted! Wesley thought - and pulled Wesley down again, silencing all laughter in a scorching kiss.

"Course he loves you, pet," Spike said, between kisses, and Wesley reached blindly and found - a shoulder.

"Of course I do, Xander. Let me - ooh - let me show you..."
"Nooooo..." Xander moaned, as the Nest they'd built bounced under Spike's enthusiasm. "I believe you. Show me later." Xander pulled a pillow over his head with a moan and hoped to suffocate where it was warm and dark and soft and smelled like demons and humans and sex. His dreams of great ways to die hadn't changed much over the years - except he'd always thought he'd be one of the ones having the sex.

"Poor thing," Wes crooned, stroking his back, and Spike's cool tongue traced the tattoo on his bicep, followed by nibbling teeth.

"I'm never drinking like that again," Xander said. "Go 'way and let me die in peace."

"Feelin' a bit...peckish, Wes. Pancakes?" Spike sat up and crawled away.

"IHOP doesn't deliver," Wes said, but the voices were moving away, and Xander sighed and burrowed into darkness, hoping the anvil chorus in
his head would be gone the next time he surfaced.

"There's..." Wesley opened his cabinets and winced.

"Leeks?" Spike asked.

"Leeks and whiskey," Wesley admitted. "I went shopping."

"For whiskey."

"Spike, you can't object to whiskey. It's - it's hypocritical."

"I'm evil - I'm allowed hypocrisy. Leeks, however..." Spike shuddered and jumped up onto the counter - pulled Wes between his thighs and wrapped his arms around him. "Does anybody deliver pancakes? Or maybe waffles. This is L.A.! There has to be waffle delivery." Wes' skin tasted deliciously of sweat and pepper and tea and Xander, and Spike licked a trail up his shoulder and pushed into the warm crook of Wes' neck, humming happily.
"I'm afraid shopping is - is in order...oh, right there - " They both jumped when Xander's phone cried 'more more more!'. "When did he change his ringtone?"

"Shoot it or answer it!" Xander shouted from the bedroom, punctuated by the thump of a thrown pillow against the adjoining wall.

Spike reluctantly pushed Wes aside and jumped down, heading for the kitchen table. "Bloody Billy bloody Idol and his bloody cheek. 'Oh no, Spike, wouldn't dream of stealin' your look, mate! It's just for the night!' Bloody poser." He snatched Xander's jeans from where they'd landed over a pile of Wes' notes and found the cell phone - snapped it open.

"Xander's phone, he's dead," he growled.

"Then you're going to have to give me the directions and I'll pay last respects when I get there," Carl said.

"What?"
"Directions to yours. As in, I need them," Carl said. "And Alex has them."

Spike stared at the phone for a moment and then tossed it to Wesley with a shrug. "It's Xander's mate. He needs directions." Spike grabbed his cigarettes and gestured to the door.

"Xander's ma - Spike, which one?" Wesley lifted the phone gingerly to his ear. "Hello?"

A warm chuckle, California accent. "Carlos Ayala. Alex calls me Carl."

"Oh, you. Yes, Xan - Alex has mentioned you. I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to meet when I was visiting him in Sunnydale. Where are you coming from?"

Spike listened with half an ear as Wes told Carl how to get to the house. He waded through the pillows on the bedroom floor to grab a clean pair of jeans and slapped Xander on the ass as he went by.
"Carl's coming. Better get up," he said, grinning. Something like _horror!_ shot through the link and Xander jolted upright, his hair a rat's nest.

"What? Carl? Where?"

"On the road. Headed here." Spike sauntered out, doing up the bottom couple of buttons on his jeans and was intercepted by an irate Wes.

"Spike, why didn't you _tell_ me someone was coming by? This house isn't fit for _pigs_, let alone guests." Wesley gestured and Spike looked around at scattered clothes, shredded plastic bags, boxes, books, papers, take-out leftovers and the overspill of pillows from the Nest. He shrugged and tapped out a cigarette.

"Carl won't care, love - he's a man."

"With a wife and three kids. Jesus _Christ_. The sun's out today." Xander scowled and squinted in the bedroom doorway and then retreated to the bathroom, muttering and slamming things, and Wes
started shifting books.

Spike leaned in the front doorway, protected by Wes' out-of-control wisteria and smoked. "Not the soddin' apocalypse. Just Carl."

~*~*~*~*~

"And this is my mother in law, Mariposa Villarreal."

From the corner of his eye, Xander saw horror flicker over Wesley's face and pitied him his half-hearted shuffle to block the chaotic living room from view. Wes shook hands in greeting and stuttered out abject apologies that Xander knew weren't necessary from long personal experience. And from the knowing smirk on Abuela Mariposa's face.

"You live life, you make a mess. Don't worry." She waved Xander closer and gave him a pat on the cheek light enough not to make his skin crawl and whimper with pain. He thought he was doing pretty
good playing Mr. Subtle Hangover too - until she spoke. "Alex - you take this, okay? It's good for hangovers." Xander tried not to groan - or turn green - while taking the heavy bag of tamales out of Mariposa's hands; large hands, hands that hadn't been shy about their work in over half a century.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Abuela!" Spike swooped in from somewhere and kissed the woman on the cheek, grinning like a hyena and Mariposa patted his cheek rather hard.

"You! You aren't taking care of Alex. Look at him!"

"He just can't hold his liquor," Spike scoffed. Xander made a face at him which he ignored. Spike reached out and snagged Wesley closer. "Did you meet our Wes? What'd you think?" Wes squirmed a little and Xander rolled his eyes - carried the tamales into the kitchen. Carl followed him, lugging a cooler.

"I think you're not taking care of him either." Mariposa cocked her head and put a hand against
the center of Wesley's chest and he flinched - but couldn't back away with Spike's arm around him. "Huh." She gave his chest a pat and stepped into the room.

Mariposa followed Carl and Xander into the kitchen and Spike tugged at Wes' arm and kept him in the living room for a moment, snuggling close and kissing his neck. He'd felt the little shudder go through Wes when Mariposa had touched him. She was la curandera - a healer - and powerful in her own right, and you couldn't be a demon and not feel her. Even Wes, only half-demon and still so new to everything could sense her.

"She wouldn't hurt a flea, Wes," Spike murmured, and Wes looked over at him, smiling hesitantly.

"Then I wasn't...imagining...?"

"Not at all. She's got power to spare, but it all goes for helping. Now - let's go see to those tamales. Xander won't have the stomach for 'em - that means more for us."
Xander *didn't*, fleeing to the living room at the first savory whiff and told himself that Mariposa's wicked chuckle couldn't *possibly* be directed at him.

Who was he kidding?

Of *course* it was directed at him.

That woman had a smirk that could win Spike's professional approval.

Unfortunately, his cowardly flight from the land of culinary treats left him standing awkwardly in the living room being callously smirked at and it was too late to turn it in a casual stroll to the couch. For one thing, there was nothing on the couch but an empty takeout bag.

So when his phone rang, he blessed whoever it was, swore to talk to them for as long as they wanted to talk to him and waded manfully into the Nest in search of his phone.
"Abuela - now don't. We're just here to visit, not -"

"Carlos, what? I just need a pot to heat the soup in! What am I supposed to do, heat it by magic?"
Mariposa rolled her eyes and opened another cabinet, tsking as she saw the bare shelf and tin of leeks. "This is a kitchen? This is a disgrace! Spike! What sort of way is this to take care of family, huh?"

"Not my house, Abuela - it's Wes' kitchen."

"And you're his novio! You're supposed to look out for him! Is this the only pot you have?" Abuela turned her gimlet gaze on Wes and Spike hugged him closer. Wes gaped for a moment and then stepped manfully up.

"Well, I - well, yes. I don't - don't do a lot of cooking and a - a plethora of pots and pans seemed...seemed foolish."

Xander snickered as he unearthed the phone. Do not fight Abuela Villarreal, Wes. The next thing you
know, you'll wake up in the kitchen section of Bed Bath and Beyond with a cart full of pots and no idea how you got there. He flipped his phone open and answered quietly enough not to jar any of his surviving brain cells. "Speak quietly and this conversation will go on a lot longer."

"Xander?" Giles spoke quietly. Blessedly quietly.

"I love you."

Giles chuckled - warm and not loud. "This is somewhat sudden. What about Spike?"

"Spike is a bad, bad vampire who comes bearing tequila."

"Ah. I see. If he comes bearing a drink involving a raw egg and claims of a miracle hangover cure, he's lying."

"Not a raw bloody egg! That's disgusting! Tabasco sauce!" Spike yelled, and Xander snickered - winced. He waded back out to the living room and slouched
down on the couch, closing his eye.

"No eggs, no Tabasco, no hair of the dog. I just need some Demerol or something."

"That will teach you to go drinking with a vampire," Giles chuckled, and Xander smiled. In the kitchen there was a clatter and a string of soft curses from Spike - a burst of Spanish from Mariposa that Xander was too tired to translate. Something about pans and...dear god - goat's milk?

"Never, ever again. I promise. I'll be good," Xander moaned. Another soft laugh from Giles and Xander took a deep breath. "So, what's the up, Giles? Something new?"

"Nothing you aren't aware of." Giles' voice warmed considerably and Xander realized how glad he was to hear Giles' voice with that tone - directed at him. "You and Spike made quite a stir at Angel Investigations."

Xander groaned. Okay, suddenly less glad. "Who
snitched?"

"A dozen Slayers. Have you forgotten already how quickly gossip spreads between teenaged girls?"

The memory of a dozen pairs of eyes took a throbbing journey through Xander's skull and he remembered suddenly that each had email and a council-equipped cell phone. It was worse than a spy network. "If this is the phone call about responsibility and duty and not pissing off Angel too much, can I take a rain check?"

"This is the call about are you all right, Xander?"

Xander pulled the phone away from his ear to stare at it. Giles' number was still displayed on the screen. "There's a possibility I'm hallucinating - but other than hung over, yeah. I'm - I'm great. Spike's great - this isn't the call where you try to talk me out of the me and Spike thing, is it?"

"No. It's not that call either."
Thank Christ, Spike thought, listening in on Xander's conversation and feeling the surprise and gladness rippling out from the man. 'Bout time the Watcher figured enough was enough. Spike hopped up onto the kitchen counter and watched with a smirk as Abuela showed Wes how to sharpen a carving knife. Wes - who could hone a knife to a sharpness that could split one thought from another - was taking it all in stride. Standing there with his blue eyes shaded by half-lowered lids, and his mouth curving up in a gentle smile. Beautiful man...so fucking special...

"Abuela, leave the man alone! He knows how to sharpen a knife."

"A hunting knife, maybe - this is different! Stir the soup, Carlos, don't just agitate it like a washing machine. Bring the vegetables up from the bottom." Carl rolled his eyes and went back to soup duty and Spike recoiled slightly as he turned from smirking at Carl to find Abuela Mariposa not ten inches from him.
"And do you think that the kitchen counter is where you should be sitting, Spike? *Food* is prepared there." Spike nodded and slid down, edging toward the living room and catching the gleam of amusement in Wes' eyes. "Although what *sort* of food is prepared in here is the question. Carlos! I must go to the market."

A thread of what felt suspiciously like a cry for help wound through Xander and he muffled a laugh.

"I wasn't aware the English weather was so amusing." Giles' voice was dry and Xander scrambled backward through his memories trying to remember what Giles had *said* about the weather. Funny - it was hard to think with Spike edging his way toward the living room.

Xander made room for his sudden armful of vampire and shifted the phone, wave of amusement and *love* from Spike who was still watching Wesley - and that was good too. "Well, it is kinda funny when you say it's raining and act all surprised. I mean London? I'm thinking rain and
"brollies."

"That...sounds so very wrong when you say it. Please don't say it again." Giles warm, amused - affectionate voice made Xander feel a wave of nostalgia and Spike turned on the cushions and tugged him close, hand going to Xander's hair and petting gently.

"It's like a virus - Spike and Wes are infecting me with weird English words all the time. I'm a sick, sick man," Xander said, leaning into the petting and closing his eye again. Spike's cool fingers made his head feel better, too. There was a noise near the front door and then a sharp knock and Wes hurried out of the kitchen, looking relieved. He opened the door and stepped back hastily as a figure in coat and hat pushed through.

"Russ?" Spike called, sitting up, and another figure came inside.

Russ, for sure, who helped Sol struggle out of his oversized trench coat. Once his head was free, Sol
lifted his nose to the air and sniffled. A ripple ran through his sleek fur and he narrowed his eyes, tongue curling out over sharp teeth before he stalked to the kitchen, a demon of purpose.

"Ssmellss good."

"Then you stir, gatito. Carlos stirs like he's mixing concrete."

Sol snickered, plucking the spoon from Carl's hand and shooing him with a delicately-clawed hand. "You go. No good at stove cooking."

"What? No greetings for us?" Spike twisted in Xander's hold to face the kitchen.

Xander watched Sol flick a dismissive gesture at them, his attention focused entirely on the pot. Sol was a demon of priorities in the kitchen. The food came first.

"Yesss. Is whatever. You don't cook." Sol grinned wickedly. "You iss all bad at stove cooking."
"He wouldn't let me stop at McDonalds." Russ sank into a chair with a creak and a sigh. "Starving all the way here and he wouldn't let me stop at McDonalds."

"MacDonaldsss," Sol said, a wealth of scorn in his voice. "That iss not food."

"He's absolutely right. McDonalds is trash. Russ, you look terrible, has Sol been keeping you up nights?"

"Abuela!" Carl groaned, and Mariposa grinned, coming around the low wall that divided the kitchen from the living room to walk over to Russ and pat him on the head.

"All right, Carlos, I make him tell me. Come have tamales, Russ. I brought them for Xander but he's too sick to eat them." A sharp look from Mariposa and Spike wrapped his arms a little tighter around Xander, shielding him.

"Let him be, Senora Abuela, his head hurts," Spike
chided.

"A raw egg in brandy will fix that," Mariposa called over her shoulder, and Xander groaned. Russ hauled himself upright and went into the kitchen, making 'feed the poor starving man' noises at Sol, who whapped him with his tail.

Xander snuggled lower under Spike, basked in possessive and snickered. "When did you change sides?"

"Didn't change sides, love. Always on your side." Spike kissed carefully, sweetly and like Xander might break - and he had to admit he still felt like that was a possibility.

"Like you on my side." Xander tugged Spike over and ruffled a hand into his hair.

"Charming as this is, Xander, you do remember you're on the telephone with me, don't you?"

Xander jerked back from the guilty verge of
forgetting he was on the telephone and groaned. "Sorry, Giles."

"Lemme have that," Spike said, and slipped the phone out of Xander's hands. "What's the news, Rupert?" he asked, and heard a sigh come down the line.

"I'm sure you heard everything I said, Spike," Giles replied, and Spike nodded to himself.

"That I did. Rain, and the new secretary has her lip pierced and...you bein' good to my boy. 'Bout time, Rupert."

"Yes, I... Yes, it was," Giles said, and Spike handed the phone back to Xander with a grin - got up off the couch to rescue Wesley from Mariposa, who was asking him if he had any cleaning supplies.

"You're being nice to Spike too, Giles. I -" Xander found himself without words as he watched Spike barge his way into the tiny kitchen behind Sol's back and around Russ' bulk, Wesley wedged into his
corner with Mariposa, the warmth so intense for a moment his headache went away. *Totally mad fucking in love.* "Thanks." To the silence on the other end of the phone, he watched Spike taste the soup, dodge Sol's tail (and claws), pour himself a whiskey - and at that point, Xander's stomach rebelled and he had to find something else to look at.

Like the ceiling.

"This is an awkward moment in the conversation," Giles observed.

"It's okay. We're handling it like men in manly companionable silence."

"At international rates."

Xander grinned up at the spider crawling across the ceiling. "Bill the Council."

"Rest assured, I will be putting this down as a Hellmouth expense. Xander...Angel said -"
"I'll bet I know *exactly* what he said. But we were serious, Giles. We're just done. We just wanna...put it behind us. I'm tired of working in graveyards, Giles, and Spike's tired of living in them."

Another silence, after that, that wasn't quite as comfortable, and Xander listened to the trans-Atlantic connection pop and hiss in his ear, faint and whispery. Giles sighed.

"I suppose I can - understand that, Xander. It's been hard on all of us but you're...still there... Angel was nearly apoplectic. I had to cover the mouthpiece." Xander snorted, and Giles chuckled, and the mood went back to lighter - went back to better. *Love* from Spike and Xander watched the spider drop down on a strand of web, swaying slightly in the air-currents in the house. *Big* air current as the front door opened and Gunn limped in.

"Hey - Wes, you havin' a party and forget to invite me?" He dropped a heavy bag by the front door.
"And there's three kids and a hot babe hanging in your magnolia tree."

"Charles! Thank god!"

Xander watched Wes struggle his way through the throng of four in the kitchen and snickered at the sudden stunned silence on the phone. "Good lord, Xander! How many people are there? Wesley said he lived in a small one bedroom cottage."

"He does. You should see it. It's so crowded, Spike should lie on top of me to save space."

"Should I, pet?" Spike said, sauntering over, bottle in one hand and shot glass in the other. Xander rolled his eyes and Spike flopped down, head in Xander's lap and feet dangling over the arm of the couch. Wes stood near the door, speaking in a low voice to Gunn who was watching with wide eyes as Sol and Mariposa bickered over whether or not to add salt to the soup.

"I think we're done here, don't you?" Giles was
saying, and Xander grinned into the phone.

"Probably. You don't think I'd make out with Spike while I was on the phone, do you?"

There was a moment's silence and then Giles cleared his throat. "Um. Not as such, however...Wesley mentioned -"

"C'mere and lemme kiss you, love," Spike said loudly and Xander giggled - held his head.

"I'm too hung over to make out. And not in front of Abuela, anyway. I'll call you soon Giles, okay?"

"Yes, please do. Be careful...the both of you."

"Yeah. Bye, Giles," Xander said, and then there was nothing but the soft purr of a dead line and Xander folded up his phone. Smiled as Spike reached and stroked his cheek.

"All right, love?"
"You mean aside from my head splitting like an overripe cantaloupe, right?" Xander dropped his phone onto the side table and leaned his cheek into Spike's stroking fingers. "Yeah. I'm so much more than all right, I'm booked into the Penthouse suite of the All Right Hilton." He let his eye close, toyed with the soft-washed peroxide curls under his fingers. "With a tray of strawberries and champagne - " Xander winced. "Okay, a tray of strawberries and whipped cream, a hot tub and -"

"Changa!" Mariposa yelled out the kitchen window. "Get out of that tree! We're going to the store!"

"- peace and quiet."

Mariel came into the house looking overheated and a little harassed, dragging Alejandro by the hand. He was six, very stubborn, and at the moment filthily dirty and Spike saw Wesley shudder and put out a hand - then stop and turn back to Gunn, squaring his shoulders and obviously doing his best to ignore the scatter of twigs and shredded leaves that Jan left in his wake.
"Jan needs the bathroom," Mariel said in passing, grinning at Spike and Xander.

"I do not!" Jan groused, but let himself be pushed inside and the door shut.

"Don't make a mess!" Mariel pushed her hair back out of her face and turned to the kitchen. "Sol! How are you? Hey, Russ. Mami! What are you doing? Leave that alone, what will Mr. Wyndam-Pryce think!" Mariel lunged at her mother, who was rifling through the junk draw in the kitchen.

"There's no church key, changa."

"We'll buy one," Mariel said, slamming the drawer and giving Sol a one-armed hug - air-kissing Russ. Xander was giggling hysterically into a pillow and snorted helplessly when Jan came out of the bathroom, sans jeans.

"These won't button!" he yelled.
"No kids," Xander whispered to Spike, who was watching with a kind of fascinated horror as Jan stomped over to their couch.

"Jander! Button me."

Xander groaned and sat up, dislodging Spike's head and taking the grubby pants. "You've gotta learn to put your own pants on, buddy. Sit on the table."

"No. None. Ever," Spike agreed as Paloma - middle, girl, eight, attitude - stalked into the house.

"Are we going or what? I want to go!"

"Going where?" Jan asked, kicking his feet. Xander whapped them.

"To the store," Paloma said and Spike watched Jan pout and Mariel roll her eyes.

"Yeah, never," Spike repeated. "Why don't we just slip into the bedroom -"
"Do you have a lot of pillow fights?" Jan had turned all of his attention on Spike. "There were lots of pillows. There was even a pillow in the bathroom."

Xander remembered clutching that pillow under his aching head on the cool tile floor and blushed. "Yeah. Tons of pillow fights. Every night, we're...fighting in the pillows."

"Mmm, yeah. Pillow fights. Rolling and pouncing and...biting -"

"Spike!" Mariel tugged Jan's jeans up - tugged the boy up and buttoned and zipped, all while giving Spike the death-glare she'd inherited from her mother.

"Sorry, Mariel," Xander mumbled, and Spike grinned at her.

"We're going to buy food. Wesley! You're going to show us the way to the market. Spike, Xander -" Mariposa called, "the kitchen needs straightening and why is there a pillow in the bathroom?"
Unsanitary. Paloma! We're going!"

Mariposa stood with her purse and a string bag in her hands, looking impatient. Wesley looked beseechingly over at the two on the couch and Spike waved happily.

"Have fun, mate!"

~~*~~*~~*~~*

_Dizzyhotlusty_. On the back of Spike's motorcycle, pressed to Spike like a second skin - like a _really_ tight tee shirt. That close, and tingling with a heady infusion of Spike's blood. Xander slid a hand up under Spike's shirt, scratching upward toward the chill metal rings he hadn't been done playing with when the call came from one of Wesley's contacts, a half demon named Hal.

A deal was going down. A deal with demons and illicit magical gems and seedy bars, oh my. A deal Hal thought Wesley would be _really_ interested in.
And Wesley had agreed.

Xander licked up the back of Spike's neck, salt and smoke and the lingering tang from Wesley biting the nape of Spike's neck when he came. *This was* the life he'd signed on to years ago when he became the Slayer's boy. Adventure, excitement - okay there was more time spent wrapped around a sexy vampire guy than High School Xander had ever imagined but that was, as the saying goes, of the good.

Spike wanted to pull over, dismount, and fuck Xander right through the plate-glass window of the 'Pay-Day Check Cashing' place. Xander's warm breath, warm hands - warm *tongue* - were all driving him to distraction and he knew he was vamped out. Driving through the streets of L.A. with the most gleeful of faces - hard as nails, floating on the heady brew that was Xander's blood and *loveminewanthappy* rolling over and over him - tingling through him. *Nothing* - *nothing* - was better. Pleasant ache when he shifted on the saddle that
brought Wes vividly to mind - Wes pushing his thighs wider and fucking him; shivering into the demon aspect so he could fuck harder and Xander kissing Spike into panting breaths...

And now - a little wheeling and dealing - a little action. Unlife...was perfect.

A block ahead he saw the stutter neon that spelled out 'The Eight Ball' and he looked for a space to park. Mentally checking his weapon inventory and making a grumbling noise of pure pleasure as Xander cupped his erection and squeezed. Oh, yeah. Perfect.

"Save this." Xander gave another squeeze and let go. Could hear the breathiness in his own voice - ground against Spike for a spine-tingling moment before dismounting and stretching. He needed a new analogy for his blood. He felt like Rice Krispies with a fresh pitcher of milk poured over them. The good kind - with marshmallows. "This place is a dump."
"Yeah, well. Demons tend to gravitate toward dark and damp." Spike lit a cigarette - swung off the bike and into Xander, arm around his waist and all that hot, fragrant flesh pressed tight against him for a moment. Hard cock pushing into Spike's hip and he kissed Xander and let him go. "Save it all night, love. Makes it so much sweeter, when you've been waiting..." Xander grinned at him and together they strode to the door - went inside.

'Dump' was being kind, Spike thought, as he stood at the bar and surveyed the worn, broken, and generally second-hand tables, chairs, booths and clientele of the bar. The bartender slopped whiskey into a smudgy glass - opened a beer for Xander and moved sullenly away and Spike snarled after him. No point in hiding in here - he was Spike here - he was William the Bloody and anybody who didn't know would soon find out. Xander was leaning casually on the bar next to him, and Spike smirked to see the envious glances sent his way. My boy - everybody wants him. But I've got him.

"Hope this Hal shows soon. This place makes
me...edgy," Spike muttered.

"You were a regular at Willy's," Xander murmured back, dropping his head and watching the clientele through his hair. He had to admit they were a lot more colorful than Willy's regulars. A lot more open about what they were - but humanized. There was a green-skinned, bald and mottled demon playing darts who Xander could swear had breast implants. "Not that this place isn't fuckin' weird."

"Willy's was the default, love. Where else was I gonna go? Got sick of the soddin' Bronze and the soddin'...white hats," Spike said, flicking a laughing glance at Xander and swallowing his shot. He banged the glass down and raised a finger and the bartender nodded, coming back their way. "I think - that might be our boy," Spike added, looking at a demon coming in the door.

Xander might have thought it was a trick of the light if he wasn't expecting a half-breed. The guy looked almost human. Hockey jersey, baggy jeans, skin a smooth, rich, dark brown that reminded Xander of
Gunn except *this* guy was short and skinny - and seemed to have gently fluttering gills on the sides of his neck. Xander was pretty sure he'd have noticed if Gunn had gills.

He looked about five years too young to drink - at least - but by the time he reached the bar, the bartender was already popping open a beer and sliding it his way. "You guys gotta be Wes' boys."

"And you gotta be stupid. Keep your voice down, you git," Spike snapped, eyeing the half-breed with discontent. Hal seemed - cheery. Spike didn't like cheery. "So who's the seller and exactly what is he selling?" Spike asked. Hal took a long pull of his beer and licked his lips.

"Vuch. Calls himself Jackie. *Claims* he's got some spelled Dragga-stones from the Seventh Star. Or something." Hal drank more beer and Spike lit a cigarette - squinted at him through the smoke.

"'*Claims'"? You said he *did*. You pretty much told Wesley it was a done deal, Hal. Does he have them
or not?" Spike didn't raise his voice, but Hal flinched back a little, just the same.

"Well, you know the Vuch! Could be lying through his teeth! Look, he'll be here in a minute, let's go sit down and -"

"No, we'll stand," Spike growled. He leaned over to Xander and kissed him - nibbled his way to Xander's ear. "Keep a sharp eye out, love," he whispered. Made his way back to Xander's mouth and kissed him again and ignored Hal's gape of surprise.

Xander licked the flavor of whiskey and smoke off his bottom lip and leaned against the bar with a little nod - gave Spike room to move and move fast. He didn't know what a Vuch was - and the Seventh Star thing sounded like something out of one of the DVD sets he'd left behind in Sunnydale - but a guy never lost the ability to look like he knew what was going on. Even when he didn't have a single soggy clue. Spike knew what a Vuch was. Xander was just along to be big and freaky. He could do big and freaky.
Hal looked freaked.

Success.

"Th- that's Jackie coming in. The F'rith behind him is Gunther, his bodyguard."

Vuch were wizened, twisted, and scaly. Rather like animate dried lizards. Jackie was a dull grey sheened with a yellow-gold that did not go well with the lavender leisure suit he was wearing. Or the ropes of gold chains around his scrawny, wattled neck. F'rith, on the other hand, were built like Mack trucks. Solid, earthy brown all cracked and mottled like the Thing. Only Gunther had a fringe of auburn hair and...gold chains.

Spike rolled his eyes and widened his stance ever so slightly, one elbow on the bar, hand holding a full shot-glass and the other lifting his cigarette to his lips. Gunther was big. Hit him first, Spike thought, if there's trouble. Hit him hard. Jackie swayed up to them, one hand fluttering.
"Hal. You look smashing. So Nelly. Are these your associates you mentioned?" Jackie gave Spike a long, appraising once-over and Spike shifted - canted his hips out a little. Jackie twitched.

"Jackie," Spike purred. "Call me Spike."

"It is a pleasure, Spike." The word oozed forth in a way that might have made Xander's skin crawl if he wasn't busy feeling a rush of smug possession. Until Jackie's eyes slid to him - and down him. "And this is your -" Jackie paused, tongue flickering out to taste the air "- pet?"

"Partner." Xander slid a hand up Spike's back, muscles loose and ready under his shirt. *Mine, you scaly bastard.*

"Part-ner," Jackie said, pursing his lips. He murmured something to Gunther, who grunted and stepped up to the bar. "Let's take a booth, shall we? Standing at the bar - so rent-boy, don't you think?" Jackie's slit-pupiled gaze ran once more up and
down Xander's body and Spike growled softly.

"Manners, Jackie," he said - took a last puff of his cigarette and blew the smoke into Jackie's face. "Manners, or I'll find a new and exciting way for you to function without your legs." Jackie's eyes went wide and then slitted, the nictitating membrane flashing across them for a moment.

"Gunther! Make mine a double," Jackie snapped. He turned and swayed toward the booths and Spike pushed slowly away from the bar - gestured to Hal.

"Ladies first, Hal."

Hal glanced back at Spike and Xander. Nervous? Xander wondered. "Gotta table reserved by the door."

Gunther closed a hand around Hal's bicep. His thumb and forefinger overlapped easily. "That table." He pointed to a table half way between the door and the back, a table without an easy run for the door. Confident? Or convinced Xander and
Spike would grab the whatever stones and run?

A warm feeling, like a mental shrug rolled off Spike and down Xander's spine, relaxing him. "Yeah. Okay." He really hoped it was in Spike's plan to have his back, because he could feel those reptilian eyes sliding down him - and ew. At least in Sunnydale, he hadn't been worried that the demon of the week wanted him naked and chained to the bed. New and wiggy.

Lust curled off Spike like smoke, peeling away from the steady pulse of loathing for the Vuch and the coiled ready ready ready tension.

Okay, when certain demons wanted him naked and tied to the bed, it was less ew. Not on topic - but a lot less ew.

Unwilling to put his blind side to Hal or the rest of the bar, Xander leaned into the corner of booth and wall.
Spike slid in next to Xander - gave Hal a look of pure loathing that had the half-breed scurrying for a chair to perch on. Gunther set down something blue and frothy for Jackie and a beer for himself - wedged his bulk into the booth, rocking the table a little.

"Dragga-stones are pretty fucking rare," Spike said, idly pushing his shot glass back and forth between two fingers. "How'd you manage to find some, Jackie?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Jackie chuckled, sipping his drink through the straw and Spike froze, feeling his lip lift in a silent snarl.

"Yes I would, actually. Don't want stolen ones. You know what that means." It meant a curse - it meant painful and lingering death. Dragga-stones could only be sold, traded, or given. Stealing them was
bad, bad, bad.

"I'm not an idiot, Spike. Bought them off this magic-user, some human - said he had to get to Australia." Gunther swallowed half his beer in one go and Hal nervously sipped his and Xander's thigh pressed tight to Spike's, warmth of his love, tension of the moment - thread of amusement because he was a Scooby, after all.

"Let's see 'em, then," Spike said, and downed his shot.

Xander leaned against Spike, a hand resting on the base of his spine. Before knowing Spike, Xander had no idea how much intent those muscles could communicate. Right now, they were at rest. So was Xander.

Jackie reached into his suit jacket and Xander watched with some amazement as that side of his chest slowly caved in when the cloth-wrapped package was removed, completely revising his impression of Jackie's physique - and causing a
small, suspicious voice in his head to ask what Jackie had stashed in the other side of his jacket.

"Five named stones." Jackie plucked at the neat bow and unraveled the cloth, revealing - Xander felt the tension in Spike's spine soar while the rest of him remained visibly boneless - five smooth volcanic rocks, pocked and pitted with an oily sheen. "Two thousand a piece."

"They're no good if the set is broken." Spike lit a cigarette, a vision of carelessness.

"They will pay for themselves and more after a short time - in the right hands."

"Two hundred a piece." Xander said and felt Spike's muscles twang under his fingertips. "If they're ruined that easily."

The confidence - lust - and something like hunting-tension from Xander was oddly soothing, and Spike smoked and watched, listening to Xander haggle with Jackie. Most everything had a negotiable price
in Africa, and Xander had learned that age-old dance well.

"These don't grow on trees, little boy - they're a long month's worth of work. Fifteen hundred each."

"Work you didn't do. Three hundred, though, since you had to deal with Hal."

"Hey!" Hal protested, spitting beer. Gunther growled. "I still have a finder's fee coming to me from somebody here -"

"Or a broken jaw. Shut up," Spike snapped. Hal subsided, clutching his beer. Settle on a price - get the bloody stones - get out of this dump and then... Spike leaned into Xander's heat a little more - stroked the muscled thigh that was tight to his. And then...back to the Nest. Celebrate with Wes. All good.

Spike watched Jackie squirm and squint at Xander - watched Xander grin lazily and drink a mouthful of beer. All very good.
Wesley watched Spike and Xander go, taking a turn fast and low to the ground and accelerating away into the night. He didn't expect them to have trouble with Hal - or Jackie, if it came down to it. Hal hadn't mentioned who his contact was for the stones but the one time Hal hadn't fronted for Jackie, Gunther had found him and broken a few fingers.

Wesley didn't plan to tell that to Spike and Xander, however. He grinned, unlocking the small shed that adjoined his house. They'd have more fun figuring it out for themselves and if all went well, Wesley would feel better about sending them into the Los Angeles demon community on his errands more often..
The shed was empty except for his own motorcycle; nothing like Spike's expensive custom design, but sleek and black and able to get Wesley anywhere he needed to go. In the darkness of the shed, he lifted his helmet - and hesitated - before putting it back on the shelf next to its pink counterpart. He shivereded into his other form, fizzes and prickles and the ripple across his scalp that filled his senses with ocean, the lingering scents of human bodies and the mechanical smell of the shed and motorcycle.

*I can see better - hear better...feel better like this. It's...it's a public service. I'm safer on the road this way.* Wesley smiled to himself, knowing that that sort of justification would have gotten a joke from Xander - a pointed bit of truth from Spike. *But it's all true.*

He settled himself in the saddle - turned the key and kicked the starter and then rolled slowly out of the shed. As he cleared the doorway the space around him opened - the feeling of invisible, barely tangible walls faded back and away as the sensitive
spines registered the change from enclosed to open space. Grinning, Wesley upped his speed and turned north, heading for AI.

*I wonder what Angel will think?* I smell of chilies and corn and - and bubble gum... Wesley shuddered at the state of his couch and hoped that peanut butter really *would* get gum off of fabric. *And I smell of Sol. And Xander and Spike. Angel's going to think we had some sort of...Mexican-themed orgy. With gum.* Wesley snorted in amusement and then sobered. The day that the Sunnydale crew had visited - only 24 hours ago - had been... Had been a *good* day.

Crowded into his tiny bungalow, eating and drinking and talking and laughing... It had been so...warm. So relaxing. At first Wesley had been on edge, afraid that he would say or do the wrong thing. But then... Max, Carl's oldest son, had asked him about his Lord Leighton print and they'd discussed art for half an hour, the boy surprising Wesley with his enthusiasm. And Russ had joked around with him about the Nest pillows that had continually spilled into the living room despite their best efforts. And
Mariposa, and Sol...

*Now I know...so much more,* Wesley mused. *I know my name.* And that knowledge had more power than Wesley had expected. All his life, he'd known on some level or another that he was *human* and what that meant. Perhaps not on a metaphysical level but in a way that, if asked what he was, he could answer 'I am a man.'

Now, with a name for what he was - with *three* names for what he was - the demon was less alien. His skin was his own.

*I am half-Sa'ins demon.* English.

*Hhetsh* in Sol's language.

*Kee-tch* in his...their - Wesley swooped around a slow-moving minivan on La Cienega and gunned the engine, tucking his body low to the tank and catching a curl of pot smoke and sour candy from the van - *his* species' language.
Names - have power. Wesley had known that for almost as long as he had known how to speak. 'Nana!' brought Miss Dalton the nanny running, and 'Wesley Wyndam-Pryce!', in that harsh growl...had always made his skin crawl. Having these names felt...solid. As if knowing was the final anchor he needed to...

To feel as if I am finally my own, Wesley thought, and gunned his bike faster. The rush of air over his spines was like one continuous caress and he shivered and shifted on the saddle. He'd have to tell Xander and Spike... He was so caught up in what he was thinking that it took Angel's blank stare and unsubtle flinch on arrival to realize that he hadn't shifted back, and Angel was facing the demon for the first time...ever.

Wesley felt the instinctive pulling shiver - urge to hide his demon face from Angel - and fought, straightening and feeling the stiff ripple of his spines standing upright along his scalp. Warning behavior his mind supplied, now that he knew Sa'ins relied on defense and threatening but harmless
display to chase predators away.

Except Angel was not a predator. With a deep breath, Wesley closed his eyes, willing the muscles along his scalp to relax and felt with relief the shift of his spines laying back down and arranging themselves comfortably. "It's called - this species - " Wesley shook his head, There is no way to say this which is not awkward. "I am a Sa'ins demon, Angel - or rather, half of me is. This half," he said and smelled for the first time the scent of a vampire's unease - determined that this be...normal. "Where is everyone?"

"Patrolling. It's what they do every night." Angel stared, and Wesley almost shifted again. But he felt...good. Comfortable. And he was tired of hiding.

"Everyone? There's usually at least a brace of Slayers here."

"I sent them out. I had Andrew do a - some sort of evaluation thing. They were driving me crazy. Illyria's - around somewhere. Wes, can you -" Angel
cut himself off, and Wesley sagged, just a little.

"Yes, Angel?"

"Can you change? I'm just not - used to - that. This. Whatever."

"Certainly, Angel," Wesley said, sighing just a little. His skin shivered as he changed, and he lifted his head, taking a deep breath. Angel leaned back in his chair, looking slightly less unhappy.

"Thanks. You know - there haven't been too many visions lately. The Powers trying to keep me out of the loop?" Angel's voice had a slight edge to it and Wesley sighed again - settled himself in the chair opposite Angel's desk.

_Had to tell him sometime. He's not going to be happy..."Actually, I have some news about the visions._"
"You told Spike," Angel said. Again.

"Yes, Angel."

"You told Spike and the vision stopped repeating?" Angel asked for the...fourth time? Maybe fifth.

"Yes." Wesley glanced longingly at the clock, wondering how Xander and Spike were getting along with Hal and Jackie. With less repetition, he suspected.

"We've got to contact the Powers."

Wait - that was new. "We do?"

"Yeah. There's gotta be something wrong with the visions. They're not supposed to - " Angel waved a hand, from Wesley to himself, frustrated.

"Not supposed to...be shared?"

"Not supposed to stop repeating until you've told
Wesley stared at Angel for a long moment - sighed deeply and got up. Angel kept a bottle of decent whisky in the file cabinet behind his desk, and Wesley got it out - poured himself a hefty shot - and drank it in one gulp. Then he put the bottle on the desk and slumped back down into his chair.

"Angel. Spike is a vampire with a soul who died saving the world. I suspect he falls into the category of 'Champion' rather neatly, don't you?"

"But he *retired,*" Angel mumbled after Wesley settled again. "It's not *fair* he gets to retire and keep saving the world."

"He didn't choose this, Angel. The Powers...well, I hate to say they work in mysterious ways because that gives them a bit more...credibility than I'd like but...well...there it is." Wesley poured another shot and pushed it across to Angel, who took it morosely and sat, staring down into the golden depths. Wesley felt a stab of pity for the other man.
Angel lifted the shot and downed it in one gulp, setting the empty glass back on the desk. "These really need to be bigger."

Wesley waggled the half-full bottle. "There's more, Angel."

"Those need to be bigger, too."

"Well, it's a start, anyway," Wesley said and got up and got another glass - poured them both another drink. *It's been ages since Angel and I drank together. I hope he doesn't sing...* 

~~*~~*~~*~~*~~

Xander could feel the stones clattering together against his thigh through the leather of the duster as they took the last turn onto Wesley's street. He felt - okay, he felt fucking fantastic and only part of it was the blood. Could a guy make a living haggling with demons over things like this? Was this how
Spike felt when he hit another demon over the head really hard and took things like this?

Okay, so Spike's method might have been more direct.

Two thousand. For all five stones.

And Hal's finder's fee came out of Jackie's money.

Xander remembered how horny a good sale - or buy - made Anya. Now, he got it.

"What's got into you, pet? Didn't think that kind of thing was so - exciting." Spike shut the shed door and leaned on it, watching Xander from under his lashes. Awash in happiness and lust and wantwantwant.

"Me neither, but...it is. It's a rush," Xander replied. He cast a lingering look over Spike from head to toe and back halfway up and Spike caught his breath at the need that spread through him like slow fire.
"Yeah? Guess we'd better...do something with all that energy, then. Unless - you want to save it for Wes?" Spike reached out and traced a fingertip over Xander's knuckles and Xander grinned. Wolfish grin - sexy grin - and caught Spike's hand - brought the fingers to his mouth.

"I think we could...get all warmed up and ready for Wes... Think you can - wait?"

"I can if you can, love," Spike murmured.

Xander pulled Spike's fingers to his lips, smelled leather and whiskey - cigarette smoke and the mechanical scent that was motorcycle; spread Spike's fingers and there he could scent the faint blood and tequila flavor of Spike himself - and who knew Spike could get turned on being...sniffed? Wave of fucknowlust rocking him on his feet. "Not gonna make it easy. Up for the challenge?" Because he wasn't ready yet to give up the feral bubbling in the back of his brain, the part that divided the world into things to fight, things to eat and things to fuck.
"Always up for you, love." Spike curled his fingers in Xander's and tugged him close - kissed him with the same slow-burning fire that was suffusing his body - walked Xander backward across Wes' pocket-handkerchief of a lawn and up onto the porch. *Thud* into the door and Xander was fumbling for the spare key, small noises of satisfaction and *want* vibrating between them. *See how long you can take it, Xander. See how long you can resist...god, so good...*

~*~*~*~*~

Decent whisky made its way to cheaper whiskey, and some time in the depths of the third shared bottle, a disapproving Andrew had been sent out for more. And this - this was *nice*, slouching mellowly next to Angel, feeling the battered sofa in Angel's office swallow Wesley's boneless body whole.

It didn't seem to matter that there appeared to be two or three Angels looking back at him - and all of
them were frowning thoughtfully. "Angel?"

Angel's eyebrows drew together impressively.
"What do you see in them?"

"What do I see in...who?" Wesley asked, confused. *In the three Angel's, does he mean?* The Angels rolled their eyes - essayed another shot of whiskey and managed to spill some on the desk, where Council papers blotted it up.

"In them. Xander and S-spike. What's the attraction?"

"You mean - besides the both of them being bloody fantastic in bed?" Angel winced, and Wesley snickered to himself. *Right. Sex-talk makes Angel uncomfortable. More sex talk. "They're bloody marvelous. Spike does this...this...thing. With hisss...tongue -"

"Wes, please. For both our sakes jus'...don' go there."
"Oh, right. Sorry, Angel." Wesley stared at the Angels. "That's what I see in them! Not the tongue-thing. I don't have to - to hide."

All three Angels looked hurt - stared back at him in silence then looked away. "Change."

"No."

"You said you don't want to hide! So don't hide!"

"I am not going to show you my other face because you've finally made yourself drunk enough to tolerate it." Wesley lifted the bottle from Angel's hands and poured himself another drink. Three glasses. All three got another shot of whiskey. "I - I won't."

"I can't play these games, Wesley! Fuck." Angel scrubbed his hands over his face. "Spike's gonna - gonna take you away from me, too."

"He won't."
"I'm losing you."

"Angel." Wesley examined the bottle and set it down.

Angel looked up, hopeful. "I'm not losing you?"

"You've lost me," Wesley corrected gently. "At least - AI has lost me. It's - it's time for me to move on."

"And you're gonna - do what? Go off somewhere and phone visions in? The Powers want you here, Wes!" Angel stood abruptly - flailed for a moment for balance and then paced away - paced back, staring down at Wes. "I...want you here. Wes -"

"It's not that simple, Angel. I just... I can't do this anymore, I..." Wesley closed his eyes, tired of staring up at Angel and after a moment the couch sighed as Angel sat back down, his knee bumping into Wesley's knee.

"I don't understand, Wes. Explain it so I get it, 'cause...I just...don't get it." Angel sounded so -
defeated, that for a moment Wesley almost backtracked - almost...gave in.

"There was a time when the people we helped had faces - and names, names we knew and remembered, Angel." Wesley took a deep breath, deeper drink and looked at Angel. Vampires were supposed to be immortal, unchanging. But Angel looked...aged. "If you want to blame anyone," he said gently, "don't blame Spike. Blame Xander. Blame Charles. Blame me. For being human. We're not Champions - we've given everything to the Powers. I gave them my life, Angel." Wesley dropped his head, shivered and changed and felt his senses unfurl around him. "This is what they gave me in return."

"So you could keep fighting, Wes. That's what it's all about - we have to keep fighting."

"Yes," Wesley agreed. "We do. You have Slayers now. You have the support of the Council of Watchers. You don't need me here. And what I need if I am to keep fighting the good fight - you can't
give me."

"I'll give you anything." Angel lifted his head, met Wesley's monochrome eyes and held them, without flinching.

"I need freedom."

"Freedom from what - to do what?" Angel's voice cracked a little, and Wesley hesitated for a moment and then reached out and gently squeezed Angel's shoulder.

"The Council - and the Powers - are...political. Are - impersonal. They take the long view, I suppose, and see that some things must...fall through the cracks in order for others to survive." Angel shook his head and Wesley sighed and leaned back, staring at the ceiling again.

"And I can't work that way anymore, Angel. I saw - what that did. What it does. I want the freedom to help anyone - everyone. Not just...toe the Powers'
line. Or the Council's. Does...do you understand that?"

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"Well?"

"Message. Again." Xander folded his phone, tucked it under a pillow in easy reach and curled an arm and leg over Spike, a mingling fuzz of worry frosting the air around them. Xander shivereded and pulled a fold of the electric blanket over them, around them. "He probably forgot to charge his phone."

"Probably," Spike agreed - felt the worry and knew he was adding his own because Wes just didn't forget things like that. *Dunno what he was going to see Angel about. But...if that bastard touches him - hurts him at all..."

Xander shivereded again and Spike tried to pull back the huntprotectthurt that was building inside. Tried, but that same shivering feeling was coming from
Xander - loop of ferocity and protectiveness that could easily spiral into kill. "Wes'll be fine, love. Just fine. We'll...give him another hour, yeah? Just one...maybe just half an hour," Spike muttered unhappily. *Come home, Wes...*

**Square Twenty**

Wesley braced himself for a moment, standing on his own front porch and feeling an insane urge to turn around and run away. The house...*glowered* at him - much as he suspected Xander and Spike would be glowering at him in a few moments.

*I deserve glowering. Shouting, even. But it's done, it's...all in motion. Had to be done...* Instinct warred with desire and Wesley stood there, hand in midair, key outstretched. And then the door was yanked open and a pale, black-nailed hand reached out and
grabbed his shirt front and jerked him inside.

"Just gonna stand there, mate? Starin' at the door?" Spike did more than glower - he *snarled*, eyes a smoldering gold. Wesley opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted.

"Don't be mean, Spike - he looks like death warmed over." Xander stood there, frowning, his hair damp from a shower, jeans on and a shirt in his hands. "We were gonna come get you. You've been gone for - for almost twenty-four *hours*, Wes! What the fuck?"

"Not being *mean,*" Spike grumbled but he let go of Wesley's shirt - smoothed it a little, peering uncertainly at him. "You do look fair knackered. What in bloody hell'd the bastard have you doing all night and all day? Fucker never *thinks* -"

"*Please*. Please, I'm - I'm all right, I'm just -"

"You're exhausted, Wes," Xander said and the glower and snarl went out of the both of them as
Xander moved in closer and pulled Wesley into a tight embrace. Warm and solid and supporting and Wesley sagged, letting his eyes flutter shut. "What does Angel have you doing?"

"My job. That's all." Wesley sighed, let Xander take his weight and relaxed between the two when Spike pressed up against his back, still warm from the Nest - or the shower. Angel was never warm.

He rubbed his cheek along Xander's shoulder, muscle and bone and dampness from the ends of Xander's hair that smelled of lemons and cognac. Words wanted to tumble out, words of deals and phone calls instead of full scale warfare - a meeting with Cardinal Ottaviano tomorrow - words of everything moving so quickly. He wanted to tell them how good that was - how everything couldn't move quickly enough for him because when it was over, he'd be free.

Well, aside from the visions. But Angel would accept phone calls. Had agreed to accept phone calls - and to let him go.
Wesley only had to direct one last campaign.

Spike pressed closer, urging a soft moan from him.

Surely he could tell them a little while later. Business could wait. *Should* wait. He lifted his head to brush his lips over Xander's - freshly brushed but unshaven, all cinnamon spice and stubble.

"You're tight as a bow-string, love - come on, shower. You smell like dust and Slayers and Angel."

Spike's fingers kneaded his shoulders and neck and Xander's arms tightened around his waist, pulling him closer. Deepening the kiss as Spike grazed lips and teeth over the nape of Wesley's neck.

*Yes...it can wait. Things are moving in the demon underground - papers are being shuffled and ambitions...reorganized. Angel is probably on the phone to Giles at this very minute and... And oh -*

"Mmm, yes - I - oh, that feels -"
"Feels good," Xander murmured, lips so close and breath warm and sweet. Spike was worming his hands between them, working at buttons and belts and Wesley sighed and leaned back into him a little, trusting their strength - trusting their love.

Trusting they wouldn't begrudge him a few moments warmth and comfort snatched before bringing Sunnydale back into their lives, now that they were finally free of it. Surely they wouldn't begrudge themselves a few more hours of that innocence.

Wesley arched between them, losing himself only for a little while in silky heat and hardness, cinnamon and lemon, Xander's kisses and Spike's skilled hands. "God. Yes."

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Wesley stood very still, watching Spike and Xander walk away - watching them grow smaller and smaller.
Flinch of Xander's whole body, as he lays out the plan Angel had approved. Flinch and his face goes white under the tan - his gaze goes flat and dead and...utterly miserable. And Spike snarls silently - getting up and putting his fist through the wall, cursing.

I don't blame them. Everything they worked for - everything they did - this course of action negates it. Makes it...nothing. But it is something! It was. That won't change - that won't ever change...

Far down the concourse, Spike turned, walking backward - mouthed something that looked like 'elephant' but Wesley knew - what it was. Xander turned too, sad smile on his face - his lips moving as well. 'Elephant'. Wesley mouthed it back, but in his throat the words were 'I love you'. He smiled at them, and then they were gone.

Wesley stayed long enough to see their plane lift over the water, turning a graceful arc in the soft
purple sky, and heading east into spangled darkness. Then he went slowly up and out, back to the parking structure where Xander's truck was costing more money per hour than the bored parking attendants made.

He climbed in and sat for a moment, just breathing. Taking in deep lungfuls of air. Leather and smoke, spice and sweet and iron. Spike and Xander and the residual musk of their last, frantic clutches in the truck, in the darkness of the parking structure. He thought about home - about the Nest - still tumbled and damp from sex. From hours of kissing and touching and...loving. He couldn't go back there. Not right now, while it was all still so...raw.

_God - how am I going to get through these next few days? Never thought...never realized..._ Wesley sighed and opened his eyes - reached for the seatbelt and as he clicked it shut his hand brushed his cell phone. And a thought formed. _Gunn_...

Wesley flipped it open, fingers passing over the buttons. _He did say I could call him any time I_
wanted to get away.

From the terrible twosome.

Who weren't there.

And weren't terrible.

And were...hurt.

Wesley winced. He could still hear the strain in Xander's voice. 'I can't do this again. I can't be here for this again. I'm sorry, Wes. I can't.'

They were going to be somewhere safe while he settled his accounts with Angel Investigations. It was absolutely for the best. Wesley dialed Gunn's number and waited for him to come to the phone. "Charles...is my invitation still good?"

"Depends, man. You sporting fangs all of a sudden?"

The easy, casual question wormed its way into him and pressed something - like a button to release the
building pressure of guilt and worry. Wesley felt himself smile, felt himself relax. "Don't be silly."

"Then get your ass over here. I'm starving - was just gonna order some pizza. You do still eat pizza, don't you?"

Wesley couldn't help the small, slightly choked laugh. "Yes, I do still eat pizza, Charles. No peppers, though."

"Right. Extra sauce and anchovies on the side. So - what's the deal? The Gruesome Twosome have something to kill tonight?"

"Oh, they -" Wesley felt the ache well up anew - loneliness and need and sorrow, and he blinked - started the truck and eased it out of the parking space. "They're...doing a job for me, I'll - I'll tell you about it when I get there. Forty minutes?"

"Sounds good, English. See you then."

Closing the phone, Wesley wished he could call
the...*Gruesome Twosome*... They'd call after their flight landed.

If they were still speaking to him by then.

Even as a joke, the thought caused an unpleasant cramping flutter in Wesley's belly. They would call. They might even enjoy the vacation. He suspected Xander would take to their destination like a man coming home.

And then they would forgive Wesley for doing what he had to do. Sometimes, a man had to make deals with the devil for the greater good.

Feeling an unexpected surge of pity for Angel, Wesley pulled out of the parking structure and into the teeming LA night, headed east.

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"Let me get another whiskey, yeah? You need anything, love?" Spike asked, and Xander shook his
head - smiled wanly at the steward who smiled back and served Spike a whiskey and a little plastic cup. Spike frowned and twisted the cap off the little bottle - tipped it up and drained it and then propped it in his cup. Frustration from Xander. And anger and sorrow and a sort of exhausted defeat that made Spike want to fight something. Kill something. Kill Angel, the bastard. Talking Wes into that...fucking mess. Keeping him there...damnit. He sighed - slumped over until his head was on Xander's shoulder. "It'll be all right, pet," he murmured.

Xander squirmed around - shoved the seat arm between them up and out of the way and tugged Spike against his side, nestling his cheek against blond spikes. Warmer. Better. Calmer.

Okay, not much calmer, but he'd take anything. "That's what's wrong." Xander kept his voice low. Not for secrecy but - privacy. This wasn't meant to be some stranger's in-flight entertainment.

He felt Spike shuffle against him until they lay in a
seat belted tangle with Xander's back against the window, the supernova star field of Las Vegas fading into the distance to their left and miles below. "Because if everything is all right and Sunnydale is put back the way it used to be...we're the ones who get erased. Me. You." Anya.

Spike felt the surge of some complicated emotion he couldn't even begin to interpret, but talking about Sunnydale always brought certain things - certain people - to mind. Joyce. She's still...down there. God... Unease at that thought - at Joyce lying restless under a crossroads or a schoolyard - under a fucking drive through. Unease and anger that made Xander take a small, sharp breath.

"Sorry, love. We won't be erased, Xander. We...what we did is there. It's always there." He tugged Xander's arm around him so the warm, callused hand lay on his belly and covered Xander's hand with his own - frowned at the look he got from the man across the aisle.

"We'll know, even if nobody else does. It's enough,
isn't it? And Wes knows..." Pang of loss - fierce surge of want want - both of them missing Wes already.

Xander shook his head, want whirling with wrong - making him a little nauseous. "We didn't give this much of ourselves to see Sunnydale go back to square fucking one." Futility - that was the word he was looking for.

"Not going to - to open it back up or anything..." Spike ventured, but he felt the same. Felt that the corp-rat hordes had swarmed in and were even now nibbling at everything he - Xander - the Slayer had ever done there. Bringing it crashing down - making it...nothing. He fought that. He didn't want despair - depression - to swamp them both. Wouldn't allow it.

"Not our fault, love - and not our responsibility anymore. It's all on Angel now - and on the bloody Council. We paid, Xander. We paid, and we're done. Let's...let's just..." Love want need need need, pushing it at Xander as hard as he could. Reassuring
him, he hoped. Wanting the deadness of emotion that was washing over Xander to quicken - to lighten. "We got out, Xander. Our time, now..."

Xander reached down, flipped open the buckle on Spike's seatbelt and his, wrapping the thin airline blanket over them both to hide the transgression and pulled Spike fully against his chest. "We're gonna get sucked back in if we stay. They're gonna call us veterans and heroes and act like it's a reward, putting us back in the field." But he didn't say that part of him - some tiny part in his heart that hadn't got the retirement memo - still responded to that. "Wes said they're proposing a deal between the Council and the Cardinal. Put Slayers on the Hellmouth again like cops...this isn't what we worked for."

"No, it's not." Spike turned his head a little, listening to Xander's heart beat - trying to just let it go. "It's gonna be like - like bloody Chicago in the twenties. Demons runnin' things and the Slayers like their own personal clean-up crew. Can't imagine Buffy
knows about this... Or Rupert..." Spike fell silent again, wishing Wes was out of the whole mess - was with them. Gonna make him get as far away from Angel as possible. As soon as possible. Damnit...

"Wes knows."

"Wes does what has to be done, yeah?"

Slayers on the Hellmouth - protecting people from the demons. Protecting the Hellmouth from people. And in exchange...what? The Otonius clan would continue to tap the Hellmouth. 'Restrained energy harvest' Wesley called it. Would use their own spell-casters to eliminate the phantom manifestations.

'Everybody wins,' Wes had said, in a voice that sounded like a guy who'd won a dose of the clap.

"Wes...gets the job done, yeah? Always was more practical that way than...any of us. It's the Watcher in him, pet - he can't help it." Spike sighed, and Xander did - heave of his chest and Spike re-settled himself, rubbing his head slowly back and forth on
Xander's collarbone. "He was right, you know. If Angel fought them - it'd be a war like you've never seen. It'd be..." *Slaughter and ugliness that I don't ever want you to know, love. Never.*

"But they'd be *dead,*" Xander insisted - stubborn and desperate and giving Angel more credit than Spike did, in this situation.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Too much of a chance though, you know? Most groups like that - they'd just kill everybody in sight - wouldn't even *try* to negotiate. We're well out of it." They were quiet a moment, Xander's palm big and warm over Spike's stomach, working its way under the tee shirt to rub and stroke cool skin. "'Sides, thought you weren't large with the 'kill 'em all' approach to demons these days, love."

"Only when they threaten the people I love." And *places.* Xander tucked his face against Spike's shoulder, lips pressing against the hollow above his collarbone. "Wes said they're accelerating the project. That means no more artifact tent. Strictly
"Yeah," Spike said softly - viciously squashed the rage and horror and misery that welled up at the thought of Joyce being tumbled and ground and leveled. Or Tara, or Anya. All those brave souls, turned under like so much fertilizer. *Used to be that's all they were. Used to be...* But Spike had lost that critical distance years ago, and it hurt him as much as it hurt Xander, to think on it. *War...would it be worth it?* His heart said yes - his head said...maybe not. His soul...wanted Xander and Wes and the Nest, and not to think about this anymore. Tried to sink into the sensation of Xander's mouth on his skin, soft and warm.

Xander stilled with his lips over Spike's shoulder, parted and breathing in the flavor of him, the *conflict* and *love*. Metallic tang of horror and rage, softened bitterness of misery; as if stifling the emotions drove them into Spike's skin, where Xander could taste them. "I know I can't stop it - but I don't want to see it - if I don't see it, it won't be as real."
"I don't either. Can't...stand the thought of it." Spike twisted until he could see Xander - see his long hair lying like raveled silk against his neck and cheek - see the delicate tracery of ink around his eye, and the shadow of sorrow and remembered loss that darkened his gaze. "I love you, Xander. Would do anything for you. I said it before - time to leave there and it is. We've got the whole world, love - anywhere you want to go, we'll go. All right? Anywhere." Spike leaned up and kissed Xander's soft, down-turned mouth. Kissed the chapped lips and slightly stubbled cheek and jaw. "Anything for you, love..."

Xander sighed. "This should be the moment when I tell you I've always wanted a place in France -" Spike twitched and Xander grinned - he remembered 'Harmony and sodding France'...

"That bint - she lived, you know. Angel said. Probably over there right now, pissin' people off left and right -"
Xander tightened his arm and brought the other hand up to hold Spike's jaw, silence him. "I don't know where I want to go...but I want a place to call home."

Spike kissed Xander again - then one more time, tasting soda and mint gum and faint, faint blood. Knew that whatever Xander was saying, how he was feeling was lost and adrift. "We'll keep our eye out - see if we can find some place good. Lots of nice stuff in New York..."

Xander thought of New York - crowds and cars and noise and people - and Spike there. That part made him smile but it wasn't...quite... "Yeah. Anya wanted to go to New York - until she read a cost-benefit analysis of cities across the United States and decided she'd rather live in Kansas."

Spike snorted softly - settled himself again, cradled against Xander as best they could. Even in first class, the seats weren't that great. "Demon-girl had a good head for the books but that is not how you pick a place to live. It just...grabs you. Me and Dru -
had this house near King's Cross. Tiny thing, but we loved it." Xander's arm tightened slightly across his ribs and Spike stroked Xander's hand under the scratchy blanket. "Had this huge old chestnut outside, and a little garden in back, all ivy and dahlias... Lived there for six years. Dru always called it our...nest."

*Love loss* and that something else that was like a wisp of old perfume whenever Spike remembered Drusilla. Xander caught Spike's hand and stroked its edge with his thumb. "Was it filled with pillows?"

Spike laughed softly. "Dru liked pillows but she liked hangings more. Had a four-poster bed just drowning in lace and velvet and tulle - had curtains so thick and heavy we could have survived the Atom bomb behind 'em. Overstuffed chairs and big plump footstools... Not quite the same kind of Nest..." Spike grinned up at Xander. "Not as good as ours. Dru was always so restless - she couldn't just lay with me all afternoon like you do - too much goin' on in her head."
"And that's the nicest way anyone has ever called me lazy." Xander grinned back, leaned his head against the cool plane wall and *settled*. "It's easy to lay with you - and okay, the sex *really* helps pass the time - but that's all I need. You, a Nest and I can - just be. Anya never...got that. Unless she was sleeping or having sex, she didn't understand why I wanted to be in bed. She was so *busy.*" He swallowed around a sudden thickness in his throat, remembering. *'I only have fifty good years left, Xander! I have too much to do! Get out of bed now, please - and do it with me.'*

Soft wash of *regret*, of love, and Spike laced his fingers with Xander's, squeezing gently. "Yeah. She was something special, your demon-girl." They fell silent then, the low hum of the plane and the muffled voices of other passengers - music from somewhere, someone's mp3 player turned up loud. A lulling, cocooning silence and Spike felt Xander settle and sigh - breathe a little more deeply. Resting, and Spike settled himself as well.

The captain announced that they were approaching
Denver to their left. Three and a half hours until their flight would land in Boston. *Thank you for flying the friendly skies. Enjoy your peanuts,* Xander thought sleepily, closing his eye and letting the slow stroke of Spike's fingers over his arm lull him.

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Wesley leaned back on the couch and groaned, one hand on his stomach, the other holding the cool neck of a beer bottle. "Oh my god. I think - I think I've done myself an injury," he moaned, and let his head fall back. Two decimated pizza boxes and a box full of gnawed chicken bones lay open on the coffee table. There were several beer bottles and a box of mostly-gone strips of sugar-and-cinnamon pizza dough, with white icing spilling out of a cup. Beside him, Gunn stretched his legs and laughed.

"C'mon, English - room for one more piece, don't you think?" Gunn waved a drooping slice of pizza and Wesley watched an anchovy tumble to the grease-stained cardboard below.
"God no. You have it, Charles."

"Fish pizza? No way."

"I have seen you eat fish before, Charles Gunn."

"Yeah. Fish. Anchovies are salty little pizza-slaying demons."

"For god's sake - they're fish."

"And fish do not belong on my pizza."

Wesley moaned, catching the scent of it and putting up a hand. "Drop it in the box. I'll eat it for breakfast in the morning."

"What? You don't approve of my breakfast selection?"

"Sugar frosted sugar coated sugar balls?"

Gunn flicked a wadded up corner of napkin at
Wesley with a snort. "They give you energy to face the day. Essential vitamins and minerals."

"And a high not unlike a few ounces of the finest Columbian cocaine. Or T'kuss dream-dust," Wesley added, and sniggered at the outraged expression on Gunn's face.

"You are not comparing my breakfast cereal of choice with nose candy or ground up beetles!"

"No, ground up beetles probably taste better," Wesley said, and tried to lean out of the way as Gunn flung an anchovy at him. He couldn't though - he was so stuffed he could barely move and he stared down at the little black anchovy that now clung to his shirt-front, leaving a greasy blotch and trail.

"Now you've done it."

"Yeah," Gunn agreed, looking at his hand and wrinkling his nose. "Now I've got anchovy on me."
"Oh!" Before Wesley knew it, Gunn was on his back beneath him with a face full of anchovy breath and the offending anchovy mashed against Gunn's lips, and Gunn laughing too hard to keep them together. The moment he gasped for air, Wesley shoved the fish in and leapt away.

"Aw! Man. That is gross." Gunn grabbed Wesley's beer and tilted it back, draining it in a long pull. "Jesus. When'd you get so strong?"

"It's my super-powers, you know," Wesley said, lolling back into the corner of the couch and stretching out his legs - belching behind his fingers and then wiggling said fingers at Gunn. "Super Ex-Watcher powers from...lifting all those books and holding that stick up my arse."

Gunn just stared at him and then he snorted - choked - and sprayed a fine mist of beer over the coffee table.

"I am not cleaning that up," Wesley pointed out with dignity - turned his face away from the last
sodden piece of pizza in the box. "But I am going to order breakfast at the diner up the road tomorrow morning."

"It's just a little recycled beer, English!"

"All of your American beer is recycled." Wesley folded his hands over his stomach and grinned at Gunn.

"That's disgusting," Gunn said, but he got up and flipped the pizza boxes closed - stacked them and the wing-box and took them to the kitchen where he balanced them on top of the trash can. Wesley stretched his legs out further, slumping even lower into the couch. It was nearly midnight and he knew that Xander and Spike would be landing soon. He hoped they'd call.

"You want another beer?" Gunn called, doing something at the sink, and Wesley roused himself a little.

"No, no thank you, I'm fine." He sat up and
collected beer-bottles - took them into the kitchen and lined them up on the counter by the sink. Gunn was washing his hands and Wesley leaned there, his hip against the counter. Feeling...content.

"Really fine?"

"Of course." Wesley looked more closely at Gunn, hearing hesitance in his words and frowning. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your boys took off and left you lonely enough to call me. That doesn't sound like 'fine'. What's really goin' on?"

"Charles, you can't think that you're just - just -"

"Backup? I know it when I see it, Wes." Gunn sounded - hurt? No.

"I've just been so busy - Charles, really. I - I've missed you, you know. It's not the same."

Gunn looked up at him, the towel in his hands
twisting and knotting. Then he smoothed it out - hung it on the little bar under the sink. "Yeah. I know. Not the same for me, either. So - where'd the Gruesome Twosome go off to?"

Wesley let out breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and followed Gunn back to the living room. "Salem."

"Oregon? Because Massachusetts is too easy."

Wesley smiled, reclaiming his corner of the couch. "Salem, Massachusetts. They're meeting with a former client of Angel Investigations, actually."

"How former?"

"Perhaps I should say: a former client of the Wyndam-Pryce Agency."

"Gunn Agency," Gunn responded automatically.

Wesley sighed, acutely feeling the loss of the third name for their once-fledgling agency - Chase. He
shook it off when Gunn spoke again.

"So, half-demon? Vamp? Or just -" Gunn wiggled his hand and Wesley smiled at him.

"No, not a vampire. A human, actually. When he lived here in L.A. he accidentally got caught up in some sort of Ji-u mating ritual and we had to de-lust him? Remember?"

Gunn frowned and then the memory hit him and he giggled. Well, really, it had been rather amusing - Nathan Cole all done up in feathers and leaves and nothing else, doing the Dance of Demon Love in the middle of Rodeo Drive. There'd been a reason he'd moved, not long after that.

"Oh, hell yeah. Jesus. So what's his deal? Somebody file a palimony suit?"

Gunn collapsed into giggles again and Wesley slapped at his knee, grinning.

"Berk."
"Guy must have been desperate."

"Oh, he is but it's not terribly urgent. I've been putting him off for the past month."

"So what *is* it?"

"Pink mice."

"Pink mice?"

"With fluffy tails."

"Do Spike and Xander know they're goin' ta case a Disney movie?"

Wesley cleared his throat. "Not yet. The phrase I used was 'possible demonic infestation'."

Gunn snorted softly, grinning. "That's not nice, English." He smiled at Wesley for a moment and then his smile faded a bit. "So - why'd they go? I thought - they were gonna stay around for a
Wesley sighed at that - shifted on the couch and tucked one bare foot up under his knee. "They... I told them about Sunnydale. About the deal we -/ - brokered. They - didn't want to be involved. Didn't want to see it. They simply had to go."

Gunn nodded, his expression sober now - serious. "Yeah. I can understand that. That place...is gonna be worse than Pet Semetery when it's all done. Or maybe more like Poltergeist. Either way - I'm not gonna go there any time soon. And my entire life's not even buried under it." Gunn leaned over the arm of the couch and grabbed the last two beers - passed one to Wesley and opened the other thoughtfully. "I guess...if it was, I'd be moving about as far away from here as I could. And staying there."

~*~*~*~*~

Spike squirmed in Xander's death-grip - turned onto
his back and sighed in contentment as Xander edged himself over a little more, draping most of himself over Spike. The bed was more-than-blood-heat warm, courtesy of the electric blanket Spike had called ahead for. He'd also called ahead so that when he and Xander had stumbled in past three a.m., tired and frozen, the fire had been roaring in the fireplace, the blanket had been on high, and the room itself had been toasty-warm with central heating. They'd spent nearly an hour in the Jacuzzi, up to their necks in steaming-hot water. Spike eyed the bright light edging around the curtains - light that was bouncing off of snow. Lots and lots of snow. He'd forgotten how cold snow was.

"It snowed last night and we don't have to get up, right?" Xander mumbled and Spike smiled into Xander's hair - kissed the curve of his skull. "I mean - it's up to the roof and we'll be here for days, right? Under the blanket."

"Yup. Days and days. We'll have to burn the furniture."
Xander made a sound that might have been 'good'. He lifted his sleep-mussed head to take a bleary look around the room. Hardwood four-poster, rich honey wooden floors; solid furniture with the voluptuous curves of another era.

"Be a shame to burn it all." Spike watched Xander's hand - barely tawny now where it'd been nut-brown at the end of Summer - slide over his own bleached skin. Watched it creep innocently to one of the silver rings piercing his nipples and arched an eyebrow as the fingertip began to trace the metal.

"Thought you wanted to sleep in. Days, was it?"

"I said I wanted to stay in bed." Xander propped himself up on an elbow, sleepy grin hanging out on his lips, hair in his face. "I didn't say anything about sleep."

"That's so, you didn't," Spike said, arching slightly into the sizzling tug of the jewelry in Xander's fingers. "How will we occupy ourselves?" Xander's sleep-tousled head dipped down and his warm
mouth closed around Spike's other nipple and Spike hissed in satisfaction, his hand sweeping down Xander's back to the heavy muscle of his buttock.

"Wes sounded better. Sounded...like he and Gunn were - having a good time," Spike murmured, and Xander's mouth lifted slowly from his body.

Spike watched flushed lips mark a trail upwards along his body and tilted his head into the pillows with an incoherent sound when Xander latched on to his throat, suction and teeth and wet, wet heat.

"This good?" Xander pulled back, thumb rubbing over and over the already fading red mark in Spike's skin. Prickles of heat and electric want now skittering from body to body.

"Don't think Charlie-boy swings that way, but Wes... He could seduce the Pope. Maybe we'll have to ask him, next time we call," Spike replied - hitched in a sharp little breath as Xander's other hand slid down his belly and pinned Spike's cock down, warm and heavy and just holding him there. Nothing else.
Spike turned his head until his own mouth brushed over Xander's and his tongue flickered out to taste Xander's lips.

"You Englishmen...coming along with your English ways and making good straight American boys gay, gay," Xander muffled the last gay and a laugh against Spike's lips, warm slide and tangle of tongues with nowhere else they need to be. He nipped at Spike's lip, felt an answering twitch against his palm and finished: "gay."

"Thought it was a Dutchman, got to you first." Spike's hand on Xander's ass squeezed, tugged and then there was skin - lots more skin on skin in a naked touching way that made Xander's toes curl and made him moan against Spike's mouth.

"You underestimate your place in my teenaged fantasies." Xander paused, thoughtful. "You underestimate Giles' place in my teenaged fantasies."

"Rupert? Oh, you've got to tell me, love. Every - tiny
- detail," Spike said, between nipping, licking kisses." He pulled and wiggled and twisted until Xander was sprawled over him, thighs on either side of Spike's hips and the warm weight of sac and cock pressing into Spike's belly. It put Xander's own jewelry at mouth-level and Spike took advantage with enthusiasm.

"It's his voice and the - fuck - the look he gets in his eyes sometimes. High School. I was jacking off - flashed on him walking in on me..." Xander licked his lips, dry with the hot, panting breaths that were all he could manage with Spike's tongue and teeth making impossible-to-follow patterns of goodness across his chest; cooler nudge of Spike's metal behind his balls on every rock. "...with that look. And watching..." Xander curled and uncurled his fingers in Spike's hair, tickling and crunch of over-processed curls on over-sensitive skin - grinned at the memory. "He did not have to watch long."

"I'll bet... Rupert gets that look in his eye, sometimes... You just know he'd know exactly how to take care of a naughty school-boy..." Spike lifted
his hips so that the tip of his cock pushed up into Xander's body - just brushing sensitive skin. He ran his nails lightly down Xander's sides and grasped his buttocks - held them open and lifted his hips again - grinned up at Xander's flushed face.

"He'd tell you to push your jeans down around your ankles...tell you to bend over his desk...get out his ruler and warm your ass with it..."

Xander twitched - from the top of his scalp to the soles of his feet, and sucked in a quick breath. "That is not playing fair." Because Xander's position was one that left him no secrets and the slick rub and bump of swollen flesh and heavy metal reduced Xander's thoughts to good and fuck and more. "You getting off on me and Giles?"

"Getting off on you," Spike murmured, thrusting up again and again, hands holding Xander wide and his teeth clicking off of metal as his mouth skimmed Xander's chest. "Getting off on you with your jeans pulled down and your ass all pink and hot...your hands clenched on the edge of the desk...head
bowed, mouth open and wet...panting for air...
You'd feel like fire under him, pet, when he pushed his cock into you..."

"Fuck!" Xander jerked - shaking and hot like he'd been plugged in, swollen and tight and thrusting against slick skin, slick muscle - but it was a flash of Wesley that did him in. Vivid, warm - knew what he'd do; slide in slick and fast and hard while Spike held him open, worked him up, worked him over - make the fantasy more real.

"Fuck..." he repeated shakily, shuddering through the last of the orgasm, lips swollen and hot against Spike's, fingers too cramped to let go - yet - of his hair. "Jesus...I also had...senior year fantasies about Wesley..."

Spike ran his tongue over damp, salty flesh - bit lightly at Xander's throat and shoulder and then wormed a hand between them - dragged it through the cooling fluid that was spattered over his belly. Nudged Xander up, just a little, and slicked himself. A moment later he was pushing into tight, warm
heat and Xander was gasping softly above him, eye closed.

"Tell me about Wesley, love..."

~*~*~*~*~

Eventually, promises to be kept and a rumbling belly drove them from the hotel and out onto the twilight streets of Salem. Xander had shivered his way through a brief outfitting trip, emerging from the store warmer and more fashionable with a heavier leather coat and a thick winter cap pulled down over his empty socket against the aching cold.

Xander knuckled melting snow out of his eye and squinted at the street signs. "That way - and why am I navigating? You're the one who's been here." He grinned over at Spike, who looked more absorbed in lighting a fresh cigarette against the wind than listening. Xander held up a cupped hand to help.
"Well," Spike said, brief smile of thanks toward Xander - "this is Flint, and that's Essex, so one more block and we're at Chestnut Street. Hope he's there to let us in - don't want to stand around in this bloody wind for long." Spike tugged Xander close under his arm and they walked rapidly, heads down. Walked until Spike looked up and saw the number - 37 - and warm, golden light spilling out of may-paned windows in an imposing **red-brick house**.

"This is us, love. Looks like somebody's home, thank gods." Xander seemed too cold to reply and Spike hustled him up the walk and knocked sharply. *Hope he remembers to invite me in. Hurry up, wanker!*

Xander huddled closer to Spike - no body heat but the duster made a tolerable wind-break. A Grecian porch roof hid the building's bulk from him but did little to protect them from the biting cold and gusts of snowy wind that rocked him on his feet. "Jesus." *'That's one big fucking house',* he wanted to say. What came out was: "It looks warm in there."

"Bloody well better be warm in there," Spike
muttered, and sent his cigarette butt arching out into the slush of the street. He could hear footsteps coming closer and then the door was flung wide and a jovial, SoCal voice was saying:

"Come in! Wesley's friends, right? Come on in!"

"Thank god," Xander said, and darted forward, Spike hard on his heels. The door swung shut and they both stood there, momentarily stunned by the heavy, heated air that enfolded them. Xander took a deep breath and un-huddled, and Spike eyed their host. Middle-aged, middling looks, pretty much Middle-man, who was smiling and ushering them in. In over glossy hardwood floors, under cathedral ceilings and across dark, patterned India rugs to a fireplace as tall as Xander and a fire that warmed them at ten paces. God, it felt good.

"It was my great-grandmother's. No history. She moved in a few years before she died but it came to me a few years ago. Excellent timing, really. I'd just had a bit of trouble in California your employer got me out of." He clapped his hands, then offered one
to Xander. "Nathan Cole."

Xander took it with fingers still half-numb, half-dazed by the heat. Even half-furnished, the home exuded warmth and age and...Xander shook himself, then Nathan's hand. "Xander Harris," he said, tugging his cap off. The hand in his squeezed harder for a second and Xander knew exactly why. Cole stared at him - at his face - at his tattoo.

"Well, that's certainly - I mean to say, you don't see - amazing what you young folks will - Well, now!"

Spike ignored the hand that was held out toward him - ignored Nathan Cole babbling something else about his grandmother - the house - the crown molding over the dining room entry. The man stank of nerves and unease and Spike turned his back and vamped, taking in a deep breath - reaching, with every demonic sense he had to tell him about the house. The house with a 'possible demonic infestation' and Spike was getting nothing. Nothing at all but the faint, teasing scent of...
"Candy floss?" he muttered, losing the demon and turning back to Nathan Cole, who stuttered and blinked and fell silent.

"Uh, what?"

"I smell candy floss. Disgusting stuff."

Xander took pity on their bewildered host and translated. "Cotton candy."

"I - oh - I - I'm certain that's only fumes from the new paint. I've just had the first floor bathroom redone. I'm hoping to sell, you know, once all of this has been cleared up."

"That's not paint, mate."

Cole stumbled over his ready reply, looked like a man choking on his tongue, then licked his lips. "Are you sure?"

"Believe me when I say he's sure." Xander sniffed the air too - smelled varnish and orange wood
polish. A little bit of the musty old wood smell - which excited the part of him that had never put away the carpentry tools - but not candy floss. "Where's the problem?" He felt like he was eighteen again and working as Eddie the plumber's assistant.

"It's - it's - it's in the...attic. It's a finished attic, you could make it into a studio or a -"

"Don't care about the finer details, here - just lead the way so we can see what's what," Spike snapped, and Nathan Cole nodded unhappily and led them on, switching on lights as he went and pointing out various features. The hand-painted tiles around the second-floor-sitting-room's fireplace. The parquetry inlay of wood along the hall. The hand-leaded stained glass in the master-bedroom's windows and the delicate plaster-work of roses and ivy that surrounded the chandelier that hung over the stairwell. Spike could feel excitement from Xander - interest and something...else. Something warm. *Likes the house, he does,* Spike thought. And a plan - formed.
A whisper of *plotting* slithered over Xander's shoulders and he looked at Spike - who was watching him, speculative expression on his face. The Cole guy was still rambling on about the home - and Jesus, he didn't even know what he *had*. He'd apologized for the scarred woodwork - the *original* woodwork - that Xander's first carpentry boss would have sold a kidney for.

Spike was still watching him - that cocked-head innocence that was *never* innocent. 'What?' He mouthed the word behind Cole's back but didn't voice it.

"Nothin'!" Spike fumbled for a cigarette and lit up, turning to peer at the joinery of the attic door-jamb while Cole dropped a dangerously huge set of keys and snatched them up again, sorting out an old-fashioned iron key with a scrolled bow that would have been at home in any fairy-tale. Spike felt *curiosity* and *amusement* and a sort of pointed hunters resolve and he sucked in smoke and blew it out - stepped up when Cole opened the attic door.
"Best let me go first, mate. Just in case," he said, and Cole's eyes went wide and he nodded, stepping back.

Xander watched Spike go - felt *curiosity* and a swagger of Big Bad that made him half hard and glad he was wearing a baggy sweater. He and Cole followed Spike up the attic stairs. "So - uh - what kind of infestation have you got? Corporeal, incorporeal? Pea soup? Death that awaits us all with nasty, big, pointy teeth?"

"Well - it's - er..."

"It's...?"

Nathan Cole licked his lips again and jangled his keys as they stepped onto the landing, the attic space opening around them. "It's..."

"*Bloody* hell!" Spike did a little catch-step as something ran over his foot and he darted after it, pouncing and bringing his foot down. He missed.
The *thing* jumped like a kangaroo - a very small kangaroo - and he leaped again, this time caging it in his hands. Then he stood slowly, holding it by the...tail. By the long, fluffy, *pink* tail. The length of his hand, a sleek pink mouse dangled from his fingers. It had oversized, tufted ears, enormous dark eyes and little paws that clutched and clasped like little pink hands. And the tail. Fluffy as a feather-duster. Spike vamped. *Candy floss. Jesus fucking...Christ.*

"It's a *mouse.*"

Xander had to turn his back *not* to laugh. Spike's jump-dance-*pounce* routine looked like Miss Kitty Fantastico after a hit off the catnip pipe. He quickly forced his face back into something appropriate for possibly demonic infestation of cute pink kangaroo mice.

Which meant he was still laughing - and grinned back at Spike on the wave of *suspicion* coming from the vampire. "You called us out here from California because you have *mice?*"
"Those aren't normal mice!"

Cole looked freaked out. In fact, he looked pale and Spike took a step toward him, swaying the squirming demon-mouse his way. Cole jumped back and dug around in a pocket - came up with a handkerchief and slapped it over his nose and mouth.

"They probably have some super-strength version of the Hanta virus! They're not safe! Didn't Wesley tell you? I want them out."

Amusement from Xander, strong enough to make Spike grin and he put his other hand up, palm flat, and let the mouse rest on it. It settled on its over-long hind paws and started washing, pushing its shock of ultra-pink whiskers flat to it's skull as it preened.

"You're right, mate. Probably teeming with disease. Fleas. Plague, even. This whole place - might have to tear it down. Sow the earth with salt."
"Oh my god. You can't do that! Surely there's something we can do! Wesley seemed to think -"

"Calm down, mate. Think I got a plan." Spike let go of the down-soft tail and held the mouse up to Xander.

Xander held up his gloved hands, grinning when the little thing pattered into his cupped palm and snuffled around, tickling his fingers when it tried to force its nose between them. It had scales on its feet and little opalescent claws that reminded him of Wesley's. He stroked a finger down its back and it puffed up with an eee-amm, eyes closed, and pushed up against his fingertip.

Cole watched him with blatant horror. "It's attacking."

"Actually, I think it's purring." Xander grinned back at Spike - who radiated predatory glee without a single outward sign. "Of course, that could mean it's getting ready to attack. It's a good thing I wore
gloves," he added quickly.

The mouse was making a sort of 'prrrrrut' noise - not quite a purr, certainly not a regular mouse squeak. More like a bird's trill and Spike watched with gimlet eyes as Xander's gloved hand stroked the glossy little back. Cole was busy propping his foot on a sixteenth century side table, rolling up his trouser leg and shoving down his sock to show a pale, hairy, bandaged calf.

"See? It attacked me! Bit me! There was a whole nest of them in the pantry! I barely escaped with my life. I was going for some gooseberry preserve, my grandmother -"

"Yeah, right - must have been a real traumatizing thing for you, mate." Spike dug out smokes and lighter and lit up - huffed smoke toward the man. "Now. About our fee -"

"Yes! Wesley told me. I'm prepared." Cole dropped his trouser-leg and straightened, looking like a man going to the guillotine, and Spike smiled mirthlessly
at him.

"Yeah, well, now that I've seen the situation - we need to talk."

*Just you and me for a while, little guy,* Xander thought, tuning out Cole's nervous stutter and Spike's *predator,* watching as the mouse demon - and how weird was it to think of this little creature as a *demon*? - decided to wash the first knuckle of Xander's gloved hand with its tongue.

The emergence of tongue made Cole *flinch* and back away. "They *jump,* you know. One almost got me in the *face.* I called Wesley assuming he'd send someone who knows what to do about demons!"

"Spike's the demon expert here, I'm just the muscle," Xander said, wandering away to examine a dusty wardrobe. *Amusement affection* from Spike and Xander reached out and ran his fingers over the dark, carved wood. Even after gods-knew how many years the carving was still crisp and fresh. Curlicues and cupids, animals and leaves. The word
'rococo' swam slowly up in Xander's brain, dim memory of a book he'd read one night on the site. He liked it. The demon-mouse - douse? - took his knuckle in both paws and nibbled delicately at the dark leather.

"Probably not good for your digestion," Xander told it.

_He's talking to it. Oh god. He'll want to keep it. It'll be a pet. Bugger._ Spike dragged his gaze away from Xander fawning over a living sugar-mouse and turned back to Cole. Told the twitching, sweating man about extraordinary effort, rare spells, _hard work_. Then he gave him an offer on the house. Cole nearly swallowed his tongue.

_Smug_ from Spike, and Xander lifted the douse to eye level, meeting its blinking black eyes. "I don't know what he's up to but we're probably safe from it."

The creature gave another of its odd warbles and hopped onto the wardrobe, snuffling around then
scampering back toward Xander and launching itself through the air to land on his right shoulder.

It wiggled its nose.

Scrubbed its face with both paws.

Then yawned tremendously, revealing a double row of sharp long needle-y teeth.

Xander quickly held up a hand for it to climb back on to. "So - uh - where do the pink mice party around here?"

The douse 'ruurr'ed at him, then it launched itself again, this time landing easily on its paws and scrambling across the dusty, scuffed floor of the attic. Xander followed it, noticing for the first time the dozens of little douse-tracks in the dust. Tracks all leading to -

"Jesus. You could bury a whole family in this!"
Xander stood and stared at an enormous mahogany buffet whose carved and pillared shelves and
cabinets rose to at least ten feet in the air. Rows of drawers with tarnished brass hardware and legs curved and clawed and sturdy enough to hold up an elephant. The douse flicked its tail and dove under and Xander went carefully down on one knee, peering into the gloom under the buffet. He could see - something. A sort of glow. Footsteps behind him, and the scent of smoke and leather.

"What'd you find, pet?"

"I dunno." Xander shuffled back and sat up on his knees, rubbing a hand over his neck, already stiff from the awkward angle. "It ran under here. There's something behind this thing."

"Oh - that - that's...nothing. Been here since the house was built. Practically. Bolted to the wall."

Xander shook his head. "No way. This wouldn't be bolted to the wall, it's just - being stored up here. Should be down in the dining room." He squeezed himself between the edge of the sideboard and the wall, pulling off a glove with his teeth and feeling
between wood and wall. "There's a gap - not a big one." And that same faint glow reflecting off his fingertips.

"Lemme see," Spike said, waiting while Xander backed out of the gap. He pushed in - felt, with his hand - then he pushed, straining muscles to heave the towering piece of furniture forward. Back braced against the wall, he eased it out - one foot, two - nearly three. The glow was stronger now and he crouched down, squinting. There.

Two feet from the floor, a wavering circle of pinkish-blue light. It rippled like a pool of mercury and as he watched a demon-mouse suddenly hopped out. It landed with a small thump - froze - and stared up at him. Spike stared back. Right. This house is mine. Ours. The git'll never stand for this. Spike pushed himself to his feet.

"Right. There's your problem - see?" He reached out and jerked Cole closer by a lapel - shoved him toward the gap. Cole peered into the dimness, bewildered, then recoiled, the handkerchief
fluttering.

"Oh my god! What is that? Is that some sort of - what is that?"

"Dice," Xander said.

Spike blinked. "What?"

"Dice. Douse. Demon mouse, douse, dice. Right?"

"Right." Bugger. He's named them! "Right, Dice. That's how they're getting in." Spike shot a quelling look at Xander, who was grinning. "Could be thousands right behind that portal. Just waiting to cross over."

"You can't let them! You've got to stop them!" Cole clutched at Spike's lapels, shook then let go quickly when Spike growled. "You - you don't understand! They look cute but when there's more of them, they're vicious!" He looked wildly from Spike, to Xander, to Spike - and to the douse which had puffed up its hackles and was making a growling
sound at him. "They ate my dog!"

A snort of laughter escaped Xander before he could stop it - and hid it behind a coughing fit.

"What kind of dog?" Spike asked, and just barely held his face in its grim lines as Xander seemed to cough up a hairball, shuffling away fast into the crowded gloom of the attic. Something approaching hysterics flowed through the link and Spike drew on the last of his smoke and pinched it out, shoving the butt into his pocket. Regaining some control as Cole babbled on about his dog.

"Look, mate, we got things to do. Let's just go back downstairs and settle the - the transfer, yeah? I'll have cash for you tomorrow."

"Cash? You'll have - Yes, right. Let's go." Cole straightened his coat with a snap and turned on his heel - marched toward the door, leaving Spike to gather up Xander and follow. Xander actually had tear-tracks down his face and another of the - dice - in his palm. Spike rolled his eyes. Never be rid of the
damn things.

Xander looked up at the overt *huff of fondness irritation* from Spike - the almost suppressed thread of *cute* running through it - and grinned.

Spike growled. *"Not a word."*

Xander mimed zipping his lips and laughed, trailing after Spike.

The douse on his hand jumped down as they reached the stairs. Halfway down, Xander turned to see if it would go back to the portal and nearly missed the next step. Dozens and dozens of red pinpricks floated in the gloom. Douse-eyes. Watching them go. Xander took a deep breath and hurried after Spike and was very, very happy to shut the attic door behind him.

~*~*~*~*~

"Come *on*, English." Pacing with a bad leg wasn't his
favorite activity but Gunn managed. Had to be doing *something*. And being pissed off 'cause Wes was late made all the pain go away - okay, so maybe he was worried more than pissed off.

And he did *not* wanna be the one making that call to Spike and Xander if Wesley went and got himself hurt takin' one more for the team.

They'd both taken *plenty* for that team if you asked him.

Gunn's leg agreed, shattered kneecap sending up a formal complaint and request for leave to the man upstairs.

*Plenty.*

He checked his cell phone for messages one more time. Nothing. "I'm givin' you another five minutes to call me," he told it, "- and then I'm calling you even if you're in an audience with Pope Whoeverthefuck."
It was actually fifteen minutes later when Gunn finally lifted the phone, fingers in 'dial' position. Then it chirruped at him and he almost dropped it, fumbling for the 'talk' button. He did drop his cane and stood swaying in the middle of the living room.

"God damnit! Hello?"

"Charles, is everything all right?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, it's all good." Gunn awkwardly bent to get his cane, grimacing as his knee screamed in protest. "Now - you wanna tell me where you are? You better be telling me you're on your way over."

There was a moment's silence and then a heavy sigh. Gunn limped to the couch and sat heavily. "I don't like the sound of you not talkin', English."

"I'm - sorry, Charles. The final negotiations are taking longer than we expected - the Clan Sorcerer is being..."

"An asshole?"
"Mulish." Another sigh, and a resigned "Yes, I'll be right there," to someone else. "I really am sorry, Charles. I'm probably going to be here another hour or more."

Gunn sighed himself - leaned back on the couch, feeling defeated. "Yeah, okay. Just...don't let 'em push you around, English, you hear me? And don't stay there all night."

"I'll do my best. 'Bye, then."

"Yeah, 'bye." The line clicked and Wes was gone, and Gunn shut his phone and stared up at the ceiling. *Sure be glad when he's quit of that place.*

The phone rang again, *Xander Harris* on the display.

"Aw come on. I'm not your answering service, man." Gunn pressed the 'talk' button again and brought the phone to his ear. "He ain't here."

"What d'you mean, he's not there? Why not?"
Where is he?" Sharp, accented voice and Gunn winced away from the phone just a little.

"He's still in negotiations, I -"

"Still? It's been hours! Bloody hell -"

"Christ, Blondie! Will you shut the fuck up? I ain't the man's keeper!" Gunn listened to a vampire breathe on the other end of the line. "You ain't the only one worried but there's nothin' stopping me from hanging up this phone and blocking your goddamn number, swear to god I will." He sank back into the cushions with a groan, headache like an ice-pick - bang right between the eyes.

"You do and I'll -" There was a noise like a lion growling, then a thud and scuffling noises. Then:

"Gunn? It's me. Sorry. Ummm - anything?"

"Tell that Blondie Bear of yours he'd better rein it in. Yeah, something," Gunn added, squeezing the bridge of his nose between thumb and finger. "I just
talked to him, he said they're still negotiating. Gonna be a while."

"Shit."

"'Bout sums it up." Xander sounded as tired as he was. "But he's alive and kickin'. Didn't sound like any big ugly took a bite out of him - unless you count Angel."

"Angel bit him?"

"What the fuck?! Angel did what?" Spike, loud enough to make Gunn wince again.

"No, no biting, he -" More thuds - growling - and Gunn wondered what would happen if he just hung up. Then Spike was back on the line for about five seconds - long enough to shout something about Angel and Wesley and stakes. And then a sort of yelp and then a breathless Xander.

"Sorry, I'm - god damnit! - sorry. We're just gonna - Spike! That's not helping! Just gonna go. Okay?"
Thanks! Bye!" Gunn stared at his phone - shut it and let it fall to the couch. *Wes must be out of his mind. Those boys are crazy.*

*Had* to be crazy in that line of work. Seemed like it drove Xander even crazier, hooking up with Spike. Stories he heard from Wes, Xander used to be one of the normal ones.

Unless that *was* what passed for normal in Sunnydale.

Gunn shook his head. Crazy people - all of 'em. And he was gonna join them - Froot Loops psycho boy edgy - until Wesley came home in one functioning piece.

*Damn* - the crazy just had to be contagious.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley stood quietly in the entry of Gunn's apartment. Smiling to himself, watching Gunn. Who
was asleep. Sprawled out on the couch, sweat pants and t-shirt and a hooded, zip-up top. Looking, in his sleep, absurdly young. *Do I look that young, when I'm asleep?* Wesley wondered. He rather doubted it. He wished...he could feel than young again. Back when he was a new Watcher and the world was a little more black and white. *All this grey now...like a fog. It's so...bloody hard...* Finally, he moved forward, putting his briefcase and jacket down on the easy-chair. Slipping his shoes off and stretching hard. Wondering if he should wake Gunn - glancing at the *Law & Order* re-run that was playing on the TV.

Wesley padded into the kitchen and got a beer - made himself a sandwich from the tuna Gunn had laughingly stirred up the day before. Heavy on the tuna, light on the 'extras'. When he went back to the living room, Gunn was stirring.

"I smell fish," Gunn said, eyes closed - no unnecessary movement happening anywhere.

"Well done. Your nose is in fine working order."
Wesley took another bite, finding himself with an unexpected smile as he watched Gunn mutter and rearrange himself into a less slouched position on the couch before opening his eyes to face the world.

Or one haggard watcher.

"Man. Where was this meeting? On the court during a game at Staples Center?" Wesley looked like - there was no metaphor. Wes looked like an Englishman who'd been dragged through ten kinds of nasty.

"Oh - I - I - God, this is ridiculous. There was a...deterioration in negotiations in the late afternoon and I was pushed into His Eminence's koi pond."

"Are you -? Oh, hell, you're fine. Jesus, Wes!" Gunn looked Wes up and down, shaking his head in mock despair. "You ate one of the koi, didn't you? I can tell. You're just picking at that sandwich."
"A little one," Wesley admitted, remembering the voluptuous satisfaction of tearing into wriggling cool flesh, gills fluttering against his fingers. "Oh don't look at me that way. We never would have earned their respect so quickly if I hadn't." Not that he'd known before biting into the fish. That had been instinct - what had followed had been a very lucky coincidence.

'You bring your own Sa'ins demon?'

'My own what, now?'

How was he to have known Sa'ins demons had a reputation as trustworthy mediators between species?

"Okay, there's a story here - one I gotta hear. But first - man, you are takin' a shower. You stink like a fish-pond. And it might be some kinda Obsession for Fishy Demon Men, but from here it's just eau de dead koi." But Gunn was laughing, and Wesley stared laughing too, and some of the tension of the day slipped away from him. My boy's gotta laugh
more often. Too damn serious.

"Get out of here - get cleaned up and I'll make the popcorn. Gotta have movie-theatre-flavor when you're gettin' regaled."

The laughter drained out of Wesley as he watched Gunn lean hard on the couch arm to struggle upright. "Are you certain you're up to it? I could -"

"Could nothin'. Go wash off the stink before I run a bath and hold you down until we find out how long your kin can stay under water."

Wesley smiled, shaking his head - let Gunn have his dignity and went slowly back to the spare bedroom. He gathered up a comfortable old pair of jeans and a soft, woven shirt, shedding his still-damp and yes, fishy-smelling clothing gratefully into a laundry basket. He picked up his toiletry bag and slipped into the bath, listening to the microwave running and Gunn singing - something from Yeomen of the Guard, unless he missed his guess. The hot water and pounding spray were absolute heaven.
Wesley closed his eyes and moaned aloud at the bliss of water over skin - let the demon shiver to the surface and tilted his spines into the water's spray with a gasp as Charles sang on of the 'humble merryman, peerly proud, who loved a lord and who laughed aloud...' Merryman who loved a lord is it now? Are you changing the words for my benefit, Charles?

He shook his head, laughed and slid both hands luxuriously over his spines, flattening them to the curve of his skull in a pleasurable pin-prickle stretch of new muscles.

Gunn heard the shower start and nodded to himself in satisfaction. Popcorn, check. Beer, check. He rooted around in the mess of newspaper on the breakfast bar and found the Channel Guide. Had to be something good on, something they could just...sit and veg on. He scanned the listings, humming, then broke into song again as he got down a bowl for the popcorn.
Like a ghost his vigil keeping,
or a specter all-appalling,
I beheld a figure creeping,
I should rather call it crawling -

"Ah ha!" Gunn grinned. 'Big Trouble in Little China' was on. No brothers, but a damn funny movie all the same. Lapsing back to a low hum again, he poured out the popcorn and limped into the living room. The night was shaping up.

~*~*~*~*~

"Ten out of ten for creepitude," Xander announced, sitting on a headstone and watching tendrils of mist chase each other between the trees. "But a piddling two for action."

"Where'd the extra point come from?" Spike mumbled into the flame of his lighter, tobacco smoke rising into the chill night air. He didn't put up a fuss when Xander wrapped arms around him and pulled him up between his legs.
"Action's right here. One." He gestured to himself. "Two." He gestured to Spike, nudged the cigarette out of the way and kissed him, smoke and cold air. "Action." He ran his hands over Spike's ribs in apology, feeling for tender spots until Spike caught a wrist in his hand.

"Don't mind you pouncing on me," Spike said, slow look through the smoke that made Xander flush and want through the link like a scatter of sparks. "Could've just asked for the phone back, though," he added, pouting just a little - watching Xander out of the corner of his eye. Because Xander was sending out a little guilt as well, and if that meant more make-up kissing and groping, that was fine.

Xander's wrist turned under Spike's hand and the cool leather glove stroked his belly and Spike took in a huge lungful of ice-edged air. Tinged with the scent of the river and the sea, snow and wet stone and wood smoke. Clean and thin and good. "Gonna kiss it all better?"
"Yeah," Xander said, sliding off the tombstone and to his knees in the snow, gloves getting peeled off and both hands resting on Spike's waist, warm and big. His mouth was warm too, hot breath puffing through Spike's sweater to the thin skin beneath.

Xander worked his thumbs under the edge of Spike's shirt, pushing it up to reveal a strip of chilled skin, kissing until his lips were cold too. He felt a hand settle in his hair where it poked out beneath the thick knit cap - and smiled. "Better?" Asked through a screen of eyelashes and a grin.

"Get up, you git. You'll soak your jeans through and get pneumonia," Spike pulled Xander to his feet, trying to frown but Xander's warm hands and warm, laughing mouth were too much and he pulled Xander close and kissed him. "Perfect, love. Exactly what I needed." Another kiss, slower this time, and then Spike pulled back with a small sigh. "You think Wes is all right?"

Xander leaned against his tombstone, Spike a solid weight against his chest. "Gunn'll make sure he
eats, sleeps, remembers to take his sense of humor pills. I'd worry about him if he was staying home." But real worry threaded through Spike, crawled through Xander's veins like a blind wriggly thing and he swept his hands over Spike's back beneath the duster. "Bureaucracy takes longer than beating things up."

"Demons and bureaucracy don't much mix. Don't care what this Cardinal says - there's always more blood than ink on a demon contract." Spike hated to say it but it was true and he leaned into Xander and wormed cold fingers up under the layers of t-shirt and thermal and sweater Xander was wearing, making Xander twitch and then shiver. But pull him closer, too, and Spike sighed and took a last draw off his cigarette - tossed it away so he could get both hands on Xander and just...hold on. Be over soon, and we'll get Wes out of there, and... Everything will be good.

"Don't mind me, pet. Never cared for the dickering, you know?"
"You and Buffy," Xander said, nuzzling his cheek against Spike's hair and looking out through the tombstones and trees. It felt...homey. Xander chuckled at the thought and held Spike closer until he thought he could feel the imprint of a hipbone. "He'll be fine. He's smart. He knows how to do things with his brains instead of his fists."

"Oi." The complaint was mild and muffled by Xander's scarf.

"Hey, I'm a fists guy too. Willow and Giles were the brains of our operation."

"Mmmm..." Spike didn't particularly want to talk about Scoobies so he nuzzled in under Xander's jaw - bit and licked and kissed until Xander was sighing - was moving against him in a slow and steady rhythm. Love and need and safemineyours - warm crest of emotion that broke softly over the both of them.

"You're right, love. Wes'll be fine." A breeze suddenly rattled through the winter-bare leaves
and Spike heard the dull and distant clang of a buoy-bell. Xander shivered, and Spike straightened up and turned a little, tugging at him. "S'cold, love. Let's go back. Fire'll be going still, and we can get in that tub again, yeah?"

"Yeah." Xander let himself be tugged, pulled, led - which was pretty much the state of his life but these days - with Spike - he was okay with that. With a last kiss, he let go, slipped into the easy side-by-side walk with snow crunching underfoot and witch lights dancing in the trees. They were kinda pretty.

And not trying to kill him.

That was always bonus points in the Xander Harris score book of life.

~*~*~*~*~

"Hello, Spike,' Wes said, and Spike wanted to drop straight down to the floor with overwhelming relief.
He didn't, though - he gripped the mantle in one hand and the phone in the other, the fire stitching a line of heat up his naked calf and thigh. Xander was asleep, curled loosely on the bed, hair across his cheek and his arm stretched out over the half of the bed where Spike had been.

"Don't ever do that again, Wes," Spike said. Fighting to keep his voice low. "You're supposed to talk to us every day."

"I'm all right, Spike. And so are you and Xander. I was in no danger at -"

"Bloody hell. You're in danger every sodding day, Wes. Haven't got the sense of a newborn buggering bunny when Angel asks you to hop -"

"Spike." He listened to Wesley take a deep breath, steadying breath and Spike wanted to curse.

_Gonna be something else now. Some new quest for Peaches. Gonna be - _ Xander stirred on the bed and Spike clamped down on his thoughts. "What?"
"The covenant has been signed and sealed, magic and blood."

Spike felt the hairs stand up on his arms and growled. "Whose blood, Wes?"

"Angel's."

"Better have been. Damnit, Wes...that kind of mojo - it's not -"

"It's all right, Spike. I was safe. Am safe. And now..." There was a pause, and a sound of liquid, and Spike knew Wes was taking a drink. "And now I just have to -"

"Have to nothing, Wes! You're done, remember?" Spike throttled his voice back down from a near-shout, watching Xander who twitched and moved a little on the bed. He tried to project calm calm, but he was breathing in hard, angry gusts and he wanted to hit something.
"I'm done, Spike. I am. Angel agreed. Tomorrow I'm going to clear out my office. I'm done."

"You - promise, Wes?"

"I promise." Wesley's voice was warm warm - gentle and wrapping around him over two thousand miles and a bloody awful telephone.

He wanted to believe Wesley. "He's gonna have another excuse. When you come in to clear out your office - it'll be another bloody excuse, another sodding job and those great poufy puppy eyes of pain he's got."

"Then he will have to find another man for the sodding job." Spike listened to ice cubes sliding against each other, a soft swallow. "When are you and Xander coming home?"

Spike closed his eyes for a moment - reached onto the mantle where he'd laid cigarettes and lighter and lit up, drawing a lungful of smoke and looking over at Xander one more time.
"Now, see...here's the thing, Wes. I don't - think we are."

Ice cubes rattled, glass clattered and Wesley's breath grew ragged around the edges. "Spike, I - no. I - " A deep breath. "You can't mean that."

*Christ. Idiot. You don't just* - "No, no, Wes - bloody hell! I'm sorry, I mean... We can't come back to Sunnydale. We can't, Wes. And - LA... That'll never work either. But *here*..." Spike drew in a lungful of smoke, pacing back and forth in front of the fire. Muddled content from Xander, sleep-thoughts without real form.

"There's this house, love. Your friend Cole, he's selling it and... It's perfect, Wes."

"You're not coming back," Wesley repeated - quietly - and Spike listened to the slosh and spill of unsteady hands pouring another drink.

"No." Spike drew hard on his cigarette, flipped the
butt into the fire and lit another one, listening to the whisky. Listening to Wesley get up and pad across carpet, open a door.

"Do you both want me there?"

"Of course we do! Wes - of course we do. This place...Wes, we both thought of you the minute we walked in. You can make it wall to wall books, love, and - there's a bedroom that'll be nothing but Nest, just for the three of us..." Spike heard a soft click and he wondered if Wes had been checking on Gunn. Was glad, as much as they were both missing Wes, that he had Gunn there for him, to keep him company. "Of course we want you, Wesley. We love you."

Spike listened to another unsteady breath. A muffled laugh. Christ. Can you still doubt it, love? "Wes?"

"Is Monday too soon for my arrival?" So much emotion clouding that voice. Muffled footsteps and the slide of a glass door, then faint traffic noise -
always traffic noise in LA. Even at three in the morning.

"Monday's bloody perfect, Wes." Spike grinned - walked over to the small wet bar and poured himself a drink - toasted the empty air. "Monday we'll be in our new house - the three of us. Free of the sodding Powers... Well, almost free. Bloody visions." We will fix that, love. Somehow. We will.

"The visions are a small price to pay for my life and freedom." Wesley sighed and Spike listened to the creak of a metal balcony railing, car horn in the distance. "How was Cole? Did you and Xander...solve his little problem?" Spike could hear the smirk in Wesley's voice, barely suppressed laughter.

"Oh, you absolute sod! You knew. D'you know what? Xander's already named them! Calls 'em douse. We'll never be rid of the little vermin. He'll
want 'em for pets." Spike poured another drink - carried it back to the bubble of heat that radiated out from the fire. "An' it's all your fault. Don't come crying to me when the little bastards nibble a hole right through Crawford's Rites and Rituals."

"Spike, do you honestly think even an ex-watcher would leave his library unprotected?" Wesley's chuckle was wicked and Spike heard him took a sip. "These - wait - douse?"

"Demon mouse. Douse. Dice. He named them, Wes. He thinks they're cute." Spike looked fondly over at his sleeping lover. At pale-caramel skin that had warmed to honey in the firelight - at the delicate arabesque of sepia ink that accented...the most beautiful face...my beautiful man... "He was petting the bleedin' thing, Wes. Cole said they ate his dog."

Silence.

Then:

"Spike...Cole owned a champion rottweiler."
And then:

"I do hope Xander was wearing thick gloves."

"Oh, right - pull the other one, Wes, it's got bells on. They're *sugar mice*! They couldn't kill a chihuahua."

"Did you see a rottweiler when you were there?"

"Could've sold it."

"Was he distraught?"

"Suppose you could call him that."

"God. He loved that bloody dog. Couldn't shut his gob about the damned thing."

"Was goin' on and on 'bout his granny this time." Spike stared into space, smoking the last of his cigarette. "No, no way," he said finally. "They're *little*. And pink. They're *pink*, Wes."
"So are Shuryllack demons and they paralyze their prey in order to feast on their warm viscera."

"Shuryllack demons aren't cute."

"Of course, it's impossible for a vicious killer to be cute - blue eyed with the curly hair of a cherub, pouting lips and skin like smooth cream."

"That's not cute, that's bloody horrible, that is, like some soppy Valentine's card or -" Spike checked - growled - and tried to ignore the suppressed snorts of laughter coming over the line. "M'not cute. Or cherubic. I'm evil, Wes. And don't you forget it." Spike settled carefully on the edge of the bed and reached out to brush Xander's hair back from his face. Yeah. Evil.

Xander mumbled in his sleep and turned his face into Spike's touch with a sigh, lips resting against his palm with warm and even puffs of breath.

"It has been a while since you last saw yourself in a mirror, hasn't it?" Wesley sounded more relaxed,
more comfortable - more likely to take the piss.

Spike snorted.

"Xander would agree with me. How is he?"

"Oh, he's brilliant. As always." Spike petted the thick, soft hair - got up again and went back to the fireplace. "He likes it here...And you can't tell him, about the house. He doesn't know I bought it. Wanted to surprise him."

"I won't tell," Wes said softly, and Spike smiled.

"Miss you, Wes."

"It isn't long until Monday. I'll have my ticket this morning and arrange for removers this weekend." Wesley sighed. Didn't sound entirely...happy, that sigh.

"What is it, pet? Not... You do want to come out here, don't you? I mean -"
"I do! God, yes. I do. I couldn't leave the two of you. Not now." Spike listened to Wesley walk again, softly padding across carpet and that quiet *click* again.

"Wes, you... You know, might be nice, once we get all settled to have Charlie-boy come for a visit. Show him around. I'll bet he's never been out east," Spike said slowly. Picturing in his mind Wesley standing in a dark bedroom door, looking in on Gunn. *His best friend, really. Only one left...*

"He hasn't," Wesley answered immediately. "I - yes, I'm sure he'd enjoy the vacation. Perhaps once it warms up. I can't imagine him enjoying a northern winter."

"Right. That's settled, then. And - you'll get our gear out here, right? Gunn can help with that... *All* the pillows, Wes," Spiked added, picturing Wes deciding that they could buy new. Or that they didn't need a Nest. "Some of those pillows have sentimental value."
"How can a pillow have sentimental value? Some of them are practically threadbare, Spike!"

"All the pillows," Spike repeated.

"All right. Every last bloody one."

"I'll buy you nice new pillow when you get here," Spike said, letting his voice drop to a throaty purr. "Something smooth and satiny, you think? Or...something soft...maybe fur... Put it under your belly, Wes...under your hips..." He heard a breathy noise from Wes and grinned.

"Bloody hell." Spike grinned, listening to the sounds of buckle and zip and the soft slither of a blanket over the back of the couch, Wes covering himself.

"Wes...are you hard? For me?" Spike murmured. "Are you...aching and hot for me? Just imagine all that silky fur, Wes, prickly-smooth against your belly...and my mouth on your back...my hands pushing your thighs apart...are you imagining it, Wes?"
Silence on the line, broken by ragged breaths and what sounded like an unsuccessful attempt to calm down. "Damn you. Vividly. On Charles' couch, Spike."

"He's asleep, Wes. Love the way you taste, you know. I'd taste every inch of skin from your neck to your...balls, Wes. Hold you open and fuck you with my tongue..." Spike leaned on the mantle, his own breath quickening, his own cock already hard. He dropped his hand to himself and stroked slowly. "Love how you taste, Wes..."

Wesley made a strangled sound, muffled moan and Spike listened - hard - for the faint tell-tale whisper of flesh on flesh. "And where is Xander? Watching us? Touching himself and...waiting his turn?" Wesley's voice dropped - and dropped again, barely there and Spike could imagine him biting his lip to keep quiet, eyes fastened on the closed bedroom door.

"Xander is -" Spike started when warm hands slid
around his waist - pulled him back into heat and solidity and he made a small, pleased sound. "Xander's right behind me, love. Touching me...touching you. He's going to hold my cock when I push it into you...he's going to have his hand on your hip, holding you still..." He felt a puff of air on neck - sharp exhalation, and Xander pressed closer, his hands caressing Spike's belly and then the tops of his thighs. Teasing. "He's going to tell me when I can move, Wes, and when to hold still..."

"Hold still." Xander kissed and bit his way to Spike's ear, nuzzling and rubbing lazily against fire-warm skin with a smile still half-asleep, one hand joining Spike's around his cock, the slow stroke of linked fingers. "Can't move a muscle - love it when you want it so much you're shaking."

Wesley swallowed - hard - and exhaled a shaking breath. "You're an awful influence on Xander, Spike."

"He's a quick study, pet," Spike said, and then Xander slipped the phone from his hand.
"Wes...I'm going to get you ready. Can you feel me? I'm going to slide my fingers into you and make you all hot and slippery...ready for Spike..." Spike shivered, small noise of frustration and wantminewant. Xander leaned closer, making sure Spike would be able to hear anything Wes said. "And he can't move, Wes. Can't move until you're ready...tell me...when you're ready..."

Shuffling fabric, urgent scuff of skin over upholstery, soft moan of need, of giving up, giving in and Wesley's breathless voice. "Now, Xander - please, now."

~*~*~*~*~

"You know you can always call on me, Angel. Any time. I'll always be ready to help you." Wesley squeezed Angel's shoulder, wishing he could do more to ease the ache that was so plain in Angel's gaze. "I'm still... We'll always be friends, Angel. I will always be your friend."
Angel looked everywhere but Wesley, finally settled on the ground between their feet. "I'm not good at the goodbye thing," he admitted to Wesley's work boots.

Wesley smiled. "I know."

"It...you can always call me too, Wes. If you want to. If you need anything."

"I know. And don't think I won't. I'll have you hopping." Wes stood for a moment, looking at Angel's downcast face - at his hunched shoulders. Then he stepped forward and gently pulled Angel into an embrace. Just...holding him, for a moment.

"It's been an honor and a privilege, Angel. Truly. And I'll always consider you one of my very best friends." Wesley stepped back - smiled when Angel finally met his gaze. "Take care of yourself, Angel, all right? And take care of Andrew and the girls..."

Angel held his gaze for a heartbeat - Wesley's - and
looked down again with a nod, silent but not *finished*. Wesley waited patiently, shoulder to shoulder now with Angel and looking out across the lobby of the Hotel Ali Baba together one last time. *Home of Angel and his forty thieves.* Andrew had begun the job of moving into Wesley's office. He could see an Imperial Star Destroyer scale model hanging from the ceiling already.

"Take care of Spike," Angel said at last. He shoved his hands into his pockets, awkward and big.

"I will. Angel -" Angel looked up at him, and Wesley smiled softly - shook his head. "Just...be careful. Especially now that Sunnydale's going to be occupied. The Hellmouth can be quite tricky, open or not."

"Yeah. We'll be fine, Wes. There's your taxi." Angel nodded toward the door and Wesley sighed a little - touched Angel's hand and moved toward the door.

A ghost impression of more than human warmth lingered in Angel's skin while he watched Wesley
walk away into the California sun and disappear into the anonymous yellow cab.

He turned on his heel and stalked back into his office and to the weapon's cabinet, opening it and pulling out a wickedly curved dagger - one that'd made its way home with him from the ruins of Wolfram and Hart. He tucked it into his coat and headed for the sewer entrance. "Andrew, hold all my calls."

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"Why do I only have one of these socks?" Xander stared down at the wooly red sock he'd bought in Salem. His California socks hadn't been up to 20 degree days.

"Dunno, love - down in the bed somewhere?" Spike shoved a sweater into his bag and toppled Xander to the bed - shifted around until he was on top and Xander was pinned neatly beneath him. "Maybe we should search the bed," he suggested, rolling groin
to groin and looking at Xander from under lowered lashes.

"Gonna miss our plane," Xander breathed, legs warm to either side of Spike's hips. "Gonna miss our plane, get stuck here...never get back to California - " His breath hitched and he hissed, sliding a hand over Spike's ass, palming muscle, flex of fingers pinning him in place. "Oh yeah - not seeing the bad."

"Don't you want to go back, then?" Spike asked, throttling down the gleeful surge of yes! that threatened to give him away. He rocked into the press of Xander's flesh, leaning down to push his mouth into Xander's neck - tease the bite that he'd put there only a few hours earlier.

"Uh...how can I put this?" Xander's fingers curled and scratched, sliding into Spike's hair, riding the tide of yes fucknow rising between them. "No." He pushed, rolled and trapped Spike under him and mouthed the long-faded bite that had been on Spike's throat, bringing blood to the surface -
stopping abruptly and lifting his head, all mussed hair and glassy eye. "We got paid, right?"

"Course. Money's waitin' in that account Wes set up for us." Spike pulled Xander back down, grinning up at the ceiling as Xander dragged his teeth over Spike's neck. He wormed both hands into the waist of Xander's jeans and kneaded the dense muscle of his flanks. "Mmm, yeah, right there, love."

"Right here?"

"Right - god yeah!"

Xander dragged his tongue over the first coppery drops, feeling the renewed electric shiver through his veins. He closed his lips over the shallow break in Spike's skin, groaning when it sealed over too soon and lifting his head, breathing hard. "Suddenly feeling the need for a horizontal dance of capitalist celebration. Right now."

"Yeah, right - fuck - okay -" Spike struggled with Xander's jeans, trying to feel him up and strip him at
the same time. "Plane won't wait for us though, Xander," he said, breathless and low as clothing was tossed aside and Xander got his arms under Spike's thighs, pushing his legs wide.

"Don't want it to. Don't care. Just want - this - god!" Xander hovered, on edge over Spike, eye wild, skin flushed beneath the arabesque of his tattoo and looked down the length of their bodies to watch himself sinking into Spike - still slick, still ready. "Just want this."

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"I'm walking, here!" Gunn snapped, flourishing his cane at an overdressed woman with a misbehaving wheeled suitcase, a small and yippy dog in a carrier and a cell phone seemingly surgically attached to her ear. She shot him a venomous look and clicked past, her suitcase clipping Gunn's cane. "Oh man I hate LAX!"

"It does seem to have gotten worse with time," Wes
said, wrinkling his nose at the cloud of perfume the woman had left in her wake. "We're early - care for a drink?"

"Jesus, yeah. I'm buyin'."

"Charles, you don't have to -"

"I," Gunn gestured to himself, "am buying my boy a drink while I still can." He slung an arm over Wesley's shoulders and steered him in the direction of an enclosed bar and restaurant.

"You're welcome to visit - any time," Wesley assured him, not liking the grim set to Gunn's lips or the skeptical look he threw him.

"Ain't the same, is it?"

"Well, I suppose not." They settled silently onto bar stools, waiting for the girl to notice them and come over. Gunn spun his cane through his hands, looking dissatisfied, and Wesley felt a twist of utter sorrow go through him. Going to miss him...
"Hey, man, don't mind me. I'm just..." Gunn shook his head - smiled crookedly at Wesley. "I'll come see you, sure. After you're settled. 'Sides, you got Blondie Bear and his evil henchman to deal with - never a dull minute for you."

Wesley felt the wistfulness of Gunn's smile in his own. "It isn't the same," he admitted.

"Some wise guy said change is good for the soul. He was smokin' something if you ask me but - I guess it's not all bad. It's a step up from changing into evil lawyer people overnight." Gunn occupied himself with spinning a bar mat on the counter and Wesley watched it flip light-dark-light until he spoke again. "What're you gonna do when you get there? Can't tell me you're retiring for good."

"Well, no. I do have a number of contacts from our...Gunn Agency days," Wesley said, smiling at the name - smiling wider when Gunn laughed. "And I will still be - well, the visions are still there, so... No, not retiring. I'd thought about opening a book-
shop, though. It would be a good cover, don't you think? I could acquire all the obscure texts I wanted without anyone the wiser."

"And keep food on the table when the clients don't pay the bills." Gunn smiled, remembered the days when the difference between eating cheap spaghetti and a two pound steak came down to that week's client's willingness to pay up. "Think you could get a wholesaler's discount on graphic novels?"

"I'm sure Xander will insist." The bartender finally came over and they both ordered a beer, watching as she opened the bottles, served them.

"And - what - Blondie and Harris are gonna be your go-to boys? Or are they doin' something else out there?"

"Yes. Spike sounds like he's looking forward to dealing with the demon community outside Angel's territory." Wesley took a drink, smiling over at Gunn. "Actually, he's thrilled to be away from
Angel's influence and reputation. They get along much better with a continent between them."

"Oh, hell yes." Gunn drank as well - picked at the label of his bottle for a moment. "Angel didn't - give you any hassles, did he? I mean - he didn't try to stop you, right?"

"No. He misses what we had, Charles - all of us. He lost as much as anyone in the past few years."

"And we're all lyin' in the bed he made. He can miss it all he wants."

Wesley sighed softly. He agreed with what Gunn was saying...but he still felt pity for Angel. No, not pity. Empathy. They'd all made hard choices - and made mistakes in the past five years.

They'd all paid a price. "Yes. That's true, I suppose. But he still... He has regrets, Gunn. Don't think too badly of him." Gunn nodded shortly, not convinced, and they finished their beer in silence, listening to the various announcements coming over the PA.
"And that's my flight. Better we say goodbye here, Charles. The checkpoint is a good distance - I don't want you straining your knee in these crowds."

Gunn nodded and they slid off their bar stools, gathering coats and carryon and cane - then dropping it all to catch each other in a fierce hug. "You take care of yourself, English. I don't wanna be getting no teary midnight phone calls from the Gruesome Twosome."

"No, no, I mean - I will, don't worry. I promise." Wesley hugged Gunn hard - closed his eyes for just a moment to deeply breathe in the scent of the man. Musk and spice and something...rich. Savory. Something that was just Gunn. Then Gunn stepped back, and Wesley did, and each held the other's gaze for a long moment.

"I'll call you, Charles. I'll keep in touch. We both will. And - I hope to see you soon."

Gunn grinned, clapped him on the back and steered
him back toward the bar's door. "Real soon. I need to get out more, anyway."

~*~*~*~*~

Angel stood amidst the splinters of an ancient wooden door. After a few ancient wood doors, they really stopped being impressive and just got annoying. He looked around the empty cavern of the oracles. Very empty. "Okay - who do I have to kill to get service around here these days?"

"A dragon," two voices answered as one and Angel turned - game-faced snarl at the oracles. Male and female. Blue as the day they were spawned.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead? I'm sure I saw you dead."

"We never lived."

"How can we die if -"
"- we never had life? Foolish -"

"- vampire. Why do -"

"- you come to us now?"

"I need something."

"Your kind is always in need."

"It is not our problem."

"I've got an offering." Angel held up the dagger, held it out - and when they kept staring, set it down and stepped back.

"That is acceptable payment for your audience."

"A favor will cost more -"

"- much more."

"I'll pay it."
"Be careful that you do not enter into a debt you cannot pay."

"I'll pay it."

"You will enter into combat in this arena with another creature who has come to us seeking a favor. If you win, we will grant your request."

Angel looked around the small room - small, short room and breathed a sigh of relief. How big could the other combatant be? "Fine."

"So be it." The man waved his arm and a wall slid away, revealing a vast cavern and a creature Angel had to look up - way up at.

"That's a fake wall? Why did I never know that was a fake wall?"

"Begin."

~*~*~*~*~
Spike hated the sadsad that was coming from Xander. The feeling of leaving home so strong already. He falls so fast... Don't care. I like it here, too. "C'mon, love - not so bad as all that, is it?" He slid closer across the back seat of the cab, getting his arm over Xander's shoulders and tugging him into a kiss. "Gonna see Wes soon," he coaxed, "have great reunion sex."

"Vampires. Always with the sex and the luring. And the more sex." Xander dredged up a smile for Spike and looked past him out the window. He shook his head - because joking was better than clinging to a headstone like a kid clings to Mickey Mouse's leg and whines for one more ride! at Disneyland. "You're getting predictable." Xander watched Spike's hand creeping innocently up his inner thigh. "Not denying that it's an effective motivational tool, though."

"Oh, so you're not bored, then?" Spike asked, letting his hand settle lightly over Xander's groin - knead gently. Xander took in a sharp little breath
and then he frowned.

"Are we going the right way? I thought the highway was - the other way," he said, sounding a little confused.

"Oh, yeah, everything's good," Spike said, and nuzzled into warm neck and hair and jaw, kissing. Distracting, just a little.

"'Kay." Xander shrugged, and caved like a wet house of cards at the first neck nibble. "You're the guy paying the driver, so if he soaks us by going to Boston via Maine, that's not my pr - " Xander lost the rest of his problem somewhere against soft lips and tongue and a hint of fangs. And okay - going to Boston via the really scenic route? Suddenly not such a bad idea.

Spike kissed and nibbled and sucked and caressed until Xander was a wriggling heap of nerve-endings and want fuck now, sprawled and panting along the cracked vinyl of the seat. When the taxi stopped he very nearly growled at the driver and told him to
just go. But then he remembered and took a deep breath - pulled away from Xander and grabbed his hand.

"Here we are! C'mon, love," he said, tugging him out the door.

"Huh? And what? Or maybe where," Xander finished, staring up at the bulk of 37 Chestnut Street in confusion, shivering in the wind and snow as Spike pulled their luggage from the taxi and paid the driver. "Why are we here?"

Spike's arms slid around him from behind, cold nose nuzzling into his nape, cold lips pressing to his neck. "It's home."

~*~*~*~*~

Angel jumped - hard - flying over the thing's warty shoulder and managing to kick it in the head on the way. It staggered slightly and then turned with a roar, boney wrist-spurs snicking through the air -
slicing the edge of Angel's coat. Angel landed hard - rolled - and was up again, leaping and punching and darting away. The thing was stronger than him and definitely bigger, but he was faster and was pretty sure his endurance would hold.

*Has to hold. All or nothing* - *fuck!* Angel lost his breath and his sight for a few precious seconds as the thing slammed him into a wall and then he was up and leaping again - landing on the pebbly, thick back and scrabbling for a hold. Trying to ignore the ache in his ribs and the sharp stab of agony in his ankle.

There were more spines on the thing's back - curving up off the shoulders and Angel had a sudden plan. He dug in, nails and elbows and knees and feet and dragged himself up - got one hand around a spine.

The thing roared again, slapping at him - caught a sleeve and the tail of his coat and started to drag him off. Angel had the spine in a death-grip. He wrapped his other hand around it as well and hung
on grimly, twisting. The thing bellowed and the spine *snapped* and Angel flew off, hitting the cavern floor.

The thing whirled and pounded across the packed dirt toward him and Angel hauled himself upright - swiped once at the blood that was trickling into his eye. Then he put every last bit of strength into one more leap up - and sank the spine into the thing's throat.

It's death-throes went on for some time and Angel knelt beside it, gasping after air he didn't need. His ribs ached, his shoulder did, and he was pretty sure his ankle was broken. But it didn't matter. He'd won.

His coat was a loss, a tatter dragging through the dust behind him as he limped back to the oracles, dripping blood - dripping *ichor* and Jesus, he hated ichor. "I win. Now give Wes' visions to somebody else. Let him go."
The oracles exchanged a glance and nodded together. "Your wish is granted."

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley strode down the concourse, nearly to his gate. His bag swung from his hand, stuffed haphazardly with books, notebooks, toothbrush and change of clothes. He did not trust the airline enough not to have packed some essentials. As he walked, he found himself smiling. Remembered Connor and their goodbye, right before he'd gone into Angel's office.

"So you're really leaving, huh? Going east?" Connor looks...so young. Younger than his actual years, and certainly younger than his life experiences. A little lost, too.

"I really am. Spike and Xander are already there."

"Man. It is gonna be so dull around here without you guys." Connor lifts his head though the rest of
him stays slouched, tucked in and guarded. "I'm gonna have to hassle dad all by myself. One guy can only do so much!"

"I'm sure there will always be allies willing to step in and help you annoy Angel."

Connor laughs, but it's short and a little shaky, and Wesley channels Xander for a moment - channels Spike and reaches out - pulls the thin figure into his arms and hugs him, hard.

"You've been a good friend to me, Connor, and I'm proud of you. Please - don't hesitate to call us any time. And you're always welcome in our home, all right? Always." Wesley squeezes him for a moment longer and then steps back, feeling better for having done that.

"I guess - I guess I could apply to Harvard..."

"Look out for Angel, will you?"

"Please. Like I could avoid him!"
And they had been back to jokes, back to banter so quickly and easily and -

"Oh!" Wesley turned too quickly, losing his grip on his suitcase as he collided with another body. "I'm terribly sorry!"

"S'cool, mun," a distinctly Scottish voice said, and Wesley found himself looking straight into amused green eyes. He blinked and then was grinning back - the smile that turned up the corners of the generous mouth was infectious. The - boy? man - bent down and then up again in a flurry of hot-pink dreadlocks and ropes of beads - charms on leather cords and pale-mocha skin decorated with swirling, black tattoos.

"Nah harm, yeah?" the vision said, handing Wesley his bag, and Wesley reached out for it.

"No, no harm," he replied. There were a ladder of silver rings up the boy's right ear - a stud just below his lower lip and - was that metal in his mouth?
Wesley's hand closed on the bag, fingers brushing over long, be-ringed fingers and -

Something.

A jolt - a sudden shock of tingling heat and then -

"Safe journey," the boy said and sauntered off, something very Spike-ish in his hip-shot, devil-may-care stride.

And that stride only fanned the flames of need for Nest and home and Spike and Xander. When Wesley's flight was called for boarding, he was at the head of the line. Not long now, Wesley thought, strange little sparks and dread-locked punks forgotten in his longing.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike watched Xander put another log of apple-wood on the flame - watched him pick up the bottle of champagne and come back to the new Nest.
They'd decided to set up in the empty sitting room on the first floor, just until they'd made the final choice of bedrooms. But they both wanted Wes there for that. Xander curled down into the Nest and Spike fussled, rearranging pillows and throws, dissatisfied with the thickness and softness.

"Be better when we get our own things - the old things. This isn't near what it should be," he grumbled.

"Martha Stewart vamp," Xander teased and stretched, lifted Spike bodily on top of him and held on. "We bought every pillow available in Salem after nine PM on a week night." He wriggled his toes in the fireplace heat, feeling the warmth soaking into him, baking him, melting him into a Xander-shaped and toasty marshmallow. "Wes won't mind as long as we're in it. I don't mind as long as we're in it."

"I know he won't," Spike mumbled, preoccupied now with tasting the curved and honey-gold arch of Xander's throat. The Nest was too thin, but it would
do. And with Wes' fever-heat added to it, it would be... "Delicious," he said, licking up to Xander's ear lobe, and Xander pulled him closer, hum of content love mine need.

"That delectable taste is Chateau Harris, Nineteen Eighty. An excellent year. Very popular with the demon set - ." Xander's throat worked, shivers sliding through him to the pulse of Spike's mouth over his skin, tracing his garland of leaves, teasing. Lots of teasing and a simmering thrum of arousal and want. Like Spike was...feeding on him. Which was disturbing in how undisturbing it was. "Okay - more of that. Right now."

"Ooh, getting bossy with me," Spike husked. He looked up at Xander, tugging lightly on one silver ring. "Givin' me orders, now?" Press of his hips down, and a slow grind and Xander lost his breath - caught it again - opened his mouth. Something - chimed.

"I order you to go and answer the door," Xander said, and Spike groaned.
"It's cold by the door."

"Better hurry, then."

Spike crawled out of the Nest, muttering. "Thought you were supposed to be the harem boy."

"The harem boy has taken over the harem."

"It doesn't work that way, you silly sod."

Xander nuzzled into a pillow and lifted his eye to Spike. "You're already up."

Spike snorted and stalked across the cold parquet to the front door, jerking it open.

"Hello, Spi -"

"Wes! Get in here!" Wesley was nearly jerked off his feet as Spike pounced and dragged him - luggage and all - into the house. "Christ! It's freezing. Come on!" Wesley let go of bag and baggage and allowed
a naked, rampant Spike to drag him down a hall, around a corner, and through a door.

"I say, this is a most remarkable -"

"Yeah, yeah, bleedin' lovely, get naked," Spike said, wrestling with Wesley's overcoat.

"Hi Wes!" Xander's tousled head popped up from a size-medium Nest and Wesley smiled at him, letting Spike do what he would.

"Hello, Xander," Wesley managed, muffled through his shirt which Spike was hauling over his head, knocking his glasses askew and pulling his scarf and hat off with it. He felt warm hands on his belt, and cooler hands on his waist and then lips, and hands lifting him and the softness of pillows beneath and bodies around and fire-warmed skin and -

"Oh," he breathed, the world going fuzzy as Xander removed his glasses last of all.

"Welcome home, Wes."
...since Spike tends to keep all eleven (yes, I said 
**eleven**) fireplaces going if possible. I can't bring 
myself to waste that much wood - or to do that 
much work, frankly, but I found I've been too busy to 
really notice. I haven't tromped through a foot of 
snow daily since I was fifteen and I find it much 
more pleasant than my memories said it was. 
Perhaps because at the end of the journey is either a 
business I'm eagerly organizing or a house that I'm 
falling more and more in love with daily.

The 'gruesome twosome', as you insist on calling 
them, should be back from New York in two more
days, at which time I'm hoping Xander can fix the window in the shop office - it comes open at odd moments and if I hadn't already performed a cleansing ritual, I'd be forced to suspect a poltergeist or some other such supernatural occurrence. In reality, I think that the frame is only badly warped by weather and the pry-bar that was used a year ago in a break-in.

And no, break-ins are not frequent, Charles. And certainly not after my warding spells went up.

I'm anticipating the arrival of several boxes of stock tomorrow - herbs and rune stones particularly, so I'll have a full day of sorting and shelving. How odd that I look forward with relish to such mundane tasks.

Did you find the case you were looking into, about grandfathering? It would be very helpful if I did not have to jump through the hoops that the State of Massachusetts has been holding up for me.

Wesley's cell phone reminded him to Feed his
Frankenstein and he grabbed it with a groan, glancing at the display before punching the talk button. I must remember. Xander should never be left alone with the cell phone. "Hello, Xander."

"Is this thing supposed to be orange?"

"I beg your pardon?" Wesley set the laptop on the coffee table and stood, padding across the absurdly large living room toward the kitchen. Hopefully toward the kitchen. Provided I don't get lost and require a map along the way.

"This - uh - thing you sent us to get. The - thanks, Spike - the taalsetallmilaa - is it supposed to be orange - oh Christ - shit! Damnit - ! Fuck - okay, is it supposed to glow orange? How do I turn this thing off?"

Wesley smothered a laugh. Naming the thing made it 'wake up', but a complicated set of cantrips and some Oil of Ishtar was required to make it actually work. "Well, first you both have to get naked -" Wesley said, and Xander squeaked.
"We're in public! Spike, he's joking. Wes, say you're joking!"

"I'm joking, Spike!" Wesley padded in socked feet around the corner and into the kitchen, chuckling at the scuffling noises and the sudden yelp that could only be Spike getting his nose whapped with a newspaper. Or something like that.

"Just say the name again, Xander, and it will go back to sleep. How is the rest looking? You said you had the Hand of the Seer, are you set to pick up the boxes from Mr. Gulon's estate? I got a confirmation email this morning."

"Yeah, we're all good on that - Spike - yes, the second we get back to the hotel - no, not in the car, it's below zero out there!"

Wesley laughed aloud this time and picked up the kettle - shook it. It was empty so he went over to the sink to fill it. Something - pink - darted past, just in the tail of his sight.
"You'll have to do better than that if you're hungry," he told it, pulling a leftover carton of Szechwan Shrimp from the refrigerator and opening it with a hip against the counter.

A pink nose appeared over the edge, with pink whiskers twitching.

"Really, it's quite good." Wesley ate a shrimp by way of demonstration and sighed. This would do...for a snack. He wondered - again - if his demon was going through puberty. "Did it work, Xander?" he said into the phone, and passed a shrimp to a pair of grasping, waiting paws.

Wesley supposed he should be disturbed that the dice turned up their noses at rice and vegetables but never turned down an offering of meat.

They seemed to like spicy meat best.

He wondered if the Rottweiler would have been better with Tabasco.
"Xander?"

"Yes." Xander sounded out of breath and the traffic noises were more distant. Spike must have dragged them into an alley. "Yeah...yeah...like - Jesus - oh! No! Hey! In public, buddy! It worked, Wes. Spike is carrying the Hand of the Seer like you told him to - looks like whoever told you vampires are immune was right. Speaking of visions - anything?"

"No, actually, not for two weeks now. I'm - I'm a bit concerned. I've never gone this long without a vision and it's...worrying." Wesley scooped up onions and peppers and shrimp - ate a huge mouthful, grateful for the moment to be alone so he could wolf it down. He felt the shudder as he changed and the food took on a slightly sharper, more distinct flavor in his mouth. The douse froze and then twitched its nose toward him, unfazed. Wesley fished out another shrimp for it.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Wes. Maybe the PTB just decided to give you a - Christ, Spike, that's - Umm,"
right, sorry, Wes -maybe you're on vacation?"

"I - don't know," Wesley sighed. Another douse had appeared and now stood eagerly up on its hind-paws, nose working and whiskers perked toward Wesley. *I'm going to have to order in more food.* He shook his head, conceded ignorance. "I - suppose it's possible."

Anything was possible for a half-demon standing in the kitchen of a Federal mansion sharing spicy Szechwan shrimp with carnivorous pink kangaroo mice.

"Don't look a gift vacation in the mouth - or a douse. Definitely don't look a douse in the mouth." Xander laughed - breathlessly enough that Wesley suspected it had very little to do with the conversation. "Um - kay - gotta go or we're gonna be arrested for public lewdness. *Oh!* Hey, Connor called, he didn't know we were out here, he was really excited about something and he said he lost your new cell number, he wanted to talk to you. So he should be - *fuck me* - *no*, not *here!* He should be
calling you soon. Okay?"

"All right. Be careful and - and tell Spike that I will be very displeased if I have to come up there and bail you both out of jail."

"Promise?" Spike's voice suddenly, breathy and thick with desire and Wesley closed his eyes.

"Yes, I promise, Spike. So displeased that you won't be allowed to come for a week." Sharp intake of breath and then Xander was saying something and then -

"Bye, Wes, we'll call you from the hotel, okay? Fuck - love you - bye -" The phone clicked off and Wesley smiled - sighed - went to the junk drawer and dug around for a moment, then pulled out all the delivery menus and fanned them on the counter.

"Hrmnn...what shall it be tonight?" Wesley asked, and the dice pattered over and fell to sniffing the grease-spattered papers. Another hopped with alarming dexterity onto the counter and Wesley
mentally tripled his order.

Forty minutes later Wesley was conducting some 'Rigoletto' with his chopsticks - the dice seemed to like Verdi - and doling out bits of crab, yellowtail and salmon to the half-dozen who'd come scurrying when the doorbell had rung. The dreadful ring of his cell interrupted and he scowled and hit pause on the remote - snatched up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey! Wes!"

"Connor! Xander said that you wanted to speak to me. How are you?"

"Man, you will not believe this - it's crazy. This guy walks in here like, four days ago, and he's all - with these crazy pink dreads and tattoos -" Connor talked on and Wesley felt a funny little twist in his stomach. Pink dreadlocks and tattoos were very familiar.
"He - what?"

"He had a vision. I thought he was having a seizure or something - a kid in my high-school had epilepsy and it kinda looked the same but - he had a pen in his hand and he started writing on the wall...Dad was kinda pissed. We were in his office."

"What were you doing in Angel's - no, never mind. What did you say his name was?" Wesley got up and walked to the antique desk that was against the sitting-room wall and hurriedly hunted up pen and paper.

"Sionn," Connor said, and Wesley frowned.

"Say that again?"

"Shoon-nuh. It's Scottish. He's Scottish. His accent -"

"Yes, can you - is that S-I-"

"Yeah, O-N-N, Elphinstone. Isn't that cool? He said call him Tod if Sionn is too weird but I like Sionn."
"Tod?"

"Yeah, I don't know either - guess it's a Scottish thing, you know like Australian Bruces. Anyway, he's cool. Dad misses you. It's a lot quieter here since Andrew got his new slayers and moved to Sunnydale..."

At four in the morning Wesley woke with a gasp - reached blindly and turned on the lamp by the Nest, Connor's voice in his head.

'He had a vision...he had a pen in his hand and he started writing on the wall...Dad was kinda pissed...'

Pink dreadlocks - Sionn - was in L.A., at Angel Investigations. Having visions. Wesley fumbled for his cell - squinted farsightedly at the keypad and hit memory 2. Waited through four rings and the breathless, rather preoccupied message that said Xander was not able to talk right that minute. Then the beep, and Wesley took a deep breath.

"I think - I don't think I'm a seer anymore. I think
that's what Connor was calling to say. I'm...not sure how I feel about this. Call me?" He hung up - stared blankly at the ceiling for a long moment and then lay down, the phone in his hand and his hands curled onto his chest.

Not a seer. Is it possible? How? I wonder...if Angel knows anything about it...

~*~*~*~*~

**Dousemaster:** Who **what** now?
**SpriteyMcFizz:** I knew it! I knew it! I'm the first!
**Dousemaster:** **Kennedy** is the Slayer on the Hellmouth? In which bizarro world is that a **good** idea?
**SpriteyMcFizz:** Come **on**, Xander. Share my squee! She's not in England anymore.
**Dousemaster:** Dawnie, I don't want the world sucked into Hell. I **like** the world.
**SpriteyMcFizz:** It's not going to be sucked into Hell. Jeez. Worrypants. The Hellmouth is closed, remember? It just leaks.
"What's the news from Merrie Olde?" Spike asked, leaning in the doorway and making that face he made sometimes when contemplating England. Xander typed a hasty and dazed farewell and a promise to call Dawn for the details and got up, leaving Wesley's laptop open and running. He was sure to be on it in a minute. The face wasn't for England so much as the Watcher's Council, Xander knew - and the fact that Dawn stayed there when she was in London.

"Well, Dawn told me who's gonna be in charge of the Sunnydale Slayers...god, that sounds like a baseball team from Hell." Xander snagged Spike's hand - kissed his cheek and tugged him along to the main room of the shop where Wesley was brooding over a pile of supplies, looking lost.

"Yeah? Who, then?"
"Kennedy. And Willow's not going with her."

"You don't say..." Spike replied, a malicious little glint in his eye and Xander reeled him in by the grip on his hand and kissed him for real.

"Yeah, I do. And no being mean to Willow. I mean - no being very mean."

"Oh, I'd never do that, pet," Spike said, look of mock hurt on his face that Xander felt compelled to kiss away.

"You are evil," he whispered, and Spike 'hmmm'ed in agreement, walking Xander backward until he thumped against the shop counter.

"Don't knock over the - bloody hell."

Xander smelled Wesley's tea-and-leather shopkeeper smell - felt the brush of Wes' sleeve and hmmmmed back at Spike who lifted him to sit on the counter with an ease that would have been
disturbing...in another lifetime. "Sorry, Wes."

"No. You're not." Wesley pushed his folded fists into the small of his back with a small groan. "Not in the least."

"But I am sorry, Wes. And as soon as we get home, I'll make it up to you..." Xander pulled Wes close and kissed him - fended Spike off for long moments while he did it and Spike watched appreciatively, one hand stroking down Wes' back and the other sliding up under Xander's sawdust-furry t-shirt.

"Mmm..." Wes mumbled, and Xander pulled slowly back - smiled.

"Maybe a little massage, huh Wes? Work out your...kinks."

"Oh, I -" Wes looked appropriately dazed and Spike pulled him closer - nipped up the side of his throat and then took Wes' earlobe in his teeth - sucked and tugged for a moment.
"Never had a massage like Xander does, love," Spike murmured, and Wes shivered, pressing closer - one hand sliding down Spike's back to cup his ass, the other doing something to Xander so that Xander huffed out a small moan.

"Anya had us take a Tantric massage class," Xander murmured, tugging Wesley and Spike into the space between his thighs and working the back of Wesley's neck with his left hand, the other just resting against Spike's back "Anya had us take a lot of classes."

"Boy's a good student," Spike mumbled into the crook of Wes' neck.

"You will never know how wrong you are." Xander knocked Wesley and Spike closer together with his knees.

"Taught you a few good tricks -" Spike said, but Wes' mouth stopped him and then Xander's hand was moving on his back, pressing and digging in just like Spike liked.
"I'd like to teach him a few myself," Wes said, and Spike felt the stab of lust and want through the link like a hot, twisty little knife. So good it was almost bad.

"I'll bet you would," Xander grumbled, but he was back to rubbing his fingers over Wes' neck and Wes was shivering - changing - making a purry little grumbling sound down in his chest that made Xander grin.

"Would you rather I teach you on your back or over my knee?" Wes' eyes were slitted open, gleaming in an expression so wicked it belonged on Spike's face. Where it was immediately replicated - along with a sinuous sexy slide of blatant appreciation.

"Oh Jesus. You told, him?" And where had hurt accusation turned into lusty moans? Lusty moans weren't in the script - his agent had promised - at least not there in the script. And why was Spike chuckling?
"Didn't tell him anything, pet."

"I find it fascinating that there's something to tell."

"Oh, Wesley, you should hear the fantasies he entertained about you in his school -" Xander shut Spike up by kissing him - hard - and Wesley blinked at the two of them for a moment - grinned when Xander finally let Spike go.

"Fantasies, Xander? What, me in my watcher-suit, all...authoritative and...stern? Did you want to be...punished?" Xander's eye - which had widened and darkened with lust and arousal now closed and he gulped air - groaned - his hand tight and hot on Wesley's neck, stroking the spines that lifted and flattened, lifted and flattened.

"Oh, fuck, Wes, I -"

"Fucking yes -" from Spike and then the phone rang. "Oh, fuck no!" Spike made a grab for the phone but Wesley was quicker, flipping it open and holding it
to his ear.

"What? Oh, of course. Certainly." He squirmed out of Xander's grip - dodged Spike and sorted through the stack of papers he'd rescued from the counter behind Xander. "I have the purchase order right here..."

Xander shook his head sadly and watched Wesley wander away, already back in shopkeeper mode - back to human with a flick of his head. "How does he do that?"

"I dunno. All that Watcher training and years of repression, I guess." Spike suddenly rounded on Xander and Xander looked at him, wide-eyed. "Don't you ever try and learn that lesson, pet. Won't have it."

"No, you'll just have me as a registered sex offender in jail for public lewdness," Xander muttered, watching Wes like a hawk. Hands on Spike's ass, pulling him close and kneading, his calves crossing behind Spike's knees and trapping him.
Wantwantwant, heavy and thick and warm.

"Won't let you get arrested, love - promise -" Spike said - tipped his head back encouragingly.

"No, that's not right - are you sure you're on the right page?" Wes said, rattling papers, and Xander's breath huffed over Spike's throat in a giggle.

"Need to get Wes on the right page..."

"Which page is that?"

"The page with lots - and lots of - oh god, stop that and I'll stake you." Xander let his head roll back on his shoulders, cool lips and tongue doing sinful gymnastics with his right nipple ring through the gap in his shirt.

"Promise?"

"I told Wes not to connect to the town tunnels until we had the work done here because there was no way you'd stay home or out of the way like a good
little vamp. But did he listen to the Xand-man? No. Nobody listens to the Xand - and more of that - man."

"'S because he talks too much," Spike mumbled - snickered when Xander smacked him on the back of his head, shivers of yes yes want that rolling down his spine like melting ice trails and he nuzzled Xander's shirt aside. "Smell good. Smell like - fresh sawdust and -"

"A working man's honest sweat? Ew."

"Nothing wrong with honest sweat, Xander," Wesley said, hand over the phone as he dug through some more papers, his mouth smiling but his eyebrows coming down to frown in irritation at the invoices.

"Nope, nothing. Salty like blood, fresh and clean...god, you're delicious..." Spike's voice faded off into a mumble as he moved from one ring to the other and Xander got his legs up - got his thighs around Spike's hips and pulled their groins together,
sighing into Spike's hair - mussing it further with his fingers.

"Maybe we can take off early -"

"No, we can't." Wes was suddenly there, clicking the phone shut and Spike reluctantly straightened, forehead to forehead with Xander and looking over at Wes.

"You sure, love?" he purred.

"Yes. I have eighty seven boxes of books in the back room that need shelving before another one hundred and forty three arrive from Europe. I have no shelves and there is a vampire seducing my carpenter." Wesley softened his words with a peck to Spike's lips and a gentle hand over his hair. "Please, Spike."

Spike pulled Wes close - deepened the kiss for just a moment. And then he pulled away - gently disengaged from Xander. "Anything for you, love. I'll just - start alphabetizing for you, shall I?"
"Thank you, Spike," Wes said - huge, happy smile and Spike had to smile back - step back so Xander could thump down to the floor and arch his back in a spine-crackling stretch.

"Right, I'm on it," Xander said, snagging his tool-belt from the floor and heading to the piles of lumber in the corner. The phone rang again and Spike sighed - found his duster and rooted out a cigarette and lit it - headed back to the boxes. He watched Xander poke around in tools and wood and little sketches of shelves for a minute and then sidled over.

"Spike - seriously - let's just get this done -"

"D'you think the visions are really gone?" Spike asked, his voice pitched low and Xander stopped fiddling - looked up at him, frowning just a little.

"I - dunno. I think Angel knows more than he's saying. I think - if they are - I'm glad, but..." Flicker of a brown eye toward Wes and Spike took a long drag - nodded.
"Yeah. He's - takin' it kinda hard. Wearin' himself out. Trying not to think about it, I guess." Throb of unhappiness and protect from Xander and Spike sighed - shrugged his shoulders. "He'll be all right, love."

"Yeah. I know." Xander pushed his hand back through his hair - picked up a length of board. "I think once it - sinks in, he'll be fine with it. I know I'm fine with it. Hated him being hijacked by the fucking Powers all the time..."

"Yeah." Spike took a last drag - crushed the butt out on his boot-heel and tossed it into the giant waste-can full of tag-ends of wood and other trash. "Yeah, he'll be fine. We'll just keep him distracted and he'll be fine."

"No problem there," Xander said, grin and a fast kiss and then he was walking away, laying the board on a set of saw-horses and Spike settled cross-legged among the crooked towers of books, starting the slow process of shuffling them into order.
...and it was a delivery guy asking me to sign for a box of fish. English, are you out of your goddamn mind? Who the fuck sends a guy fish for his birthday?

The last laugh's on you this time, man - because Mrs. Feeny across the hall's a damn fine cook and I've been eating like a king every night since it came.

Xander lifted his head from Spike's stomach, the soporific heat from the grand fireplace melting him into a state of profound laziness. "Wes looks smug. Do you think Wes looks smug?"

"He looks very smug. I wonder what sort of plot he's hatching over there?" Spike said, his fingers moving slow, slow through Xander's hair, his eyes half shut
and his body almost floating from heat and satiation.

"I'm not hatching a plot," Wesley said, glancing up at the two of them, smiling.

'There's some new brand of X out there, I think it's more for demons than humans - really tweaking the kids. Anne's been asking me to talk to Angel - see what's what and that's...just not happening. But maybe - Connor can look around for me?' Wesley made a mental note to call some of his contacts in L.A. - half-demons and humans who would be able to help. "No plot, just - my birthday gift was a hit," he said finally, and Xander grinned sleepily at him.

"What'd you get him?" Xander's eye closed completely and he stretched, one long, golden arch against the brightly colored Nest pillows.

"Fish."

Xander's eye popped open. "Live fish? Like pets?"
"Dead fish. To eat."

"Okay. For my birthday? I want a gift certificate to Tower or something."

"Get you anything you like, pet," Spike murmured and Xander's sleepy look went instantly calculating and gleeful.

"Oh, that was a mistake," Wesley chuckled and Xander turned to Spike, propping himself on his elbows and looking more than a little excited. "And I promise no fish, Xander." Wesley turned his head sharply as a douse scuttled from one corner to another, disappearing behind a glass-fronted bookshelf. *Must tell Charles the latest about the dice. How they're empathic...* Wesley went back to his email, opening a reply box as Xander started peppering Spike with birthday suggestions.

Peace enjoyed a very brief visit before fleeing in terror.

"What the *fuck* would you do with a *pony*?"
It was not an answer Wesley had any wish to hear. 'The dice are remarkable creatures. They have surprising intelligence which I suspect is the result of empathic abilities. I don't believe they understand what we're saying (as Xander does) but that they understand intent and tone to a more complex degree than dogs and cats. None of them have shown any hostility to the three of us, though one did chase a lady from the local church off our porch and into the street.'

"No, now - don't be upset, pet, I know I said 'anything' but...we need more space for a pony. Lot's just not that big," Spike said, a slight edge of desperation to his voice. "Wes, you had horses, yeah? Tell him we don't have room."

"You are completely on your own on this, Spike," Wesley said loftily, and giggled when Spike growled and Xander pouted.

'Of course, we were all fascinated to see the douse 'beamed up', as Xander said, when it reached the
end of the walk. As I suspected, their existence is tied directly to the portal, and if they move too far away they're simply - gone. We don't know for sure yet if they are 'beamed' out of existence all together or just returned to their home dimension. Spike says we should tag one and then chase it out of the house, and I'm considering it. So long as the dice don't take that as a threat -'

"Wes! Tell him I can so have a camel if he won't get me a pony!" Xander said, snorting with laughter as Spike pounced on him and started biting him all over - ticklish 'love-bites' that still left a mark.

"Camels are nasty creatures, Xander - ask for an elephant."

'- as they did Cole's extermination attempts. I don't know what might have happened if Spike and Xander had tried to exterminate the dice as per his request.

I wonder, Charles, if it was ever this difficult for Angel to send us on dangerous assignments. If it is
Wesley shook his head, deleted the last two lines of the email.

"How about a small elephant? A pygmy elephant I can train to bring me the right screwdriver?"

"You could train a douse to do that," Spike scoffed, then he looked at Xander, narrow-eyed. "What about my birthday? Didn't get me anything," he said. Xander's eye went wide.

"I don't know when your birthday is! You won't tell me!"

"A good boyfriend would find out," Spike huffed and rolled over in the Nest, curling up sulkily. Like a big white cat, Wesley thought, who's been warned off the cream. He reached for his tea - batted a curious douse away from the sugar-bowl and sipped. Cold.
"I'm getting some fresh tea," he announced.

"Find out how? Hire a psychic?"

Wesley left the room quickly.

So did the douse.

In the kitchen Wesley gave the douse a sugar cube and filled the kettle with fresh water, tuning out the raised voices in the living room. "It's good to have a big house," he told the nibbling douse and ate a sugar cube himself. Then they shared one-sided conversation and tea biscuits until the kettle whistled and Wesley refilled his mug, dropped in a fresh tea bag - and lamenting the loss of his English pride. "It really doesn't taste different once you're used to it," he excused himself.

The douse twitched its whiskers at him and hopped closer to the sugar cubes.

"Very well. One more but that's all. I won't be responsible for rotting your teeth." He gave it
another cube and closed the box, listening to the profound silence from the living room. *Oh dear.*

And a moan.

And a curse.

*Oh.*

"Wes!" Xander's voice was a breathy moan and Wes came back into the sitting room - leaned against the door jamb, watching Xander fight Spike's hold on his wrists and lose. "Wes, make him let me up!" Spike looked up from where he was slowly licking his way up Xander's stomach, shooting Wes a look that was smoldering and heavy with desire and love.

"I think...not," Wesley said softly - walked to the couch and put his tea-cup down and then slowly stripped off his shirt. Shucked jeans and underwear with a tiny smile. Dark red underwear that was Xander's 'oops, I forgot' gift for Valentines a week past. He knelt down into the Nest - shivered into
the change and crawled over to Xander and Spike - took Xander's wrists in his own slate-dark hands and held him effortlessly.

"I think it's time for you to tell me more about these...high-school fantasies," he murmured, and Xander groaned. Spike - leaned up and kissed him.

"Watching you and Spike kiss wasn't one of them," Xander sulked, petulance ruined by his breathlessness and the erection straining against Spike's thigh.

"Shall I guess what was?"

"He's the wrong way up for most of them, mate." Spike murmured with a wicked look from their prisoner to Wesley - drew a sharp, shuddering breath and met Xander's wide-open eye, mindless lust and not a virginal blush left in his body.

~*~*~*~*~
And there's a new Seer. I know you know there's a new Seer. A man can listen in on phone calls in his own office if he wants to.

Wesley was curled up in the master bedroom Nest, cotton sleep pants and a thermal shirt riding easy on his skin. He had a whiskey, a plate of very good imported biscuits, and a letter. And utter silence to read it in, since Xander and Spike were out doing - something. 'Getting to know our demon neighbors' Xander had said, grinning, and Spike had slipped a wad of cash into his pocket and winked. Playing poker, then, and drinking - probably starting one fight and making at least two friends. Almost nothing could withstand Spike and Xander together. Wesley sipped his whiskey and tipped the letter - hand written on fine, dull-parchment paper - toward the light. Angel's clear, slanted hand marched densely across the page; writing habits formed when paper was a luxury and you crammed as much onto one page as possible.

'He's strange and Scottish and writes on my walls
and he's not you but he's all right. I'm all right. We're all right. And if you're not all right, I'm flying out there to remind Spike and Xander that Angelus is sleeping, not gone.'

Wesley chuckled softly at that. The mild threat - the simple fact of the threat - made a warm little spot in his heart. He'd felt - so bad, leaving Angel. And he hadn't held out much hope that they would stay friends. But...Angel was trying.

'Why did the PTB send this tod to my henhouse? Half the girls have crushes on him. Andrew has a crush on him after just meeting him one time. And Connor spends way too much time with him.' That's right, Wesley thought, 'Tod' means fox... A flash of clear, amused green eyes - of a narrow face and graceful limbs came back to Wesley and he nodded to himself. It was apt. Perhaps a little too apt. Connor probably has a crush on him, too. I wonder if Angel knows, yet? Have to ask Spike...

Wesley glanced at the clock and sighed, the exhalation taking him deeper into the pillows. Only
midnight. *It may as well be high noon for the two of them.* He closed his eyes, remembering the hectic flash and flush of Xander's eye and skin, feral pace as he disappeared into the lamp-lit night with Spike. Wesley returned to his letter. In the morning he would wake with two bodies curled around him, one cold, one warm, both equally dead to the world until they woke up hungry.

Like the douse snuffling into the hem of Wesley's trousers. "You won't find any biscuits in there," he told it and gave it one.

'*This girl the council sent - this Slayer...She's very...strident. Reminds me a bit of Darla. She seems to think she knows - everything. I think the Hellmouth is going to have a surprise or two for her. And she knows Andrew from before and it kind of...pisses him off. It's actually kind of funny in a 'maybe they'll kill each other' way...'*

~*~*~*~*~
Xander stared at where the table used to be, one hand on his beer bottle, the other fanning out five cards - one queen away from a winning hand. "Hey!"

Something big, heavy and *scaly* struggled up out of the wreckage and threw itself back the way it came with a snarl, the Queen of Spades speared on one of its back spines.

Xander drained his beer and folded.

"Eight ball in the side pocket," Spike said - set the chalk aside and lined up his shot - made it and then whipped around at the *crash* from the back corner where Xander was playing poker. *Alarm disgust disgruntlement*, and Spike grinned as a Chchu scrabbled in the wreckage of the table and pounced on a drunken F'yarl, playing cards speared here and there on its spines. Xander tossed his hand down and sauntered over, grinning back.

"Guess the game's over," he said.
"Who got the pot?" Spike asked. Xander looked blank, then thoughtful, then wandered back toward the corner. *There's my boy! Find the pot and take it home, love - looks like everybody else is watching the fight.* Spike smirked to himself and collected his winnings from the vamp he'd been playing pool with and looked around for another mark.

"First time I ever folded for the jackpot," Xander observed, dangling a green-fire jewel on a chain with a frown before wrapping it in a sawdusty bandanna and tucking it away carefully. "Gonna ask Wes to take a look at that one." Another *crash* from the far corner, shattering glasses and Xander slid a hand into Spike's back pocket, groping out a small bill for another beer. "And I've got two hundred on the spiny guy who took my queen."

"Gonna collect on that," Spike said approvingly - snagged Xander back by a belt-loop and kissed him. "Get me a shot, love?" he asked, and Xander kissed him back - sauntered off to the bar, side-stepping a smashed chair. "Right - who's next?" Spike said,
eyeing the loose half-circle of demons and vamps who'd been watching him play.

They all looked back nervously and Spike hid a smile. Easy pickings, tonight.

Xander gave his order and leaned on the bar, enjoying the predatory thrum that was Spike and meant great sexcapades ahead - and yep - apparently still reliving his second adolescence because none of Xander was objecting.

In fact, some of Xander was ready to bend Spike over the pool table and - crash he was spun into the bar hard enough to knock the breath out of him - and that was so not of the plan. A second crash and another breath-losing shove from a body wider, taller and more muscled - more everything - and Xander was pushing off with his right foot while his left foot and hands scrawled and scrambled and vaulted him over the bar and into the cramped, beery space behind it.

"Here's your Jack."
Xander looked down at the shot, up at the bartender. "Thanks."

Spike heard the crash - saw Xander fling himself up and over the bar, apparently none the worse for wear. He summoned his demon and walked up behind the F'yarl that had crashed into Xander - tapped it on the shoulder. It swung around, growling.

"Don't fucking touch my boy, you gobshite," Spike said, and swung.

Xander stared dumbly at the shot of Jack Daniels in his hand and tossed it back, scrambled on knees and elbows back over the polished bar and tackled Spike across the floor - knees, elbows, knees - ow Jesus - head. "Don't kill him! Money on spiny guy! Money on - whoa -" he swallowed, dropping his head and blinking slowly down at Spike when the JD caught up with him. "I'm a little drunk."

Spike lay on the floor and stared up at Xander -
grabbed him by the back of head and pulled him down tight as a bar-stool winged across the room to explode against a far wall. "How much on Spines?"

"Two hundred!" Xander said, muffled against Spike's chest.

"Right. Okay. Let's find a better perch." Spike looked around - pushed Xander up and then jumped up himself and hauled Xander by the hand back to the bar. "Up and over, pet," he said, giving Xander's ass a good, groping push and Xander flashed him a dopey grin and slid back over the bar. Spike hopped over right after, nearly braining the bartender with a boot.

"Sorry, mate, my bad," he said. He snagged a bottle of Jack off the shelf and opened it - took a healthy slug. "Right - best seat in the house, love." Xander leaned into him and giggled.

"Don't bogart the booze." Xander snagged the bottle and tilted it back because nothing said Boys' Night Out like chasing a double shot of Jack with
more Jack. Xander ducked a flying chair and lunged to rescue the bowl of bar nuts.

"Hey!" Spike ducked the flying chair, too and snatched a bottle of questionable single-malt off the shelf - hurled it with deadly accuracy and whooped in delight as it took out a vamp.

"He didn't throw the chair," Xander mumbled around a mouthful of nuts.

"Who cares? Just wanted to get my hand in. Yeah, yeah, put it on my tab," Spike added, waving off the glowering bartender and snatching another bottle. Schnapps. Not even a question of what to do with that. Spike took aim and let fly and Xander cheered. The night was looking up.

~*~*~*~*~

From: Dousemaster@wyndampryceoccult.com
To: Anactoria@scanthelburycollege.edu
...contacts in the local demon community and yes Wills, I'm being careful. Scooby here! Graduate of the school of hard knocks - straight A's. Honor student. Valedictorian. Survivor. You can take the Scooby out of Sunnydale but you can't take the - okay, that's creepy and I'm getting my Sunnydale surgically extracted. Seriously, Willow - I'm safe and I'm okay and I'd really appreciate it if you lay off the Spike and me thing.

Xander stopped, cursed softly under his breath and backspaced. He'd spelled 'Spike' as 'Spoike'. Normally not a mistake he'd make but he was a little annoyed at Willow. No, not annoyed. That's a Wes word. A Giles word. I'm pissed. I've...gone spare. I'll go spare? Whatever it is Spike says. Fuck. Xander leaned back and stretched his neck and shoulders - rubbed at the socket and then bent back to his task.

'He's a permanent character in the Big Book of Xander Harris from this chapter forth. Andrej was a - a pamphlet, an aside, a footnote - a chapter of porn to keep my readers interested through a really
boring part of the story. When kids take a test about the book of me, the answer to 'who was the love of Xander's life?' is going to be D: Bloody, William the.

Xander fidgeted with the mouse, highlighted the last paragraph of text but couldn't make himself press the delete button or deal with all the red-underlined typos staring back at him. "Jesus." He saved the draft and closed the laptop, took a deep breath and pushed himself out of the couch with a grimace.

The bruises around his ribs were fading - fading in a skin of many colors. A whole rainbow. Red hearts! Yellow stars! Purple horseshoes!

Xander Harris: magically delicious.

Also hungry.

He padded through the sitting room - Spike was on his back in the sitting room Nest, one of three Nests - smoking and listening to...something. A stack of
CD boxes by the stereo said that the rhythmic crashing coming out of the speakers was Sonic Youth, Frank Zappa, Stravinsky *isn't that like* - *ballet music?* MC5 or ICP. Spike grinned as Xander wandered through and Xander grinned back - made his way to the kitchen and perused the pantry. They'd just re-stocked and his array of choices was -

"Exxxcellent," Xander chortled, rubbing his hands. He twitched ever so slightly as a douse appeared out of nowhere, standing tall on its hind legs and sniffing at him. "Wait your turn," he said sternly, and turned back to the shelf full of cereal boxes, mentally dismissing from the running the boring, healthy, whole-grain stuff with pictures of waving wheat and tasteful berries on the front.

He got his crunch on with the Cap'n, filled a bowl and poured in the milk. "Feed a man and he'll eat until his plate is empty. Teach a man to fill a bowl with cereal and he will never go hungry." A quick recon of the pantry added the chocolaty goodness of a HoHo to his snack, a spoon and a bottle of SunnyD for his recommended daily allowance of
irony and Vitamin C.

The douse sniffed cautiously at the cereal and flopped over onto its back, tongue lolling.

"Drama queen. I defy you with my big spoon." He shoveled up a heaping spoonful and shoved it into his mouth.

Then his phone rang.

"Sht," Xander sprayed and picked up the phone, choking down the cereal. "Say nothing," he told the douse sternly.

The douse wrapped its paws around the HoHo and started dragging.

"I haven't said anything yet," the caller grumped, and Xander chugged a mouthful of SunnyD and wiped the back of his hand over his lips.

"Hey! Gunn! Sorry, not you, one of the dice. Hey! Gimmie that, you little mooch - you didn't even
ask!" Xander stopped watching the Herculean display of Douse With HoHo and snatched at his after-cereal snack. The douse clung and Xander lifted them both to eye-level. "Naughty, naughty demon. You'll make Dousemaster angry! And you wouldn't like him when he's angry." The douse twisted - *sckreeked* - and slid off with a shredding of plastic, chocolate under its claws.

"Man, what in *hell* are you talking about? That portal's like a damn - pylon or something, isn't it? Givin' you all brain cancer or something. Is Wes in?"

The douse gave Xander the Evil Eye and licked chocolate out from under its claws.

Xander gave the douse one back and shoved half a HoHo into his mouth, looked uncertainly at the other half. "Here. Take this part. It's got...demon cooties." He crouched, the remaining half of the HoHo held out in his fingers.

The douse hesitated half a second and *snatched* the treat, hopping like the Hounds of Hell were on its
heels.

Okay, maybe not the Hounds of Hell. It'd eat the Hounds of hell. Xander swallowed. "Sorry. Had to do a little...dousekeeping."

"Jesus. Wes?"

"No. Xan-der. Different voice. Lots less English."

"Asshole. Is English there or not? And don't go playin' innocent, tellin' me Spike's in the other room."

"Actually, he is." Xander washed the last of the chocolate out of his mouth with another gulp of orange drink. "Wes is at the shop. Do you have the number?"

"Oh. No, I - don't guess he gave it to me yet. His cell just rolled over to voice mail."

"Probably on his cell, and the other phone too. Some big mess with some of the stock, he's been
yelling at people for days. Just a sec." Xander shuffled over to the 'fridge where the list of numbers were - suppliers, the heating guy, the local hardware store, and the shop's new number, just installed three days ago.

"Okay - got a pencil? Here we go - 351..." Xander read the number off and Gunn repeated it, and Xander's spoon clattered to the table as two dice upset his cereal bowl and floundered in the pinkish milk, soggy 'berries' sticking to their fur.

"Oh crap. Gotta go, man - talk to you later. Hey!" Xander snapped the phone shut and dove for the dice, who leaped off the table and shot away, trailing milky paw prints. Headed for the sitting room. *Wait for it*...

"*What the* -! Xander! Fuck's sake!"

Xander grabbed an Old Speckled peace offering and followed the yellow brick road - or in this case, the pink paw prints and soggy CrunchBerries trail to scattered jewel cases and a game-faced Spike.
"Breakfast got away," Xander said, slipping into the Nest - straddling Spike's thighs with beery offerings held aloft and out of the way. "You know how it is," he mumbled against ridges and fangs, sharp and soft and - "Hmm. Don't change back yet. You taste different like this."

"Taste how?" Spike asked, lying still under Xander's slow and exploring mouth. "You're all sweet-chocolate..." Spike closed his eyes to the goodminewan curling through him. Heated little tendrils all through his soul - through his bones. Fingers lightly on Xander's biceps and his hips lifting slightly - just enough to feel the heat and hardness that was Xander kneeling over him.

Xander ran his tongue over Spike's teeth. Smooth and sharp, like licking a bone knife - not that it was something Xander had done - but like what he imagined licking a bone knife would be. Smooth and risky and kinda exciting and bad.

"Like metal. Like the blood's closer to the surface." Xander chased down the flavor of orange, chocolate
and blood and stomped on the voice that still insisted it was *Ew! Gross!* - and maybe it would be if it wasn't also *Spike*.

"Magic, maybe," Spike said - caught Xander's odd look. "The demon's full-on magic, love. Lots of magic keeping me like I am...Got to have its own taste, don't you think?" Xander drew back and looked thoughtful for a moment - leaned in again, tracing carefully along a fang and making Spike shiver a little.

Spike slid his hands up Xander's shoulders and ran them down the smooth curve of his back, flinching a tiny bit when Xander did, when he hit a bruise that was still sore. "Barely notice it anymore - unless you're like this," Xander mumbled, tiny crease between his eyebrows and eye closed while he explored, shivers of *familiarity* creeping from him.

"That all right, love?" Spike asked, stopping the sweep of his hands - stopping everything for a moment to look at Xander. Xander pulled back and *looked* back. Thinking, and Spike could almost feel
the process tick over in his mind as small eddies of
emotion came and went.

"It's...yeah. It is. It's more than all right. It's...you
and...it's perfect. Love you, Spike," Xander
whispered, and leaned down again, to kiss again,
and Spike lay back, content - pulled Xander close,
arms around bare back, one calf curling around
Xander's, knee in Xander's thigh. Love you too...Feel
it, pet. Love you too.

~*~*~*~*~

BSummers: I guess if you let me grow up, I have to
let you grow up too.
BSummers: God, I think I gave Dawn this speech last
year.
BSummers: I'm not saying it isn't weird
BSummers: Xander Harris and Spike?
BSummers: But you're not the same Xander, are
you?
BSummers: That was really hard to type, Xan.
Xander wiped quickly under his eye, smearing sawdust and tears across his cheek.

Dousemaster: I love you, Buffy.
B Summers: Do I know you?
B Summers: Stop that.
Dousemaster: What?
B Summers: Stop making me laugh when I'm crying. Snot goes the wrong way.
Dousemaster: And that was in no way disgusting.
B Summers: Not as disgusting as the noise I'm making. laughing Okay, sorry. I - you wanna know something weird?
Dousemaster: Uhhh, maybe?
B Summers: I kind of...envy you. I mean - I was the focus of all of that...love and attention and...attention once. It scared me then. Made me feel like I was drowning.
B Summers: But looking back... It was really... It's one of the most amazing things, when somebody loves you that much.
Dousemaster: Yeah. It is.
Xander's fingers hovered over the keys and he chewed his lip, popped open the can of soda Wes' upstairs neighbor had given him and took a long and grateful drink. Spike and Buffy. Buffy and Spike. He poked at the concept from a few cautious angles, then typed.

_Dousemaster: Have you told him that?_  
_BSummers: Well, no. I haven't...told anybody. You're the first. I guess - I haven't known it long enough to tell anybody._  
_BSummers: Can I ask a favor?_  
_Dousemaster: Always, Buff._  
_BSummers: Can I crash your party? Can I come over and - hang out and just...Learn how to be friends again?_  
_BSummers: And I really just want to...see you guys, you know? See for myself._  
_Dousemaster: I'm not promising you a free floor show every night._  
_BSummers: Oh ew._  
_Dousemaster: You say 'ew' but can you resist the raw power of the Spike and Xander show?
BSummers: Yeah. I can. : ) You don't have to...worry about me, okay? I just need to see you guys happy.
Dousemaster: My clever code didn't hide a lot, did it?
BSummers: Less than my new bikini.
BSummers: Can I visit? I have two weeks off in March while the new Slayers take their Spring Breaks.
Dousemaster: The council gives Spring Break?
BSummers: It does now.

"Hey, English, you paying any attention at all, here?" Gunn asked, and Wesley blinked - leaned back in his chair a little, focusing on the papers spread before him and not on Xander. Who had gone from amused and casual to stiff, to teary to...something. Happily smug? At any rate, his conversation with Buffy seemed to be going well and Wesley sighed in relief.

"Yes, of course I'm listening Charles, I just had to make sure Xander was...all right," he said quietly.

"Oh, they havin' that kind of conversation? She
cool?"

"She seems to be. Now - you were saying - an entire branch of some new sept, right there in Hollywood?"

"Man, pointy yellow demons as far as the eye could see. It was - crazy. Lucky for us they're about two feet high and their only concern is mining the land fills. I think we can work with them."

"That's wonderful, really. I hate to think of you having to fight alone, Charles."

"Oh, I got my crew doin' the work - Anne's regulars are all in the know, but yeah - war isn't what we need." They both contemplated that sentence in silence for a moment. "So what's new in WitchyPoo-Central?"

"Very little, due to a Teamster's Union strike in the Skaff demon lines. They went on strike on the twentieth and there's no sign of an agreement soon. Giles is trying to connect me to a transatlantic
supplier willing to work around the union but these things do take time." Wesley sighed, shuffling papers on his desk, listening to the jingling of the shop bell.

"So, this is the new place," a voice like gravel rumbled and Wesley looked up sharply. Two large figures draped in long coats, faces hidden under deep hat-brims stood in the doorway.

"Looks like it's gonna make a lot of money," one said, and the other made a grumbling sound of agreement.

"Can I help you? We're not actually open for business," Wesley said, standing in the doorway to his office, a cold feeling in his stomach. Wrl demons. Slow, tough - greedy. It couldn't be good.

"Oh, I think you're open for our business," the first one chuckled, and Wesley had to resist rolling his eyes at the corny, Late Night Movie line.

"I really doubt it," Xander said, and Wesley turned
his head slightly sideways, eyes never leaving the demons - doing his best to ignore the slightly panicked-sounding inquiries coming from Gunn.

"Careful, Xander. They -"

"I know, Wes. Never fear - Dousemaster's here," Xander whispered and then slipped past him. "So, business. It involves payments or our next shipment of Holy Water might spontaneously combust, right?"

One lifted his head, the bigger one - and why is it always the bigger one who notices me? and Xander got a good look at narrow yellow eyes and skin too loose over bone, bristling whiskers and -

Whew. Yeah. There's the sour milk breath.

"Holy water, books..." The two Wrl exchanged a look. "Customers."

"We're not interested," Xander said. "You look familiar. Do you guys go to the bar under Summer
and Endicott?"

Another look. A cautious lowering of the brow and \textit{wow} those guys could get their brows \textit{low}. Angel could take lessons. "No. We go to the Witch and Web on Flint."

"Just checking," Xander said, and then he went \textit{in}, ducking down and \textit{over}, his hand going out hard to the horn he knew was just \textit{there}, at the temple. Obscured by hat and shadow and a dense comb of whiskers but - \textit{yes!} He had the scaly, slender thing in his hand and he leaned - twisted - just like Spike had showed him. The Wrl tried to wrench back - hurt itself - shrieked. And tumbled down in a boneless heap. Not dead but paralyzed. Xander stepped back, panting lightly, putting a hand out.

"Hey Wes, wanna give me that jar of powdered nettle? I hear it makes their skin boil right on the bone." He risked a glance back at Wes who had shivered to his demon form and was standing there, spines up and out, teeth bared. "Always wanted to see -"
"Xander!"

Something hit him, hard, on his blind side - made him stagger sideways and the second demon was bending down and hoisting its fallen companion by an arm and a leg - getting the body up over its shoulder and gone, out the door with a bang and a jangle of the bell.

"What the \textit{fuck} -" Spike, tousled and dusty from a nap in the back room careened into the store proper and then Wes was there, pulling Xander over to a chair, making a hissing sound - touching his temple and pulling back with blood smeared on his fingertips.

"Charles, I'll call you right back, we've had a small - incident. Yes, I'm fine." Wes snapped his phone shut. "Xander! Are you all right?"

A guy didn't survive Sunnydale without learning to check before answering a question like that. He fingered the wound - sharp pain but nothing
shifting, nothing...deep. Nothing flashing before or behind his eye so - "Yeah - but I'm not gonna be winning any hearts with my manly beauty for a few days." And where was something to wipe his hands on when he needed it?

Xander sat and dripped thoughtfully on his shirt. It'd do. He pressed the hem to his temple and winced. "We're drinking at the Witch and Web tonight."

"You are not! Xander, it's already beginning to swell -"

"Just a bruise, Wes, and little cut," Spike interrupted, flicking his Zippo closed and walking up close - bending down to peer at the wound, smoldering cigarette held out to one side. Xander turned his head and let Spike look - smiled when Spike lifted his hand and slid Xander's bloody fingers into his mouth. "Got your blind side, love. What'd I say 'bout that?"

"Said to be 'more sodding careful, you daft prick', if I remember right," Xander said, and Spike snorted.
"It's not a joke, Xander!" Wesley had shifted back to human - was hauling a Sunnydale/demon-hunter sized First Aid box out from under the front counter and flipping it open - kneeling beside Xander. He caught Xander's chin and forced him to look down into wide, angry eyes. "You could have been seriously hurt!"

Xander slid sticky fingers between Spike's and sighed. "It's a flesh wound. I had worse injuries after rough sex with Anya in the basement." He felt Spike draw breath next to him - felt the subaural snicker and held up a warning hand. "Nuh! It was not the coffee table or the washing machine and that's all I'm gonna say." Wesley slapped an antiseptic pad onto Xander's temple. "Okay that and ow."

"Is anything not a joke with you, Xander? Regardless of Spike's effect on your blood and your - your testosterone you are human! You can't take the kind of risks Spike can."

"I know that, Wes!" Xander snapped back - took a
hard breath and squeezed Spike's fingers. Spike squeezed back, for once wisely silent instead of - not. "Look, I know I'm still just human, okay? But those guys - they're like - like Puffy Giles in his slayerproof suit - big but kinda weak and breakable. Spike showed me that trick with the horn, it paralyzes them - ow, Wes, Jesus!" Wesley threw a second pad into the little heap of trash he was accumulating and picked up a tube of antibacterial cream.

"No, not that crap. I hate the way it smells. I'm not going to get an infection so could you just - stick a band-aid or plaster or whatever on there and stop hurting me?"

"I'm hurting -" Wes exclaimed and suddenly Spike was down next to Wes, on his knees, his hand on Wes' neck, kneading gently.

"Wesley, pet, it's okay. Xander's okay, yeah? Just a bit of a bump and scrape, he's fine. Wes?" Wesley struggled for a moment - sighed and slumped and leaned down, going back onto his heels, his
forehead resting on Xander's thigh.

"I'm...sorry. I'm just...I worry." Wesley felt the muscle tense under him and then shuddered with the sensation of Xander's fingers combing through his hair, Spike's rubbing at his neck. "I love you."

"You gotta trust me, too. I know my human limitations. Hey - survived twenty five years human here and I've only lost one body part. I think -" Xander lifted Wes' face, held it in both hands, eyes to eye and brushed his thumb over Wesley's lip. "I think that's pretty good for a guy who grew up on the Hellmouth."

"That's actually - you are actually quite remarkable, Xander," Wesley admitted, and smiled when Xander did - leaned forward for the soft kiss that came next. "Just - promise -"

"Don't make him promise things he can't deliver, Wes," Spike said softly and Wes shivered - looked over at Spike's serious, solemn face.
"All right, I... Promise to study hard and learn *everything* Spike teaches you about - about killing and maiming and -"

"Torture, oh my? That I can do, Wes," Xander chuckled, and kissed him again. "Now - a little gauze to keep the sawdust out and I'll go finish that table you wanted, okay?"

"Yes, all right," Wesley said, turning back to the First Aid kit - ignoring Spike, who was pouting.

"Well, fine, that's all good but I was going to kiss Wes better," Spike muttered, and Xander whapped him, grinning.

"I'm the wounded harem boy, I get the snogging from the dashing Nomad Prince."

"*You're* the - ? Make up your sodding mind!"

"Less talk, more snogging it better," Xander insisted, tugging Spike closer with a hand to the back of his neck. "The harem boy demands his reward for
protecting the - ow! - fucking sadist with the medical supplies."

Wesley taped the gauze in place and pressed a gentle kiss to the skin below it. "Idiot."

"That's me."

~*~*~*~*~

"Yeah, really? Okay, yeah...Wow. That sounds really cool...Oh, we will definitely come for a visit. Yeah. Okay, man - glad you called - yeah - take care - bye!" Spike watched Xander fold up his phone - go into the bathroom and get some water running. Mid-afternoon, middle of the week and it was raining. Well, more like sleet. Needle-fine, mostly frozen water slanting down out of the sky and skinning everything in a slick, hard coat. It made a sound like a snake's hiss and it made Spike feel cold. He got up, the electric blanket around him like a shawl and put two more pieces of wood on the fire - hopped back into the master-bedroom Nest
and curled up, tugging the big, puffy down comforter over him and snuggling into the velvet and flannel that lined this Nest.

"That was Russ! And Sol," Xander added, standing in the doorway, spitting tooth-paste foam. "They're in Seattle."

"Yeah? Bet Sol's lovin' it up there - nice and wet and grey."

"Yeah - it sounds - crap." Xander wiped at the toothpaste dribble down his chin and went back into the bathroom and Spike grinned - dug out the remote and clicked the stereo on. Kronos Quartet's 'Kongerei' spiraled out and Spike relaxed into sweet-spicy warmth - the scents of Xander and of Wes who was - downstairs somewhere, sunk into his books. First official job and the shop only open two days.

Xander spat into the sink, rinsed, then curled around awkwardly and poked at the long but shallow gash on his ribs before falling back on his
rule that if it's not bleeding, it's fine. "It sounds like they're happy there. He also said Carl turned his seasonal job in San Bernardino into something full time and moved into an old house down there with Mariel and the kids. It's got a guest house he's renovating for Abuela."

A gust of cold air sneaked in from somewhere Xander resolved to find before next winter and he padded back across the floor, minty fresh - and freezing his balls off. A corner of the Nest lump lifted and Xander dove for it without a second thought, snuggling up to toasty warm vampire flesh and hanging on through Spike's squawk and flail of protest.

"Bloody cold!"

"I'll warm up."

"You bastard," Spike hissed, twisting to get away from frozen feet and icicle fingers that Xander stuck unerringly in all his warmest bits. "Told you to wear your slippers. What'd I get 'em for if you're just
gonna go barefoot? You'll get chilblains!"

"What the hell are chilblains?" Xander asked, giggling, squirming around and getting on top of Spike - squishing him flat and sticking a cold nose into Spike's neck.

"You'll learn when I toss you out on your naked arse. Pillock," Spike added, jerking the comforter higher and settling, finally, the warmth from the electric blanket seeping back. The top if his head was warmed by the fire and he sighed and shut his eyes. "Think Wes'll come back up before Buffy gets in?"

Xander rubbed his nose over Spike's pulse-point - what would have been a pulse point with a pulse - and breathed deep. Warm, Spike took on a distinctly smoky scent. Nice scent. "Only to ask us if we actually intend to spend the entire day in bed and what she'll think if we're still naked in the Nest by the time she arrives." He shuffled, shifted until his feet were in a fold of the electric blanket and his belly was pressed to Spike's thighs, cold hands
tucked under sharp shoulder blades that would glare at him if shoulder blades could glare.

He kissed Spike's collarbone in apology. "Once the phone rings, he's gone â€“ till bedtime."

"Hmmm...noticed that, have we? Yeah...they talk as much as the Niblet ever did. At least Wes doesn't giggle."

"Not too much," Xander agreed, smiling into Spike's sternum and making a pleased little sound when Spike stroked his knuckles down the gentle curve of Xander's vertebrae.

"Least the shop's done and open - was drivin' me round the bloody bend, all the last minute shite that kept cropping up."

"How it works. You should have seen Giles trying to get the Magic Box into shape - it was a nightmare." Xander shifted and turned his head - lay his cheek on Spike's chest and idly traced nipple and slatey-blue jewelry with a fingertip. "And he didn't have
half the 'real' occult stuff like Wes does - he didn't want the good people of Sunnydale to turn their neighbors into toads or anything."

"Hellmouth did *that* without any help from him, pet." A rumbley start-stop purr vibrated beneath Xander's cheek and he smiled, straightening the bead and ring and sliding his hand down to rest warmly over Spike's ribs.

"Wes said people *here* either know what they're doing or think magic is all bubble, bubble, toil and trouble and *that* kind uses ingredients you can get in a major supermarket." Xander traced the lower edge of Spike's rib cage with his thumb, reviewed half-forgotten lists of spell-ingredients for Giles or Willow. "Mostly. I don't think they sell Eye of Newt at Ralph's."

"Should bloody well hope not," Spike mumbled, more concerned about where Xander's hands might go next than a sale of Newt at the grocers. "S'good, though. Half the mojo-inclined I been talking to have mentioned him or his shop. Got a good
reputation out here already."

"Had a good one in L.A. Giles told me some stuff back before the whole Wolfram and Hart - thing."

"Huh." Spike shifted and pulled Xander a little closer - cupped his hands around muscular buttocks and kneaded, smiling lazily. "He won't keep vamp hours, though."

"And that in no way sounded like a complaint." Xander grinned, stretched and pushed his cheek against Spike's chest like a cat. "Take it from a refugee of the retail sector widower's club - midnight to dawn? Not a top-selling shift." He wiggled warmer fingers further under to knead Spike's spine, a discontented *grumble* in the back of his mind.

"Maybe. Maybe not. S'different around here, yeah? But...his shop, his rules." Spike arched a little into Xander's touch and closed his eyes. "Said maybe a run down to Atlanta in the next week or so. Some stone or other. And *this* time -" Spike opened his
eyes to look as sternly at Xander as possible.

"This time no shouting 'Geronimo!' and jumping off the roof onto a demon. Could have been skewered, you git."

"Mhmm. 'Kay." Xander nuzzled into the pocket of Spike-scented warmth beneath his jaw. "This time I'll yell like Tarzan. I do good Tarzan. I've got manly Tarzan hair." He lifted his face â€“ frowned when he saw Spikeâ€™s face. "It was a shed, Spike. And okay - maybe it was higher than I thought but any fight I can walk away from -"

"Is a good one. I taught you that, pillock. Can't help but worry, love. You're not quite as tough as all that just...yet."

Xander snorted, wriggled an overheated foot out of the blankets and planned his masterful retort, but the possessive thrum of worryloveyou...won'tletyougo took a lot of the fun out of it andâ€¦ there were a few things they needed to talk about and that pretty much topped
the list. It was the list. "No pressure there."

"No, no pressure," Spike said, catching Xander's gaze and making sure that the *loveyouonly* was strong - was clear. Xander as a vampire would be...amazing. Powerful - unstoppable. But only a willing Xander and Spike knew - there were questions still. Worries. *Enough that he wants it - enough that we talk about it. Can wait...for years, still.* "You know - Wes won't disown you, love. Nobody will."

Nobody *might*. And then nobody might buy a transatlantic plane ticket for personal stake delivery service. And yet? He pushed against the Nest, closed the inches between their lips and tasted cool, sweet smoke. *Not feelin' the doubt.*

"That what's bothering you so much, pet? Feelin' guilty for...not feelin' guilty?" Spike's gaze was mild - was so, so solemn, but the *love* and the want from him were fierce, and it wasn't anything Xander could stand up to. Wasn't anything he *wanted* to
stand up to.

"Yeah, maybe. I guess." Xander sighed and propped his chin on Spike's sternum - traced his finger over Spike's jaw and to his lower lip. "I don't...I mean, shouldn't I feel bad to feel that way? I'm gonna do something that might make every friend I've got hate me and...I don't care."

"I don't think you should feel bad, love. You know that..."

"Duh," Xander said, a font of eloquence - giggling and failing to dodge a light smack from Spike's hand. He caught the hand and splayed his palm against Spike's, dark to light, looking at them. "I told Buffy I've got different ingredients now but this is gonna be like - giving her a mince tart when she's expecting chocolate chip. She hates mince tarts. It's not like oatmeal raisin, you know? You can pick out raisins. I was oatmeal raisin last Christmas."

"She doesn't have to eat you. I mean -" Spike whapped at Xander again, who was giggling harder.
"She'll just have to - to buck up and eat what we give her...Christ. This is hard." Spike hauled Xander up by force and kissed him hard, hip lift-roll-grind guaranteed to make the giggles go away. "It'll all - all work out in the end," Spike said, kissing his way over Xander's face to his throat - baring fangs and tenderly pressing them into Xander's skin. "It'll all be just...fine. Hundred years from now they'll all be dead, anyway," he mumbled. "Worries over."

"Yeah." Xander worked his fingers into the gel-stiffened peaks of Spike's bed-head and held him there - pressed until he felt the pop and burn of fangs through skin, full body shiver and a trickle of -connection. Swallowed hard to find his voice again, scratching his fingernails against the back of Spike's neck. "I get it - being afraid of losing me. Kinda scares me, too."

**But not enough to stop. Not enough to give up -**

Lightning arced through his nerves, veins, blood **wantminemine** like a storm, arching his spine, making him gasp.
Spike drank - not the gulping mouthfuls of a feeding demon, but the slow and seductive sips of a demon on the prowl. A demon who was wooing. Xander writhed over him, gone voiceless and breathless and yoursminewantalwaysnownow with every pound of his heart. Spike let his legs fall open - took Xander in closer and went deeper and just held on for long, long minutes.

Finally, slowly, pulled away - licked the bite like a cat at its grooming and growled softly. "Only want you love. Only, always, you. You won't change so much. You'll still be there, you will. Promise you, love. Promise."

"If you -" Xander lost his voice, chased it down in the smoke and spice scent of Spike's hair. "If you end up with a Xander-shaped sack of high-kicking, pun-flinging demon instead of me, you're the one who has to live with it." He licked his lips, flexing stiff fingers in Spike's hair.

"No, love. Won't be like that. Listen..." Spike settled his arms around Xander - tucked the dark head
under his chin and started a soothing stroke down Xander's back. "When Dru bit me...turned me... It was like - the world unfolded. Like a Chinese puzzle-box and all of a sudden I knew the right moves - knew the tricks. Everything was so...bright." He paused for a moment, remembering. Drawing it all to the surface again.

"And you were..?"

You, you...which you? Fuck... "All right, love, this is where it gets a bit...confusing. When I turned...the first thing I wanted to do? Go home. Fix my mother. She was dying - I wanted to make her well. Give her immortality. Sounds a bit daft, I suppose, but it seemed like the perfect...plan. Dru went along with it - she didn't care but my mum..." Spike sighed - tugged gently at Xander's hair, slipping the earth-dark silk of it through and through his fingers.

"What came into her took her over, love. Wiped her out. What came into me...didn't. It just - talked me 'round the 'right' thing to do, most times. Told me I was better so I had the right to things. Now a
strong-minded bloke might not fall prey to that but... I was lonely, and I was...mostly unloved and I'd had a very bad...night."

"You, love. You're none of those things and you won't have Angelus riding you like a hag, pushing you to more and bloodier and...harder. Or trying to take away your true love." Softly, with that last, because he didn't want to hurt Xander's feelings. But some small bit of Dru was always and forever in the secret chambers of his heart. He'd never leave Xander - never love her like he once had, no, not ever again. But she was there, for good and all.

And it was Xander smiling down at him, hazy-eyed and mussed and his.

"My true love can kick Angel's ass," Xander mumbled and ducked down, pressed the words into Spike's skin, into his throat and tightened his arms -willed Spike to feel the intense needyoumine and the nervous flutter that went with it. He lipped the sharp protrusion of Spike's collarbone, traced it to the point of his shoulder then turned his head to
meet gold eyes, a ridged face. "When Buffy gets here, she's gonna see the new model Xand-man, happy human oatmeal raisin guy and the vampire who's not gonna let anything of the bad happen to him. And in maybe - *maybe* fifteen, twenty years, if she hasn't staked us yet, she'll believe it."

"That she will, love," Spike said softly, watching Xander watch him. Reached out and traced the tattoo on Xander's face with a gentle fingertip. "She'll see, and she'll know... It'll be fine, Xander. Really it will."

Xander took a deep breath, *soon* and *yes* and *scared* humming under his skin. Ready to jump - to throw himself off a cliff. Fly - or fall, and there was Spike, right *there*. Giving him wings, if he'd just take them. So he did. "That's all," he said, into the rush of air that was himself, flying.

"You lost me, pet."

"That's...pretty much the last item on my 'to do while...warm and breathing' list." Warm and
breathing - and with his heart beating hard enough to make him dizzy.

"Is it, then?" Spike said. But the link was fizzing like champagne - like pop-rocks and fireworks and everything and anything else shiny and bubbling and happy.

"Yeah, it is." Xander lifted a tingling hand to the back of Spike's head, the butterflies taking flight in his stomach and soaring. "So - after Buffy leaves - what do you say? You and me? Significant exchange of bodily fluids...?" Forehead to forehead, nose to nose, breath and no breath and lovelovenow. "Iâ€™m not getting any younger. Let's get started on forever."

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Wesley yawned - stretched - brought his tea cup to his lips and then grimaced as he realized it was stone cold. Reading, taking notes - talking to Charles while he'd searched a book out of his growing home
library and his tea had sat, neglected. Getting up from his chair he padded into the kitchen and assembled the tea things - got a kettle boiling. As was becoming the norm, a douse appeared out of nowhere, sniffing hopefully toward the sugar bowl and fastening huge, damp eyes on Wesley.

"Oh, really - you must think me daft if you expect that to work. I'm not swayed by that look on Xander's face - it's not going to work on an overgrown Cracker-Jack prize." The douse shuffled and scrubbed its face - looked mournful. But edged toward the sugar-bowl all the same, as if confident of victory.

"I'm fairly certain you could get the lid off yourself if you tried," Wesley said, and the douse twitched and eyed the sugar-bowl as if looking for the right spot to put the lever. Must tell Charles about their tool-using. I know I saw one using a toothpick to get the last olive... Wesley smiled to himself. As usual, his thoughts had turned to Charles Gunn.

A pang slipped between his ribs, unerringly to the
heart and he stretched out a careful forefinger to stroke down the douse's back. It rrrr 'ed and arched, wiggling its hindquarters and half-closing its eyes. "Out for any pleasure we can get, are we?"

"Fuck! Spike!"

The douse whipped around, tail high, ears low - eyes wide at the ceiling in the direction of the master bedroom.

"Oh, don't mind them," Wesley murmured, watching the douse. Not actually touching it while it was still so on edge. Also not thinking about Spike and Xander upstairs in the Nest, doing...what they were doing. He felt - out of sorts. He loved them - loved them. But he was restless. Wesley knew he could go upstairs and slip into the Nest - could say one word and have the concentrated - and quite mind-blowing - attention of two extremely handsome and sexual men - sort of men - for as long as he could remain conscious. He just...didn't want to. Not right then. It's the damn shop - this first job. I'm just...nervous, is all. The kettle chose
that moment to start singing and Wesley moved to the stove, lifting it off - cursing as someone knocked on the door.

"Bloody hell." Buffy was early - or Xander had written down the wrong time for her flight. Spike had distracted him well enough during the phone call. He dropped the kettle onto an unlit burner and flipped the lid off the sugar dish for the douse - hoped Xander or Spike had thought to warn Buffy about the douse population. *Darling pink sugar mice with voracious appetites: do not attempt to slay.*

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Wesley padded out of the kitchen - down the hall past the sitting room and into the entry, the harlequin pattern of pale and darker woods chill on his feet. The sleet was still hissing down outside and he hunched a little as he undid the lock - turned the knob and opened the door.
A wind, ice-edged and tinged with wood smoke struck him in the face and he squinted and started to smile - and froze. Staring not at a small, blonde bundle of leather and wool and SoCal perkiness but - dark wool topcoat and thick, tasseled scarf. Watch-cap pulled low and leather gloves clutching the handle of a suitcase - the knurled head of a cane. Dark skin and dark, dark eyes...

"Charles?"

"Y'said come any time, English." And a smile like sugared coffee with cream, like autumn sunlight, like - things warm and welcome and - Wesley stared open mouthed and with no words left.

"I -"

And then there were lips, warmer and softer and fuller. And suitcases dropped and canes clattering to the floor and a hard wall at his back and warmth - warmth and the scent of cologne and cinnamon gum and -
On the staircase.

On the landing.

Where Wesley could see if only his eyes were open, if only he weren’t lost within the kiss...

Xander leaned against Spike, jolt of arousal, flutter of triumph. Whispered - "You so owe me fifty bucks."

Square Twenty-Two

Lost in a kiss.

A poetic piece of hyperbole, Wesley's rational mind insisted.

The rest of him was lost in a kiss. Warm, full lips
sliding over his, pressing, sucking until they tingled, until he couldn't have told when from where. Until his neck ached from craning the few inches that separated his lips from Charles'. Until he felt the first shudder, shiver-pull of *demon* and jolted back against the grip of arms, falling into *here* and *now* with a *thump*.

Here and now included Xander and Spike, sitting on the steps like two naughty children spying on their elders. Hair tousled from Nest-ing, dressed in pajama pants and flannel shirt and sweater, respectively, and Spike's feet clad in carpet slippers of a dark and suspicious tartan. Suspicious because Wesley was quite certain it was not Spike's family tartan, but then - slippers shouldn't *come* in family tartan colors, should they? Wesley shook his head slightly, taking in Xander's grin and Spike's leer and... And Charles' leather-clad fingers on his elbow - on his waist. Charles face inches from his own, still, looking a little shocked and a little scared and a little stern. *Oh god. Xander and Spike...what will they...? And now Charles thinks that I... Oh god.*
"Look who's come to visit," Wesley said and Gunn felt a tightening in his gut, that clatter in a dark alley feeling of - waiting. Xander was coming down the stairs in his peripheral vision. Coming their way. Coming to - Jesus, man. Get a grip and loosen your goddamn hold on Wes. Except his arms weren't listening and then Xander - breezed past.

"Look who's leaving the door open for all the hot air to get out. Not all of us have body heat in here, buddy." Xander circled Charles to close the door, grab the suitcase - grinning like a lunatic fool. "Sitting room fireplace is lit," he said, as if Spike didn't keep all of them lit, and Wesley felt a grateful flutter in his belly before it was swallowed by the yawning chasm of Oh god - Charles...

"Or the Nest. You know - the more the merrier and Spike doesn't bite." Xander grinned, "much," and Wesley could have cursed him - or at least hexed him with something uncomfortable - perhaps boils - if he frightened Charles away.

"This boy invite every strange man who shows up
on your doorstep into the Nest?" Right, Charles. You keep focusin' on Wes and not the crazy one-eyed guy.

Crazy one-eyed guy was hard to ignore when he ducked close to kiss his cheek and what the fuck?

"Only the ones we wanna keep." Xander shut the door in a last swirl of cold air and held up his hands, grinning at them and Wesley found it impossible to resist smiling back. "No rush!"

"The sitting room may be more comfortable." Wesley risked a glance at Charles who looked - bemused. But not upset. And raised a chilled hand to touch Wesley's cheek.

"So y'all didn't roll out the special guest weather for me just to get me into the Nest?" He could feel the heat of Wes' cheek even through the chilled-through leather of his gloves - and god, the way Wes pressed into the touch. Yeah - no turning back from this one. "Thought it was supposed to be snowing, not this hell-spawned liquid ice shit."
"There was more snow two days ago - this sleet has kinda melted it a little." Xander's grin didn't falter as he scooped up Gunn's cane and leaned it against the wall - patted Gunn's shoulder and hopped back up the stairs. Spike stood as Xander came abreast of him.

"We'll put his case in the blue bedroom, Wes," Spike said, and gave Xander's ass a little smacking push as Xander stood there, still *grinning* - he just could *not* stop the grin. "Glad you took us at our word, Charlie-boy," Spike added, and then Xander was thumping away up the steps, Spike hot on his heels, leaving one bewildered ex-watcher and one vampire-fighter to...carry on.

Xander tossed the suitcase onto the bed and whirled - pinned Spike to the dresser and stared him down. "I take cash...or trade only. No checks." Giddy *happiness* fizzed through him. "Admit it - I was right," he singsonged.

"Yeah, you were right. Never thought Charlie-boy
swung that way but...Wes...

"Yeah, who can resist him?" Xander undulated slowly against Spike - resisted when Spike made to pull and push him back onto the bed. "No...no...no. Bad vampire," Xander scolded, kissing Spike's neck between words. "No...sex...on the...guest-bed. C'mon, we've got a Nest and *The Big Lebowski* waiting in the DVD player and hours to kill until Buffy gets here and I want my fifty dollar blow job before then."

~*~*~*~*~

Charles smelled like Christmas. Like cinnamon and pine forests and mulling spice and - "Oh." Kissing again. Like a teenager at the door and - Wesley pulled back. "Took them at what word?"

Charles looked slightly guilty, now - but more he looked...so wonderful. Flushed from the cold, his lips a little chapped - sleet melting on his shoulders and cap and starred in his eyelashes. Wesley
reached up hesitantly and tugged Charles' cap off - tossed it down on the little table by the door and ran his fingertips gently over Charles' skull.

"I can't...believe you're here," he said, and Gunn snorted softly.

"I'm here." Gunn tilted his head, looked down at his arms like they were someone else's arms that kept finding their way around Wesley's waist - like it was where they belonged - and felt the effects of phone calls to the Harris half of the Gruesome Twosome coming on. "I'm here. I'm tryin' out the queer. Get used to it."

"You're trying out... Charles, really, are you actually -" Wesley stopped and just looked at Charles - looked at the bemused - stubborn - expression on Charles' face. Leaned into the still-cool folds of Charles' coat and sighed, smiling despite his confusion. "You're chilled through. Come into the sitting room, it really is wonderfully warm and - and I've tea or coffee - whichever you'd like, and -" Another kiss - remarkable kiss; warm and wonderful
and breath-stealing kiss.

"Shut up, English."

"Shutting...up," Wesley mumbled between kisses. Natural kisses - *playful* kisses like the kisses Xander gave Spike and - "*Why?*

"Man, you don't shut up *long*, do you?" Could be kissing - not asking the hard questions. Why'd he always have to fall for the chatty brains? Chatty brains who made his stomach do that flopping-over thing and the back of his skull tingle and - *shut up and kiss, English.* Even Fred couldn't talk while kissing. Much.

Figured *Wes* could, already mumbling between kisses.

"I'm just...I'm just...overwhelmed, Charles, I -" Wesley stopped himself - pulled away a little and took Charles' leather-clad arm in his - tugged him toward the sitting room. Despite the wonder of having Charles kiss him, his feet were numb from
cold and he was starting to shiver. Charles grabbed his cane and allowed himself to be towed, smiling all the while. When they entered the sitting room, though, Wesley felt him stiffen and looked over anxiously.

"What is it?"

"I'm not gettin' down in any damn Nest, Wes - whether the wild bunch is in it or not." Yet wasn't a word he was ready for. Yet. See? But Wes was looking - nervous and damn, couldn't have that. "Never get me back up again, man - not with this knee -"

"Oh! No, no -we've chairs, here - let me -" Wesley steered Charles to the hearth where the other man sighed in relief and opened his coat - tucked his cane under his arm and stripped his gloves off. Wesley hurried to the overstuffed chair that was on the other side of the Nest and lifted it - brought it over and positioned it close to the fire. Took Charles' coat and gloves and scarf and draped them over the couch-back.
There now," Wesley said as Charles eased himself down, grimacing slightly, his leg held stiffly out. "Now, let me get you a drink, Charles and then - really - I must insist on the full story." Wesley tried to sound stern but Charles was grinning at him - reached out and snagged him by a sleeve and pulled him close, pulled him down, and Wesley crouched there, one hand on Charles' thigh, the other on the arm of the chair, watching Charles lean forward. The fire made Wesley's face so warm... Made Charles' face warm too, warm and stubble-rough. And his hand warm where it slid behind Wesley's neck and into his hair, drawing Wesley with it.

It was like something out of a one of those Rockwell paintings - fireplace going, classic American furniture - okay like Rockwell if you ignored the two guys thing, the black guy and white guy thing, the crazy harem pillows and - that blush on Wes' cheeks was just so damn...sexy. "Been a long trip...gettin' here. Ain't gonna pretend I know what I'm doin'. Couple of idiots with sex on the brain told me I should follow my gut. I don't know where the fuck
it's goin' but here's where it wants to be." In a crazy, fucked up Norman Rockwell painting with a couple of demons and a crazy one-eyed guy, demon pets and no goddamn clue what he was doin' other than following his gut.

His gut was crazy.

"So, I have your guts to thank for...this?" Wesley said softly, and Charles gave him a look - head a little tilted, all his old, street-wise attitude right there in snapping brown eyes and twisted lip.

"Don't look gift guts in the mouth, Wes. Oh my god. I've been talking to Xander too much." Gunn dropped his face into his hands and Wes - started to laugh because his world was just not turning on end fast enough for the universe.

Delighted and giddy with it all, Wesley pushed aside his anxiety for the moment so he could just - bask. I must have a talk with those two, and soon, Wesley thought. Soon, yes, but...first - there were more important things to do.
Like kiss Charles again, like slip his fingertips under the layers of Charles' sweater and shirt and tee - like listen to the steady heart-beat and the soft sigh of pleasure when their lips touched again.

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"Gah." Xander stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling stared back.

*I mock you, ceiling. For you cannot know the mind-numbing thrill of a blow job from a man with over a hundred years of experience.*

Xander continued to stare at the ceiling, extremities tingling, until Spike's face hove into view. "Worth fifty, pet?"

"I owe you change."

"Ta, then," Spike said, sounding entirely too pleased
with himself. Xander wanted to roll over and pounce on the vampire - wipe that smirk off Spike's face with a few well-chosen moves of his own.

*In a minute. Maybe two. When I can feel my legs again. Oh, fuck - what if I can't feel my legs when Buffy gets here?* "If I can't actually ever move again and Buffy has to spend her entire visit lying next to me in the Nest it's all your fault, Spike," Xander mumbled. Spike poked him, making him twitch.

"We're *not* havin' the Slayer in the Nest with us, Xander."

"It'll be a girly slumber party! She'll bring cheesy chips and I'll braid her hair and Jesus did I just say that about *Buffy* in *our* bed?"

"That you did, pet."

Xander threw an arm over his eyes, trapped Spike with a leg and felt the cool weight settle onto him. It wasn't doing his *legs* any favors but the rest of him liked it a lot. The rest of him was a traitor to the

"What brain?" Spike muttered into his neck and Xander growled half-heartedly.

"Damn...nap...need a nap," he muttered back, and Spike nuzzled in a little further, teeth grazing Xander's collarbone.

"Or a little pick-me-up," Spike said, and nipped with fangs. Xander's body tingled some more, only this time it was renewed arousal and anticipation and Spike chuckled softly, hips grinding down just a little.

Xander gasped, groaned and grabbed a double handful of vampire ass. "Pick me up. Light on the up. Up *not* happening again any time - oh - in the next ten minutes," Xander finished with a shudder, hungry mouthful of smooth, smoky throat; nipped, nibbled - oh yeah he was *not* the only guy in that Nest with a neck fetish. No...sirree.

Spike shivered, pushing his throat into Xander's
mouth - let the demon up and out and sank careful fangs into the smooth muscle that connected Xander's neck to his shoulder. Spike groaned as Xander's teeth cut into his throat and Xander sucked, coaxing blood out, his hands pulling Spike closer and his hips rising and falling. Spike swallowed - pulled away - licking his lips and rubbing his cheek on Xander's - worming one hand underneath and the other into Xander's hair as Xander slowly unlocked his jaw and drew back, love want yes yes in the link.

Tingles ran from Xander's groin to the top of his head and the soles of his feet like fizz and electric crackles danced under his fingertips when he stroked Spike's back. Taste of Spike - coppery, peppery, demony - "Hey, Buffster. This? Just a hickey. You know what it's like when two crazy kids get to necking," he said with a lazy stretch and grin.

"She knows we're intimate, you git," Spike grumbled. Not like that sort of thing doesn't go on all the time." Xander flexed and Spike let himself be pushed, looking down at a wide-open eye and a
mouth that was moving, but making no sounds. At least, not for a few seconds.

"Buffy let you bite her? You bit Buffy? Are you kidding?"

"Well, course she did! Vampire lover an' all..." Spike said. Xander whapped him. "Oh all right. No. She wouldn't let me. Said it gave her the creeps after Drac, that bastard. Ruined it for me, didn't he? Could have had Slayer's blood as an aperitif... Amazing aphrodisiac, that..." Xander whapped him again and Spike growled.

Xander's brain dashed ahead to This is your vampire. This is your vampire on an aphrodisiac' but before it reached any questions? it didn't have any blood left to think with and Xander stared at the ceiling, dazed. "Unless you're planning on asking Buffy to spare a few drops of Slayer-style Spanish fly to give me the jollies. Then it's okay. Actually - do you think she would? Is it still good if it's in a cup? Can you bleed into a cup?"
"Hey!" Spike whapped back, making Xander blink. "Pay attention, pet. Tryin' to seduce you, here. And no, I don't want any bleedin'...blood in a cup."

"Because talking about the most recent ex is such a great seduction technique." Xander tried for serious but somewhere along the way it turned into teasing - and the teasing turned into kissing and Xander dropped his head. "Okay - seduction technique highly successful."

"Mmm...more like it." Spike bent all his concentration to kissing - felt the buzz of the blood going through Xander and Xander's own blood like warm honey and whiskey. Kissed with deliberate slowness and thoroughness until Xander was making a small, needy sound down in his throat and writhing helplessly under Spike. Then a thought occurred and Spike pulled abruptly back.

"You're not... I mean, when the Slayer's here -"

"Yeah, not, right, but... You're not expectin' me to - us to - not... *fuck*. Are you?"

Xander lifted his eye. Then his eyebrows. Everything else was already lifted. He looked down their joined bodies with a snort. "That'd be a *no*. If delicate Slayer sensibilities can't handle manly fucking going on down the hall, she can sleep in the guest house. I may be a *little* insecure about having the Buffster's talents in the house, but I am *not* made of steel."

Spike stared down at Xander - rooted under a pillow and came up with lube. He pushed the blankets back and sat up - straddled Xander and made a show of squeezing out some lube - using it - and then, excruciatingly slowly, impaling himself on Xander's cock. He had one hand on Xander's chest, the other on Xander's thigh, and he never once let his gaze waver from Xander's.

"There is nothing... absolutely *nothing*... that I did with the Slayer... that compares to *this*, love. Nothing. You... make every thing we do... every kiss and every touch... *perfect*. Perfect, love... Never
doubt me." And all of that in the link - hard as he could while he flexed and lifted and fell, languorous and calculated and...perfect.

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Nothing like waking from a postnap, postsex nap with a nose full of vampire throat, electric blanket-warmed hands on his back and Texas-sized hickeys that said Spike was here! And here. And here. And over there too. The gears of thought and speech made a creaky, mumbled start. "What time is it?"

"Uh?" Spike just burrowed deeper and Xander struggled into a half-sitting position, squinting in the gloom toward the bedroom clock. Not a nice, easy-to-read digital, like he'd wanted, but something that had to be wound. With a key. Wesley had approved and Spike had approved and Xander had pouted. The dice seemed fascinated by the ticking and the little pendulum that swung inside the case. As a matter of fact... Yup. A crouched and hypnotized douse obscured the clock-face. Great. Looks dark
outside. Fuck - Buffy!

"Wake up." Xander jabbed at Spike.

"Fuck off."

"No. Come on, Spike! Wake up. Buffy's late." Xander squirmed, even got his knees under him before he was arrested and pinned by a lazy vampire-strong arm.

"She's the Slayer. Can take care of herself."

"She could've run into trouble."

Spike snorted, rolled them both over and buried his nose determinedly in Xander's throat, nibbling at a half-healed bite. "How much trouble could there be?"

Xander caught Spike's hair, a big handful and pulled - until Spike came away from his neck with a soft sucking sound that made him shiver. "Okay, first? That's really dirty pool. And second? The Slayer."
Here. East Coast demon central?"

Spike growled, but there was more *worry* than want coming from Xander so the growl petered out into a sigh and he reluctantly levered himself upright - grabbed Xander and hauled him across the half-acre of king-sized bed-Nest. They both slid off and upright and Spike dragged his hands through his hair, feeling the wild disorder of strands that had been washed and then slept in. "Fuck," he muttered, and stumbled toward the bathroom. Xander was yanking open drawers and tossing clothes at the Nest and Spike leaned against the sink and groped for a can of mousse - started to palm it through his hair, making tufts and spikes in the moon-pale strands. He'd had Xander clip all the black tips off a week before.


Xander appeared, tugging a thermal that had once been dark green over his head, heavy dark rust sweater dangling from his other hand, voice
muffled until his head popped through. "That's a bet you would so win." He dropped the sweater on the counter and grabbed an elastic, scooping hair back from his face and banding it messily at his nape. He looked at himself in the mirror, wild stray hairs poking out all over - then turned to Spike, neat tufts like icefire all over his head. "And how do you do that without a mirror?"

"Got about a hundred and thirty years practice, pet. But I didn't start using a pomade until..." Spike snapped his jaw shut and stalked out, going for his own clothes and ignoring Xander's snickers. "Beats lookin' like I been dragged backwards through a privet hedge!" He rifled a drawer - yanked on black jeans and black tee and then a thick, pewter-grey sweater - went to put on his boots by the fire. He would warm himself and then trap the heat under his duster - it would linger for nearly an hour. "Didn't hear the phone - think she called?"

Xander snickered around his toothbrush, spat, rinsed and trailed Spike into the bedroom, tugging on his sweater. "Wes would have insisted on one of
us taking the call."

"Dunno, pet. He might be all wrapped up in Charlie-boy by now."

"Wes is never too wrapped up to answer the phone." Xander dropped into a crouch behind Spike, slipped his arms around his waist and rested his cheek against sticky-damp tufts that still smelled like alcohol and anonymous floral scent.

"Charlie might change that," Spike said and then paused a moment, thinking about that. Gunn might actually do that - he was different, he was older, he was...something else entirely. He was what Wes needed but didn't have here, that much Spike knew. Needed as much as Wes needed him and Xander. And now he's got him...hope he can keep him...don't wanna screw this up. Spike contemplated all the myriad ways he himself could screw it up - from jealousy to trying to move Gunn along too fast. Take it slow. Let Gunn lead...let Wes tell us...what he wants. Whatever he wants...
"And that is in no way your worried face," Xander said, rubbing his cheek against Spike's, grinning when Spike snorted his derision but worry fluttered through the link, a reluctant thing. "Gunn might. I mean - I guess he might. Or he might answer the phone instead, the way he's always riding our asses about not answering the phone." Xander leaned back and tugged Spike with him, working his hands under his sweater and holding, skin to skin. "It'll be fine. They'll be fine. We'll be fine. And Buffy will be frozen solid and do you wanna bring a cranky Slayer home? I don't think so."

"Not like she won't find something to be cranky about," Spike muttered, but he relaxed into Xander's hold - breathed in his heady scent for a moment. And then they stood up, synchronized through the link, Spike reaching for his Duster and Xander loading wallet and keys into his pockets, hunting for his pocket knife - missing again - while Spike got his cigarettes off the mantle and found his lighter. "Best get a move-on then, love. Shall we pop in on Wes and Gunn or leave them to their own devices?" he added, lift of lip and eyebrow that
made Xander grin.

"If there are any wet sucking sounds coming out of that room, I am not walking in on them." Xander gave up on the knife and stuffed his cell phone into his pocket. He bussied Spike's cheek on the way past, striding down the hall.

"Probably sitting in the kitchen having cakes and tea with the bloody dice."

"Do I hear my vampire making another sucker bet?" Xander turned, walked backward, grinned wide and easy, the worry mutating into nervous energy now they were on the move.

"You said 'sucker'" Spike said, in his best Beavis voice and Xander snorted, stumbling over his own boots and turning around to walk forward again - not even glancing at the guest-room door as they went past and down the stairs. Hesitating only for a moment outside of the sitting room door - - both doors were closed.
"So - where do we start? No messages on our phones - no pounding on the door from Wes with a message... Maybe she's out walking?"

"It's probably ten below, pet. I doubt it - don't think Chanel makes all-weather gear and you know she'd never sully her ensemble with a big down coat. What?" Spike added, as Xander laughed again, this time slightly hysterical giggles as they went through the kitchen and mud-room to the back door.

"Buffy did get messy on patrol, Spike. She complained about it but a little mud never killed the Slayer. It only made her mad." He shrugged into his coat. Big and brown and lined with fleece. "Seriously - you did not wanna be the guy getting mud on her Jimmy Choos or whatever." He checked his phone again and squinted into the night. Snowing again and blowing at a sharp slant. "Let's check the shop."

They scurried, heads bowed, from back door to carriage house and got into the cold truck. Spike huddled on the icy leather while Xander started the
engine and revved it gently, letting it run for a couple of minutes before he put it in gear and hit the button on the remote for the door. They rolled out into the slanting curtain of white-on-white, each street-light and headlight surrounded by a dazzling corona, the black of the streets obscured here and there by a thin scrim of snow. Xander drove slow and steady - already at ease with winter driving - humming tunelessly under his breath.

Spike fiddled with the heater - got a CD playing - and stared out the windows, half-expecting to see the Slayer striding along; luggage at heel like a good leather dog and dust on her hands.

"I don't see her. I don't see anything -"

"Wait - look there -" Spike said. He popped open the door and climbed out - trotted across the street. Yup - blood. Demon blood by the pepper-sulfur smell. A smear of it, a spatter and then a puddle. And a faded wisp of Armani Sensi. All saying one thing. The Slayer was here.
Xander glanced down the abandoned street and eased the truck over to the sidewalk, rolling down the window and leaning out - squinting against the snow with a shiver. Buffy may have been the Slayer. And she may have won against whichever nasty met up with her but he didn't like the idea of her out in this kind of cold. "Too late for footprints. Can you follow the scent?"

"Oh, yeah," Spike said, flashing for a moment on scents and following and what was probably the only moment of his and Buffy's utterly doomed 'romance' that had actually been...nice. Christ. Maybe I need to get drunk. He walked, the snow creaking underfoot, uttering the occasional muttered curse as hidden patches of ice made him slip and slide. The truck rumbled quietly along beside him, the window down and Xander's Johnny Cash CD playing softly. A block north - turn here - alley, open lot, half a block east...

"It's a bar," Xander said, leaning out of the truck window and Spike grinned.
"That's my girl."

Xander snorted, switched off the truck and scrambled out after Spike, taking in the purple and blue-lit neon sign of 'T e Fr g And Fl gon ', whatever that was supposed to be. A pair of Skovish demons were staggering out, laughing and snuffling loudly to each other in their own language. Xander watched them heave open a manhole cover and drop down into the sewers. "Okay so the plan is we rescue Buffy from the bar, or the bar from Buffy?"

"Oh, probably a little of both." Spike lit a cigarette - pulled open the door and sauntered in, Xander at his side. Things seemed...normal. Pall of smoke hanging overhead, nearly touching some of the taller demon's heads or horns or...whatever. The sweet crack of pool-ball into pool-ball. Early seventies hillbilly rock on the juke-box, some sort of fruit-machine dinging and blinking in the corner. But no Slayer, despite the thread of 'Sensi' that still tickled Spike's nose.

"To Buffy!"
"To Buffy!" ragged chorus of growling, lisping, demonic voices.

"To me!"

"Nope, she's still here."

"Xander! Spike!"

The crowd parted like the Red Sea in that old Charlton Heston movie and Buffy bounced through it, hair muddy and wet, cheeks flushed, a drying stain on her blue jeans and a grin on her face. She threw herself at them. "I went to your address but nobody was there and then there was this little G'ggktch being beaten up by a bunch of Doresh and I kicked their sorry butts!"

"Buff! Buff! Still human!" Xander croaked, creaked and that was so not a good sound for ribs to make and then she was letting go, backing away and squinting, frowning - squinched up her eyes and stood on tip toe, peering at Xander's face.
At his soc -

"You tattooed it!"

Oh.

"You tattooed it! And you stopped wearing the patch. And - huh. That's kinda...sexy." She whirled, grabbing their hands and pulling like a drunken blonde tugboat toward the crowd of demons.

"Hey, guys! Meet my friends!"

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"Okay, man," Gunn said, full of liquid courage and putting his beer bottle on the hearth. He was feeling warm and happy and buzzed. Also hungry. "Dazzle me with your control. Lemme see you dial that phone and not order sushi."

"You'd be amazed at my control," Wesley said and
they both - **blinking**. Wesley felt the blush heat his face and he opened his cell and dialed the number off the menu. 'Authentic Northern Italian Cuisine' which was debatable, but the food was *good* and filling, and the portions huge so there would be some for Xander and Spike, if they wanted. Xander's truck had rumbled out of the carriage house a half-hour ago or more - presumably in search of Buffy. Wesley...really hadn't thought about it.

"Man. Didn't know you *could* blush like that anymore." Gunn brushed the backs of his knuckles over Wes' cheekbone - kinda scratchy and warm until Wes jumped - dropped his phone in his lap and fumbled it onto the side table. "It's...fetching."

Wesley felt the blush *flare* and pretended not to hear Charles' laughter. It was...*strange* being touched like that. By Charles. As strange as it was natural and Wesley wasn't prepared to examine that deeply. "I reserve it for special occasions."

"I'm a special occasion now?" Charles sat back, puffed out - and grinned, head cocked at an angle
that was impossible not to kiss.

And Wesley's restraint was no longer what it once was even if he could feel his lips tingling - chapping from too many kisses already. "Yes. I'm afraid there's no champagne but there is a nice sauvignon blanc."

"I'm pretty good with this Old Spotted Rooster stuff," Gunn said, and then he leaned in and kissed Wesley right back. The kissing, yeah that was the easy part. Getting easier every damn time.

Wesley was absurdly grateful for the privacy of the empty house. Because he and Charles were...necking. Making out like teenagers, their chairs pulled up knee-brush close in front of the fire. Wesley's whole body tingled gently and every touch - every look - from Charles was an overload of affection and amusement and quiet lust. And we're both still fully dressed. Spike would despair. Thank god they had to run out and get Buffy... He loved Spike - loved Xander. But this time alone with Charles - just reaffirming their friendship and
discovering...something else...was precious to him.

"Spike won't be pleased if we drink it all up," Wesley said a little breathlessly, and Charles just laughed.

"Yeah," Gunn breathed into the kiss, got a hand behind Wesley's neck and rubbed, thumb and knuckle rolling against Wesley's muscles until he moaned and dropped his head to one broad shoulder, heavy weight, _good_ weight. "'Cause I care about pleasin' Blondie Bear right now."

"He can be very...tenacious," Wesley said, and Charles' fingers worked up through his hair and then back down again. Wesley's own hands were sunk into Charles' sweater, fingertips finding warm, satiny skin over Charles' waist.

"He'll live. 'Sides, he went through my desk and stole my damn jawbreakers plenty of times. Payback's a bitch."

Wesley closed his eyes and passed a hand over
them with a muffled groan.

"What's wrong?"

"I saw the rest of my life flash before my eyes. It involves mediating the great Twinkies heist of aught seven." He peeked between his fingers.

"There's Twinkies?"

"Xander lives here. Of course there's Twinkies. And HoHos and something called...Swiss Cake Rolls that, rest assured, have never set foot on Swiss soil." Charles was looking pleased and Wesley shook his head. Another one. I knew about the jawbreakers...what else did he hide in that desk? "When Xander discovers the empty boxes Spike blames the dice, of course."

"Yeah, well I still haven't seen these mythical pink fluffballs, so if you ask me that's a pretty cheap excuse." Gunn sat back in his chair but didn't let go of Wesley's fingers; kept them twined with his, warm and dry. Soft. He remembered when their
hands had had the kind of hard calluses that came from swinging weapons, not slinging paperwork.

"Oh, just you wait. They're very smart. They know exactly what a ringing doorbell means."

"Yeah? What's it mean?"

"It means dinner is served," Wesley chuckled, and Charles shook his head, lips pursed in mock disapproval.

"You know if you feed them, they never go away."

"Yes, I've heard that. I suppose that's what happened to Xander," Wesley added, joking, and Charles snorted softly and reached down for his Old Speckled - drained the last half-inch.

"Never feed a vamp - I'll keep that in mind."

The doorbell rang and Wesley held out a hand before Charles could struggle to his feet. "Wait. Listen."
Gunn waited - hand on his cane - hand on the crazy English guy's bonyass knee and first there was a pat and a taptap - and a clatter from the kitchen. And a bounding patter like rain and - "What the fuck?"

Wesley pointed at the staircase.

And a dozen pairs of limpid black eyes blinked back at them, twenty four sets of whiskers quivered at them. And eleven tails shivered in anticipation, the twelfth clutched and wrung between eager paws.

"Shit. It's like that scene from Jurassic Park. And you feed them?"

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"And then I kicked, like this - and punched, one two uppercut, don't drop your shoulder, Buffy and then - and then another kick -" Buffy wobbled - flailed - and fell back into Xander's waiting arms as the crowd of demons, half-demons and humans
laughed and applauded, lifting drinks in salute. "And that's how I killed a Mmresch demon in Sicily!"

"That's great, Buff - really cool - why don't we sit down?"

"Oh, sitting's good. My feet hurt. Oooh, a drink!" Buffy sprawled down into the booth and Xander slid in after her, pinning her in the corner. Buffy grabbed Spike's shot and lifted it - pouted when Spike plucked it deftly from her hand and tossed it back himself.

"No fair! Finders keepers!"

"It was mine. And you've had enough, Slayer." Spike seemed immune to The Pout, but Xander found himself reaching out and patting Buffy's shoulder.

"One more Appletini and then we're gonna go home, okay?"

"But Xaaaan! I'm gonna miss all my new best friends!"
"They come here all the time and you can come back." Xander turned, addressed the assembled demon chapter of Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Fanclub and how weird was that? "Can she come back?"

A Horrth raised its flagon in a tentacle and burbled assent.

"To Buffy!" The rest of the demons echoed.

"For you? Drinks on the house, sweetie." The half-Brachen barmaid set an Appletini down for Buffy and pushed at the Horrth. "You give her room!"

The Horrth burbled and waved a tentacle.

"They're not givin' her room!"

"They're my family," Buffy announced - enunciated - and sloshed her drink. "Like brothers." She smiled at Xander and at Spike before her expression crumpled into confusion. "And they're my - my..."
"They're your bleedin' devoted acolytes, all clamorin' to worship at your little kicky feet. You're not gonna *puke*, are you Slayer?" Spike leaned as far back from Buffy as possible as she made a sort of choking noise, her shoulders heaving.

"Buff? You okay?"

"My acolytes," Buffy moaned - lifted a tear-streaked face to Xander's concerned one. "My *family*. It's *good* to have family."

"Oh, yeah, *so* time to go home. Spike, you wanna go start the truck, get it warming up?" Xander dug the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Spike.

"You have a *truck*? Is it a big truck? I bet it's a big truck," Buffy said, apples and spice and everything nice - okay, apples and spice and everything lightly pickled. "It's icy out there," she said with big, serious eyes and the pout he fell in love with when he was sixteen.
"It's icy but I have a great big truck and a guy with vampire reflexes to drive it."

Buffy stuck a finger into the center of Xander's chest, reminding him way too much of Cave Buffy. 'Appletinis bad!'

"Spike's a bad driver."

"No, Spike's a good driver. A good vampire and a good driver -"

"Hey! Can we cut the 'good' shite out? I'm not good! I'm bad to the bone, Slayer, and don't you forget."

Spike scowled down at them, Xander's keys jingling in an agitated hand and Xander stifled the giggle that threatened.

"Oooh, you're right, you're bad...you're real bad..." Buffy slumped lower, her head sagging gently down. "Ama - hic - Amadeus said you were bad...tole me all about you an' Angel and those...chains..."
"Amadeus? Is that what the Immortal Wanker's callin' himself these days?"

"Chains?" Xander grinned, and pulled Buffy upright.

"Like a - like a couple of slabs of beef...cake." Buffy giggled into Xander's shoulder. "And no shirts."

"Storytime!" Xander singsonged, and Spike growled.

"Slayer, you are so. Dead."

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley stacked the last glass in the dishwasher - things left over from Xander and Spike's mid-afternoon dinner as well as his and Charles' things - and turned to the sink to wash his hands. And stopped. Charles was standing very, very still while a douse sniffed his trouser leg thoroughly then moved on to the scarred, dark wood of Charles' cane.
"It's not gonna bite me, is it?" Gunn asked - low and careful and not because he was gonna scream like a big girly-girl if that little pink sucker tried any fast and fancy footwork up his pants leg.

"Oh, no. Not at all. Not unless you want to hurt it. They're empathic, if you recall, so just think - friendly thoughts." Wesley dried his hands and frowned, sure he'd put his watch on the sill above the sink.

"Yeah. Right. Friendly. Hey, little rodent. Little pink vermin," Gunn sing-songed. "How 'bout you scamper off and -" The douse stood on its hind legs and Gunn took a step back. Bite-sized evil sized him up and then it dropped to all fours and hopped over to Wesley - swarmed up his leg and poked its nose into his shirt-collar.

"Jesus, Wes!"

"Charles, really - we had a dozen with us for dinner -"
"Yeah, all down at your end of the table." Charles looked skeptical and Wesley smiled - reached up and coaxed the douse onto his palm.

"Just get a sugar cube out of the bowl there, would you? Hold your palm flat -" Charles stood there, palm held out, and Wesley let the douse hop from his hand. It sat in Charles' palm for a moment, sniffing, and then it picked the sugar cube up and started to nibble, whiskers flicking and tail whisking.

Kinda tickled. Looked about as threatening as a wind-up toy. "Okay. So maybe they ain't all that bad."

The douse gave him a reproachful look and held up the sugar cube in both paws.

"I think it's offering to share." Wesley turned back to the sink, hiding a grin. "It wouldn't want the entire community slandered now.

Gunn made a face and held the douse carefully
away in case it decided to try for a sugary free-throw into his mouth. "Hey now. You nibble nibble nibbled it and it's yours. I don't wanna swap spit with demonic ver- uh, rodents."

Liquid back eyes narrowed.

"Not that I don't appreciate the offer!"

Wesley watched covertly, rinsing his hands as the douse opened its mouth wide - exposing the long, sharp teeth - and shoved the sugar cube in, making its cheek bulge. Then it turned and leapt onto the counter, ran lightly to the end and dove off onto the floor, running for the attic or any other of several bolt holes they hadn't yet found.

"That was close," Gunn muttered, brushing his hands together, trying to brush off the sugary stickiness it had left behind with its paws. Douse cooties - Jesus. He shouldered in next to Wesley to wash his own hands.

"So when do you think the Gruesome Twosome and
Buffy're gonna be here?"

"Oh, if I know them, not until well after midnight and really -" Wesley yawned, hand to his mouth. "Really, I need to sleep. The shop opens at eight and I need to be there early to let in a supplier. Are you -?"

"Exhausted, English. Need a shower and a soft bed."

"I believe I can provide both of those."

Gunn's stomach did that flipping over thing again, nervous energy shooting up into his chest and down into his balls, light headed and kinda scared - bomb deactivating scared. He lifted a hand, brought it down between Wes' shoulder blades and held his breath in that weird slowed-down time waiting to see if he got it right. Then Wes leaned back into the touch and everything started up again a-okay. "Need a warm body for the bed, too. Think you can provide that?"

Slow as each heartbeat came, Wesley felt one skip.
"I think I can come up with something."

"Yeah?"

Out the corner of his eye, Wesley saw a team of three dice hoist the sugar bowl between them and run, paws pattering in close formation. He hadn't liked that sugar bowl anyway and he had much - oh - much better things to occupy himself with. He hadn't *quite* memorized the exact shape and texture of Charles' lips.

Yet.

"Yes," he said belatedly.

~*~*~*~*~

They had enough bathrooms - and big enough water heaters - plural - that Wesley was able to shower in the master bath at the same time Charles was in the bath attached to his room. Standing in the steam afterward, brushing his teeth, Wesley felt
a little shiver of tension - anticipation - twist in his belly. Charles was...so different. Or - not different, but - so surprising. And now - sharing a room - a bed... Wesley shook his head once, sharply. Pulled on a pair of pajama pants and hesitated over the shirt.

_Courage, man_, he thought, and lay the shirt back down. Pulled his robe on and pushed his feet into his slippers - put his glasses on and walked quickly to Charles' room. He could hear a pleasant humming - an operetta he didn't recognize - and he knocked softly.

"Call me crazy but it ain't locked," Charles called in between verses and Wesley pushed the door open, laughing when he found two dice swaying back and forth to the music on the bed.

"Charles, do you have dice in the bathroom too?"

"Nah. I chased 'em out. They still out there?"

"I'm afraid so." Wesley sat on the bed and ran a
fingertip down the back of one, from between the ears to its tail until it started shivering happily. "They *are* harmless. You didn't have to kick them out."

"Man, they *stare*. And they were *eating* the *soap*."

On cue, a douse hiccupped and a soap bubble floated away. "You shouldn't have done that," Wesley told it.

The douse stuck out a frothy tongue and scrubbed at it with his paws.

"They ate half the bar. Which is too bad 'cause that stuff smells really good...for froofy girly soap." Charles walked out of the bathroom in flannel pajama pants, a towel around his neck. Wesley smiled slowly - shooed the dice, who slithered off the bed and scampered away.

"Your fire needs a little more wood," Wesley said, trying not to *stare* - trying not to make Charles feel...awkward. But the man was... *Lovely*. 
He's...lovely. Still...perfect. Trying not to make himself feel awkward.

"Fire's the only thing." Gunn said - smirked, givin' Wes the once-over. Hot water and warm kisses and a quick and soapy hand job made the world a more secure place. And Wes looked - fine.

Wesley drew his robe quickly around himself, laughing. "I promised to take it slow but I'm only human. Here. Let me. If you add more wood when the fire is this low, you'll wake up with the embers still burning. It's much more pleasant." Three logs joined the others, flames licking at the dry bark.

"I don't mind lookin', English. Or touching. Looking and touching are good things. Wouldn't mind doin' more of both."

"I don't want to make you feel...uncomfortable. Rushed."

"I look rushed to you?"
Wesley smiled, turned - stared. "You look -"

"Yeah?" Gunn felt a big goofy grin coming on. The look in Wes' eyes was next door to worshipful and damn - felt pretty good.

"You look naked," Wesley admitted through a throat too dry for more.

"It's how I sleep. Hate gettin' all twisted up in pajamas."

"Yes, I - I feel the same," Wesley said faintly, and then he blinked - shook his head. Take. Off. Your. Robe. He slipped his robe off his shoulders - draped it over the curved footboard of the sleigh bed. Shook his slippers off and then undid the drawstring of his pants - slipped them down. Bending to free his foot he saw the ugly, twisted scars of Charles' injury - the misshapen knee and the further scars from surgery. It looked slightly swollen and Wesley longed to comfort him - help him, somehow.

Gunn followed Wes' look to his knee - what was left
of it. Yeah - okay, so not all of him was the fine specimen it once was. "Not so pretty, huh?"

"It's not - It isn't anything to be ashamed of, Charles. You...you look so -" Wesley took a slow step forward - another - and then Charles hand came up and cupped his cheek - his other hand fitted itself around Wesley's waist and tugged, lightly. The look in his eyes was one of... Want. Desire and...want and...oh, something... Wesley inhaled the lingering clean Christmas spice of Charles' cologne on his skin, overlaid with the orange-cinnamon-honey of the soap

"Wes -" Charles murmured, and Wesley *shivered* - shivered again and *changed* - helpless. Wanting so much - so hard - and the demon wanted in the way that Spike did. Selfish and possessive - a covetous want. Charles' eyes went wide and Wesley closed his, feeling...

*Oh fuck, English.* Gunn's stomach lurched, surprise and -
"I'm sorry, Charles, I -"

_Protectiveness_. "Ain't nothin' to be sorry about, English. Just let me look. Don't hide it from me - man, it's what's keepin' you _alive._"

Wesley took a deep breath - opened his eyes. "I'd...like that." He saw his reflection in Charles' eyes - tiny demon, crest of opalescent spines shivering under the brush of dark fingertips, shiver that skittered down his spine and made him arch and close his eyes.

"Jesus." Gunn watched black eyes close - black like sharks and fishes are black but with way more _light_ than any kind of shark he knew. Felt the bend and bow of spines the color of pearl inlay and skin smooth and thick like the dolphins at Sea World but _warm_. Freaky - and kinda beautiful too. "_Damn,_ English."

Rough fingertips traced his collarbones, floated over his chest and Wesley caught his breath. "What do you think?"
"Think you'd make a great pair of pants."

Wesley's eyes snapped open. "Excuse me?" Charles' hand was large and warm against his back and strong, holding him there - kissing and tasting, loving and falling back with laughter when Wesley fought an arm free and hit him, demon falling away before human offense. "Pants?"

"Like eelskin, man. Smooth. Soft." Gunn cupped his palm over a stubbled cheek that wasn't soft anymore - scratchy and familiar. "Nice."

"Nice enough for trousers," Wes grumbled, and Gunn laughed softly.

"Or a really nice wallet," Gunn teased, and Wes cracked a smile - pushed into his touch just a little. From - somewhere - a thread of sub-zero air curled around Gunn's ankles and he shivered. "Okay - damn. My feet are freezing already. I think it's time to get under the covers." Said with a bravado he - almost - felt. Because he was a little - nervous. He'd
seen Xander and Spike - hell, Spike practically made a point of being seen - and despite it being...them...he'd gotten a shiver of arousal and curiosity, thinking about him and Wes...like that. Hell, he'd whacked off in the shower like a damn seventeen-year-old thinkin' about him and Wes like that. But - thinking about sex - man sex - was totally different from having it. Totally unknown territory and he hoped to fucking god Wes really was okay with going slow.

Wesley wrapped Charles' fingers in his, marveling at how cold human skin felt now. He tugged. "I could sweep you into my arms and carry you like a bride."

"No offense man, but -"

"Joking," Wesley said and tugged sharply - caught Charles when he stumbled and bit his lip. "Joking."

"Wes -" And damn how did it go? Man, you are doin' things to me I never expected a guy to do. And as much as I really want you to do 'em, I'm so scared I'd be shakin' in my boots if I wasn't barefoot
and fuckin' freezing. He licked his lips.

"Charles - get. In. The. Bed. Before you freeze. All right?" Wesley stared at Charles who finally nodded and slid under the pile of flannel and wool and eiderdown, making a small sound of satisfaction as he discovered -

"There's an electric blanket under here!"

"On every bed, in every Nest. Spike insisted. He seems to have a fetish -"

"So don't want to hear 'Spike' and 'fetish' in the same sentence, man. Not right now." Wesley grinned and slipped under the covers as well - lay on his side, cheek propped on his fist.

"I promise not to discus the sexual proclivities of the 'Gruesome Twosome' if you promise..."

"Promise what, Wes?"

"That - that you'll..." Wesley took a deep breath -
looked up at Charles and took the chance. "Charles, I want you to stay. Here. In this house, in this - this city. Stay with - me. Will you?"

~*~*~*~*~

'Stay with - me. Will you?'

"So the Buffster's as snug as a really drunk bug in a -"

Spike's hand came up sharply and Xander stopped talking and raised an eyebrow - watched Spike with his ear pressed to the guest bedroom door. When Spike straightened he radiated smug satisfaction - and a heady surge of wantwantwant.

He took a step forward.

Xander took a step back.

"Git. I almost missed the most important part."
"And which part would that be?" Xander ran out of back and hit the wall with a thump, Spike's palms smacking the wall to either side of his head.

"Part where Charlie-boy," Spike's mouth made the journey from collarbone to jaw, nipped like a little electric spark that made Xander weak in the knees, "said he'd stay."

"Said he'd - ah ha! I knew it!" Xander tried to wriggle free of Spike to do his 'Superiority Dance' (non-churchy), but Spike had him pinned a bit too efficiently to the wall. Pinned and held and...oh, yeah... "Damn - yeah, right - Spike! Oh, fuck!"

"Yeah, Xan..." Spike nibbled a little harder and then growled in irritation when Xander's hand pulled his hair hard enough to hurt. "What?"

"We are not doing this right outside of their door! And right down the hall from Buffy! It's rude."

"You only wanna go in our room 'cause you know I can make you scream," Spike husked, rolling his
hips against Xander's and running his hands up under the layers of clothes, finding sensitive spots and tweaking.

"Yes! No! I mean - stop it! Our room. Now. I'll - ummm....do something extra-special?"

Spike cocked his head to one side, looking at Xander who looked back, eye half-closed and hair mussed - ripe for anything. "You will, will you, pet? Like what, then?"

"I'll be your captive audience. And ah - ah okay - the neck is cheating." Cheating tingles of goodness that left him weak in the knees - weak in the fingers that had no will to pull him away and okay weak in pretty much everything but his dick which really, really liked the plan. Which meant he needed a plan. An offer. A thing. A pair of handcuffs in the top drawer waiting for a special occasion and -

Lesser Xander voted an enthusiastic and shuddering yes.
"Really captive," Xander offered.

"Ooh, captive. My kidnapped harem boy..." Spike put a last, nibbling kiss into the juncture of neck and shoulder and then scooped Xander up and over his shoulder - strode down the hall to their room and pushed open the door - dropped Xander onto the Nest with an ooof of expelled breath and got to work on his boots. "Kit off, love," he said, when Xander just lay there for a stunned moment.

"Well, that's romantic," Xander muttered, struggling with his sweater, and Spike tossed a boot across the room - attacked the other.

"Fuck romance, Xander - wanna see you stretched out and tied down. Every. Inch. Mine."

"Jesus, Spike." Numb fingers and button flies - not mixy. Not mixy at all and - hunger want fuck now clawed through him like electric fingers. Xander closed his eye, pressed the heel of his hand against his cock and took a deep breath. "There's gonna be fewer inches of me available really fast."
And eye closed? *Bad* because with his eye closed, he *felt*. Every word. "Could tie that up too, pet. Lash your cock and balls tight, make 'em hurt. Make you wait." Double thump as Spike's own boots joined Xander's against the wall.

"So not helping." Quick, burning breath and Xander pulled it in, pulled it together. *Principal Snyder in a Speedo*. Oh yeah. The old stand-bys never failed. He was doubled over, fumbling with a sock when he felt the mattress dip behind him.

The pale-gold curve of Xander's neck was too pretty to ignore and Spike bent over Xander, brushing the silken hair to the side - tracing muscle and bone with his tongue. "God, love...want to taste every bit of you - bite you, suck you...make you scream for me..."

Xander's breath hitched - the link *surged* with desire and Spike slithered backwards, yanking open a night-table drawer and dragging out - things. Laying them on the pillow for Xander to see.
Cuffs.

Long, thin cords of braided leather.

Lube.

Want want want and Spike watched Xander toss the socks away - stand up and push clumsily at his jeans. "So fucking beautiful, Xan..."

"Yeah?"

Warmth from the fireplace and Spike's words crawled over and through his skin, through stretched muscles and he reached for the ceiling with a groan, everything tingling.

"Where're you gonna start?" He could feel Spike's eyes on him and turned - froze and watched Spike's hand touch his knee, gnarled twist of scar tissue that marked the bottom of the wildebeest scar and traced it up, hair shivering upright in its wake.
Spike tugged and Xander crawled onto the bed-Nest - folded to his knees on the pillows. Velvet under the left - something shiny under the right - and silky rough brocade beneath his balls, between his thighs. Scratch and silk and - *thump* from Buffy's room making him jump. "Spike -"

"Gonna start here..." Spike murmured - ignoring the noise, ignoring the little flinch it drew from Xander. Leaned forward and pressed his lips to Xander's - kissed him slow and steady and *hard* - bending him back and back until he was lying down, knees still under him, back arching and hands gripping Spike's shoulders.

Spike brought his own hands up - ran them along Xander's and tugged them down and away - grinned into Xander's mouth when the chill and silvery *click* of the cuffs made him jump.

"But first I'm just gonna make sure you don't go anywhere." A few twists of a leather cord and Xander's hands were immobilized above his head and Spike was sitting back and running fingertips
over the taut lines of Xander's ribs, thighs and belly.

"Not going anywhere," Xander promised - even if the handcuffs weren't biting into his wrists - even if he wasn't hard enough to pound nails -

Xander thought about that and winced. There would be no pounding of nails. Pounding of vampire? Yes, yes, yes! Especially if he didn't stop - "Teasing. You're teasing." With feather-light brushes of cool fingertips - over his belly and down his hips, legs and ribs - arms and - Jesus! Fingers through nipple rings that had a direct line to his cock and in hindsight, jerking against Spike's hold was not the smart guy choice.

"Just getting you warmed up, pet," Spike said. He squirmed out of his own clothing in moments. Leaned down to smooth his tongue over Xander's nipples - this one, then that one, lapping like a cat, riding the heave of rib and muscles as Xander took in a hard breath. Distracting him so Spike could reach out - find another cord - bring it down between tense, splayed thighs. With his feet tucked
under his haunches, Xander's back was arched - buttocks off the surface of the Nest and Spike liked that. He drew the cord down - around and around - up. Binding neatly and quickly and finishing with a slow stroke of his hand up Xander's cock.

"Now we can take all night." Spike slipped one hand under Xander - lifting him a little more as he moved his mouth slowly down, from nipples to navel to the dark, swollen head of his cock.

"Maybe I'll start here instead."

"Maybe -" Xander heard the breathless squeak, breathless moan under the word and cleared his throat. His thighs were shaking with the strain of the position and he couldn't see Spike anymore. Only the curve and wing of a pale shoulder blade. His mind supplied the rest - wicked blue eyes, wide, wet shining trail left behind the stroke of his tongue where the air felt cold.

Spike rose into view. "Maybe?"
Xander licked his lips and bit back a groan. "Maybe I'll ask for a gag next time." Slow up down slide of fingers tight around his cock, tug of leather ties and slow burn of stretched muscles. Fire warmth and draft cold air and - Want to see... "Is the camera in here?"

"Mmm - good idea, pet." Spike slid up and away - walked to the wide desk that sat in one corner and lifted the digital camera from its place - clicked it on. Another thump from down the hall - what in hell was the Slayer doing? - and he turned back to Xander and just looked.

Feasted with his eyes.

The curves and dips of Xander's torso sheathed in cream-gold skin that flushed rose at chest and groin, the black cord stark against blood-heated flesh. Fan of mink-brown hair over the pillows - over his shoulders - fleece of it, thin and silken, from navel to the root of his cock. His mouth open and wet and swollen. Pretty enough to eat.
Spike took pictures from this side - that side - working around the massive, four-poster frame this Nest was constructed on. He curled down next to Xander to show him the pictures, mouthing the coiling lines of his tattoos.

"That one is so-oh!" Xander clenched his teeth - bit back the moan in his throat - in his throat and under Spike's lips and teeth, biting and mouthing color into the woven leaves around his collarbones. "So my Christmas card picture." He turned his face, rubbed against Spike, tufted hair prickling at his cheek, sticking. "With a bow."

"Don't tempt me, pet, I'll do it," Spike said - pushed the camera under a pillow and started to kiss in earnest - kiss, lick, suck. Starting at Xander's mouth, moving slowly down. Hands on shoulders, ribs - thighs. Feeling the quivering strain of the muscles there and gently helping him unfold his legs. Spike rubbed the long muscles, digging his fingertips in as he sucked red-purple bruises up on the thin skin under Xander's hip-bones and along the crease of his thighs. Lay his tongue flat on the underside of
Xander's cock and licked up once, slowly, bitter tang of leather that faded to salt-musk and then the cool, savory slip of pre-come at the very tip.

Xander sighed, arching up into him, and Spike backed off - started to make his way down toward Xander's knee.

"Oh fuck you," Xander breathed, curled his hands around the metal cuffs and pulled, sliding Spike's lips down a few more inches to the curve of his knee. "Come back here." Thump from Buffy's room - unless it was his heart. Loud heart. Tell-tale heart. He bit his lip against a whimper and curled his leg over Spike's shoulder - tasted salt and iron - and "Ow." He tongued at the wound in his lip, came away tasting extra red and nudged Spike with his knee. "Willing to offer bribes here."

"Kinda busy," Spike said, sliding his tongue along the crease behind Xander's knee - sinking his teeth in, just a little. His hands were busy kneading muscle - stroking flesh - tugging at the free three or four inches of leather cord that he'd left dangling,
right under Xander's balls. Tickly little tease and he could smell blood. He made his way with studied casualness down to Xander's toes - switched feet and started up again, ignoring the little noises - the twisting body and the legs that tried to drag him upward. He stopped, sprawled between Xander's thighs, arms folded over Xander's belly and his chin propped on the back of his hand. Heat and hardness pressing into his sternum and he wiggled.

"You look like a proper harem-boy, love. All rumpled and wide-eyed and...debauched. Ready to beg for it?"

Xander stared at Spike in what had to be stark disbelief. He checked. Yes. Stark. Also hard and thrumming and tingling all over and aching like an overfilled balloon o' pain every time Spike wiggled.

He marshaled his brain cells - all three of them. Each one kicked out a word. "Fuck. Me. Now."

Somewhere on his belly, the fire of Spike's fingernails casually digging in, scratching, and his brain cells got together to kick out a bonus word
free of charge. A bonus word full of vowels and of no language known to man and punctuated by wrapping his legs around Spike and arching.

And vowing never *ever* to give Spike ideas again.

Unless Spike got on with the fucking.

Then, there were a whole *lot* of ideas on tap as soon as the -

Another *thumpthud* and Xander swallowed a moan - also, his tongue. "*Fuck.*" His three musketeer brain cells agreed.

"*That's* not begging, love." Spike pushed himself up onto his knees - moved off of Xander altogether and grinned at him - *rolled* him, so Xander was sprawled on his belly. Shoved a pillow or two up under his hips, spreading his legs wide. Spike got back in between them - ran his hands possessively up Xander's back to his ass - cupped and squeezed and rubbed.
"God, love, you've got a gorgeous behind. Just - fuckin' perfect. Round like an apple...could sink my teeth right in..."

"Nuh. *Gah!*" Pinpricks of heat and sharp-sharp biteyness made their mark and Xander closed his eye and saw dancing spots behind both lids. Dancing? Boogying *down* spots. He *ached*, the bites setting off sparks inside that begged to join the party, and pushed back against Spike desperately. *pleasepleasepleaseenownownownow* crackling through every nerve and the leather ties *creaked*. "Fuck me, fill me, *use* me, just do it *now!*"

"Still not beg-ging," Spike singsonged, mouthful of iron-salt-sweet and link full of formless need. He pushed Xander's cheeks apart with his hands - * licked*, balls to the small of Xander's back. Did it again. And then again, and again. Flat of his tongue pushing hard - dark bitter-musk taste on his tongue mixing with leather and salt and the faint spiciness of their soap. Thumbs pushing and pulling - working the muscle all *around* but never quite where Xander wanted him to go. Sucking Xander's balls into his
mouth - humming around them. Licking and mouthing the bite high on Xander's left cheek and then going back to the other licking. Spike's whole body tingled with the waves of lust and frustration that were pouring off Xander - tingled with his own desire and he shivered all over - changed - and nuzzled into Xander's neck, his own achingly-hard cock rubbing wetly up and down Xander's crack.

"Begging is please please please, Spike, need you Spike..."

"Spike!" Xander bucked - writhed under Spike - hot, damp-musk air filling his lungs from the pillows pushing back, back, back against hard-wet-teasingfuckingbastard-cock and up. "Need - fucking - n-nee -" Teeth scraped at his throat, scraped along nerves laid raw, shuddering through him, everything tensed, everything hungry, shaking, sweating, hurting. "Please!"

The link was fire, was static-shock tingles and belly-twisting want and Spike rocked backward - slid his hands down and down until he could hold Xander's
hip in one hand - himself in the other. Pressed forward until the head of his cock was just barely pushing into Xander. Other hand on Xander's other hip, and a slow, steady breath.

"Now that's begging, pet - that's perfect," Spike murmured. And a sharp, forceful roll of his hips had him going in - riding on pre-come and saliva, Xander open and ready from teasing tongue and fingers. Furnace-heat and clenching sheath of muscle and Spike growled, snarling whine of pure ecstasy. "God, perfect, love -"

Heavy weight burning heat inside and perfect - fuck, yes perfect Xander would agree if he was verbal - felt it all through the link, fucked and fucking - and stretched out, arms and ass and there might have been a more! in his embarrassingly needy whimpers but that was a low priority worry.

Very low.

Several levels of low and well below the dozens of levels of harder and more where his world
narrowed to in-out-in-out-flamingJesusyesyesyes!-in.

"Christ -" Spike loved it when Xander got - non-verbal. When all he did was make these sounds - needy and animal and full of passion and desperation and pure fucking enjoyment. Spike leaned over Xander - put his mouth to neck and shoulders and kissed and licked, smooth skin and the raised texture of the razor wire scar. And he bit - small bites that drew no blood but that made Xander twist and moan and clutch a pillow so tight his fingers went right through - pop!. Spike yanked at the leather that looped around the headboard and got Xander's hands free - hauled him upright and fucked harder, one hand curving around Xander's belly and the other across his chest, holding him tight. Xander's arms came up - hooked around his neck and the chain from the hand-cuffs scraped the back of Spike's neck and he didn't care.

"Perfect, perfect, perfect," hoarse mumble into Xander's neck and then his fangs prickling over the wren-beat of Xander's heart - his fingers unknotted
and unlooping the last leather cord - fisting Xander's cock to the same rhythm of his hips. "Xander - god -"

Xander clenched his fingers in the short hairs above Spike's neck, pulled and pushed and wanted, breath coming hard and fast between the pressure in his balls and the pressure in his throat - like too much blood - swollen with blood and need and - he loosed a low whine, head thrown back in surrender.

Spark of 'this is what it will be like' - knowledge that Spike wouldn't stop soon. Would keep drinking and fucking and fucking and drinking and take it all crashing into him, crashing through him and taking him with it.

Xander's head, rolling aside on his neck - the hard arch of creamy-gold skin exposed and pulled taut under Spike's mouth and wantyoursyours from Xander, strongest under the sheer lust that made Spike pant for air he didn't need. Shuddering surge of Xander's body and his muscles locked tight - his hips jerking in helpless spasms. The tidal scent of his
come was sharp in Spike's nostrils and the demon snarled - wanting to take and keep taking what Xander was offering.

Ultimate surrender in the curving sweep of sweat-damp skin. *Not yet not yet notyet*, and Spike bit down, harder than usual - growled around the mouthful of flesh and blood and jerked hard, coming as well - grinding into Xander's body, bruising his hip and belly with a grip like iron, fingers sticky and warm on Xander as a second round of shocks jagged through him, making Spike moan at the surge through flesh and link both.

Finally spent, Spike sagged back on his heels, holding Xander to him - carefully loosening his fangs and doing his best not to tear Xander's skin. And then they both simply knelt there, panting - riding the delicious little aftershocks as they came down.

*Love, want, mine* sang between them, passed from skin to skin and Xander turned his head, rubbed a salt-wet cheek against Spike's. His neck sent up small, spent flares of tingling *vampire was here* with
the movement and he curled his fingers through Spike's hair, sticky with sweat-melted hair products. Holding him there. Holding him right there. When the shake in his muscles got worse, when he couldn't hold the position anymore, he'd let go. But not yet.

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Gunn picked up his cane and gave a last glance over the room, making sure his suitcase was zipped up - so no little pink vermin could creep in - and that he'd tidied up the bathroom enough. He patted the bed - grinned at the flashback of memory. A night of...cuddling. Snuggling. Snogging, Wes called it. Of just...being close. Touching, and kissing, and talking. Of listening in acute embarrassment to the...enthusiastic noises from down the hall. And then wondering what it must be like for Xander. Yeah, it was Harris to make noises like that. Is that 'cause of Spike or just...'cause it was...gay sex? Fuck... Wesley was dressing and Gunn wanted to join him. Not to ogle the man - again. Oh, hell,
who'm I kidding? Course it is.

He opened the bedroom door and stepped out - directly into the path of a dandelion of blonde hair, fluffy pink and green robe and very fluffy, fleecy slippers. And huge green eyes, and a pale, chapped mouth that made an 'O' of surprise at him.

"Oh - my god. Oh my god! I can't believe they let me - I mean - I was drunk but - Oh my god. I brought you home last night and I don't even know you!"
The blonde - Buffy. Gotta be Buffy... was clutching the front of her robe, a little overnight case dangling from her hand. "I mean - oh my god - not that you're not - I mean - you're really a very good-looking guy but - oh. My. God! Wesley! G-good morning!"

"Good morning, Buffy," Wes said. And then before Gunn could react, say good morning - or even think about shit, did I brush my teeth yet? Wes was pulling him around, down and in and it was a good morning with a hello kiss like that. "Good morning, Charles," he said and Gunn vowed to get right on
that answer - soon as his power of speech came back.

"Wow. Okay so - there was a big explosion of gay in California, right?" Buffy asked. "Oh my god! Is Angel gay now?"

"Actually, he was -" Wesley caught himself in time with the flicker of dismay over Buffy's face and cleared his throat. "I believe he has resumed his monastic ways."

"He's - wha?" Wesley made a sort of - gesture - with his eyebrows and Buffy - who looked a bit pale - seemed to catch on with a little mental click. "Oh. Oh. Okay. I - uh - so I didn't bring you home, right? Wesley did?" Buffy added, turning to Charles and Wesley fought the burst of hysterical giggles down.

"Buffy, this is Charles Gunn. He was a member of Angel Investigations."

"Wow. I thought you'd be a lot taller and - um - you know what? It's really great to meet you finally and
I really should brush my teeth and - there's a lot of...girly stuff I need to do before I'm fit for company," Buffy said, edging in the direction of the hall bathroom. "You know? So I'll just...do that. Girly stuff. Now."

"You're welcome to join us for breakfast," Wesley called after her.

"Think we'll see her again before lunch?" Gunn asked, and Wes grinned up at him.

"Buffy is really very resilient. I'm sure she'll be down before long. Now - about breakfast. There is a rather large supply of cereal and toaster pastries and things laid in, of course, but I thought a real English breakfast - a sort of - celebration -"

"Wait - does an 'English' breakfast include anything called 'bangers', 'cause I've heard stories -"

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Wesley swept the last of the table scraps down the garbage disposal and returned a douse's glare with one of his own. "If you wanted that, you should have told me before it went down the drain. I'm sure you can convince the Slayer to share her breakfast with you."

"Dunno, man. I've heard stories about Slayer breakfasts."

"That we eat whole-grain health foods in dainty quantities that keep up our youthful good looks and peppy dispositions?" Buffy asked, making her appearance; buffed, puffed, showered, blow-dried and in a kicky ensemble.

And oh my god, I just thought the words 'kicky ensemble'. There ain't no turnin' back from the gay in this household. Gunn dropped his head to his folded arms and groaned.

"Too much pep, too early?" Buffy asked, sliding into a kitchen chair and Wesley smiled at her - patted
Charles' shoulder as he walked by, frying pan and spatula in hand.

"No, no. Something completely un-connected, I'm sure. How are you, Buffy? I'm sorry we weren't up to welcome you when you - got in. You got in rather late, didn't you?"

"And rather...tipsy," Buffy said, eyeing the fry-up Wesley was sliding onto her plate with something between panic and horrified curiosity.

"Ah - Spike and Xander took you drinking?"

"Well...no...more like - a grateful nest of G'ggktch demons took me drinking. And then some other - demons and then - Spike and Xander bought me Appletinis." Buffy perked at that and then frowned again. "I think they were Appletinis."

"You sure you wanna be eating that after all those Appletinis?"

"Why not?" Buffy asked, picking up her fork and
digging in.

"It's makin' *my* stomach queasy and I didn't drink *anything.*"

Buffy jabbed her fork in Gunn's direction. "You have a lot to learn about Slayers."

"What Buffy means," Wesley said, pouring himself another cup of tea, "is that Slayers have advanced healing abilities. While they get drunk as quickly as anyone of a comparable size, the consequences are minimal."

"Well, *minimal*. That's kind of...minimizing it all. I mean - I threw up last night. Twice." Buffy added, ripping off a chunk of toast and swirling it through her over-easy egg. Gunn watched in fascination - barely twitched when a douse scampered up Wes' leg to his shoulder and perched there, whiskers flicking in anticipation. Buffy, however, wasn't quite so blasé.

"Wesley! There's a pink - a pink - It's one of those!"
Them! Xander's little - deece!"

"Dice," Wesley corrected.

"Dice?"

"Douse. Dice." Wesley finished his tea and left the cup in the sink. "Any grammatical complaints should be directed to Xander."

The douse hopped down and sniffed after the cup then took a flying leap from the counter to the table, skidding on a patch of spilled tea and careening across the wood, paws flailing.

Buffy yelped and jumped back - just as Gunn did, and Gunn scowled at the douse. *Man, get a grip on yourself!* "It's okay, they're friendly - mostly. Hungry little fu- guys but friendly. Go on and feed it some bacon." Gunn coaxed. Buffy took the edge of her plate in her fingertips and pushed it gingerly toward the douse.

"It can have the rest," she said, and the douse
righted itself and sat upright, tail sweeping in fast arcs through the spatters of tea, little scaly paws clutching in what looked like a distinctly 'Mr. Burns' manner.

"Oh, no, no, that's entirely too much rich breakfast for you, Wes said, swooping in and rescuing the plate. "Buffy, are you sure you don't want any more?"

"Oh, I'm sure. Wow - look at the little nose!" Buffy made a sort of cooing noise and the douse and Gunn both stared in disbelief. Buffy sat up straighter, pushing her hand back through her hair. "Right, okay - ummm... Wesley? You think Spike and Xander are going to join us?"

"You're kiddin' right?" Gunn slipped a sugar cube out of the bowl and held it out to the douse which snatched it and ran, soggy pink tail flicking tea this way and that. "Those boys ain't gonna make an appearance for hours."

"Charles is right, unfortunately. You're welcome to
join us at the shop if you like."

"What, spend the day at the 'Occult and Mystical Supply Depot'?' Buffy made a wry face and shook her head. "I've kind of had my fill of booky, spell-y, funny-smelling shops with things like 'rats eyes' on the shelves. When I was fighting last night I saw some neat stores and stuff - I think I'm just gonna - spend some money. I - have a Platinum card with my name on it." Buffy grinned, arching her brows and tipping her chin in a manner that made Wesley feel a little twinge of nostalgia.

"Besides, Dawn threatened me with actual physical harm if I didn't bring her back some sort of authentic 'witch' thing, and Willow wants me to take pictures - she gave me a list." Buffy fluffed her hair - stood up and brushed a crumb off of her sweater. "And the sun is actually shining and it's not doing that weird ice-rain thing anymore and I have a pair of killer snow boots 'Deus got me in Champery.'"
in the booky, spell-y, funny-smelling shop on Flint," Wesley said in his best dry, 'Watcher' voice - pulled a key off the hook by the door and passed it to Buffy - like anything could break into this house between the spells, dice and sleeping oversexed vampire. "Try not to find any more fights, though - I'm not sure even a Slayer's constitution could stand up to another night of drinking in a demon bar."

Buffy tucked the key into her purse and flashed Wesley a perky California Girl grin. "A Slayer's constitution can try!"

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"It's just above freezing... I wonder if the sidewalks will be slippery? I think I'm going to call a cab," Wesley said, peering out the kitchen window at the ice-sheathed mounds of snow that humped across the yard. The sidewalks between home and work had all been cleared for days but the sleet of the night before might have put a treacherous scrim of ice over everything and he was worried about
Charles. "Let me just find the number..."

"Don't you usually walk, Wes? I thought you said it was close?"

"Well, yes, it is but after the storm, I was thinking that perhaps -"

"Walking is therapy, English. I do it every day." Charles looked - stubborn. And maybe a little hurt, and Wesley reached out and touched his arm - rubbed it through shirt and sweater.

"Yes, you do, I know. You did bring some good boots then? Or I can loan you something - we have several pair - Xander seems to enjoy buying boots..."

"That boy spent way too long surrounded by women." Gunn shook his head, shook off Wes' arm, then took his hand. "I'm gonna say this once, English. You don't have to worry about me."

"I'm not worried." Wesley licked his lips, looked at
his fingers, pale and skinny trapped in Charles' larger, darker hand. Sturdier hand. Hand that had never looked out of place on an axe.

"I really am," Gunn said. "Now get that damn door unlocked. I'm freezin' my ass off."

Wesley pushed the key into the lock - turned and pushed and grabbed Charles - pulled him into the shop and into a kiss at the same moment. From dazzling brightness to dust-mote dimness and Wesley stood there for a long moment, his fist clenched in Charles' coat, his other hand still on the key, cold lips growing warm, Charles' hand on his waist. And then he pulled back - grinned at the look of stunned pleasure on Charles' face.

"I'm very glad, Charles."

"Damn." Gunn raised a hand to his lips, felt the tingling swell from the outside and caught Wes before he could walk away into the shop. "One more time."
"Only one?" Wes didn't offer any resistance - or any help. Just watched him with those blue blue eyes.

"I'll let you know," Gunn said and kissed him. Warmer now, bolder. And with a hand under Wes' coat where he could feel the shape and heat of his back under his hands and the flex of Wesley's muscles when he put his arms around Gunn's neck.

"Ah." Wesley blinked his eyes open to a world fogged white through his glasses - and laughed.

"Ah?"

"Sorry - I can't actually - see you." Wesley took his glasses off - held them out of the way while he kissed Charles again - and then again, and then finally stepped back and got his key out of the door - let Charles come all the way in.

"Welcome to Wyndam-Pryce Occult - Mystical Books And Supplies. Would you like a tour, or -"

"Or...?" Charles had a wicked smile on his face as he
pushed the door shut behind him - slid his hand up Wesley's arm to his neck and rubbed there, leather cool and slick against Wesley's skin. "You wanna spend the day makin' out back here? Leave the lights off and the 'closed' sign up?" Teasing, probably. But god...it was so tempting.

"And lose the moral high ground with Spike and Xander?"

"Man, with those two there is no lower ground."

"Charles - that's hardly fair to - oh..." For a man new to - all of this, Charles was not shy with his kisses. "Peace," he mumbled, when Charles pulled back for air, "I will stop your mouth."

"That was my line, Wes."

"I am not Beatrice."

"Sure as hell ain't Don Pedro. Not unless someone's been changing the script."
Wesley looked up into wide, open, *honest* eyes and brushed his thumb over the fullness of Charles' lower lip. "Our script has changed."

"Yeah. Guess - it has." Gunn looked down at Wes for a long, long moment - bent and kissed him, one more time. Fluttery excitement in his belly, because this was...was *more*, and better, and...scary. "We'll figure it out. Wanna show me your pride and joy?" And really - thank god Spike and Xander weren't there. That was just too good a straight line for either of them to pass up.

"You've seen my pride and joy." Wesley felt the heat bloom from within, and covered it with a grin, taking Charles by the hand. "Now come see my shop."

They wound their way between the boxes, stacked, numbered, organized - humming.

Humming?

"What the fuck's in here?"
Wesley peered at the label. "A Thessalonian prophetic urn." He tapped the lid of the box and the humming decreased. "They're unreliable but popular with a certain crowd."

"Wait - wait. You mean we were all skulking around Wolfram and Hart lookin' for prophecies and with one of these, we could've grown our own?"

"I did say they're unreliable. And anyway, only the blind can use them."

"Yeah, but - still -" Gunn glared at the still-humming box, wondering what difference - if any - something like would have made with Connor - or with Angel. Guess we'll never know. Another box seemed to be leaking a sort of greenish mist and Wesley cursed softly. "Now what in hell is that?"

"That is the Breath of the Goddess and before you ask, no, I don't know which goddess. It's a special order for someone who thinks they know more than they do. I think in future I'll have to run a
background check for certain orders." Wes muttered something and a bubble appeared, containing the box and the mist.

Gunn sidestepped it carefully, holding his coat in close until they were past. "I think that's a damn good idea, Wes."

Beside the door, Wesley unlocked a book on a pedestal - a very familiar book. "Wes - tell me that ain't one of the volumes from Wolfram and Hart."

"It isn't. March sixteenth, two-thousand and five," he told it and then opened it to the middle, reading the text as it scrolled over the page. "It is by the same manufacturer."

"Jesus. What's it take to get you to use a computer, man?"

"Books do not crash." Wesley pulled a yellow legal pad from the shelf above and jotted notes from the book.
"So what is it?"

"A practical calendar. Anything in red is a risk to sell within the next five days."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, various reasons. Planetary alignments, ides, portents - prophecies." Wesley shot Charles a smile and shut the book - pushed open the back-room door and led Charles out into the store proper. He went briskly to the door, flipping on the lights and unlocking - turning the 'closed' sign to 'open' and then going behind the counter to fire up the electric kettle. He liked to offer hot tea to anyone who fancied some - and he rather enjoyed having a cup or two during the day, as well.

Wesley watched Charles walk around the shop floor, peering into display cases and skirting the 'reading' area Wesley had set up - a low couch and a scatter of chairs and little tables so potential buyers could browse the wares at their leisure.
Of course, there was a small spell on the chairs and things, so that if the intent was to, say, read a spell and memorize it without paying, a nimbus of light would glow around the customer. It was noisy light, and rather unnerving and Wesley hadn't had too many problems with attempted theft.

"So, what do you think, Charles? Does it meet with your approval?"

Gunn eased himself into one of the chairs, stretching his leg out in front of him with a grimace. "Gotta say, English - you've come up in the world since the days of the Gunn Agency."

"Wyndam-Pryce Agency, you mean."

"Yeah, yeah." Wes came over, eased a footstool under his leg and smiled the way that made Gunn need to pull him down by his sweater to be kissed. "Still helping the hopeless?"

"I haven't had any hopeless visitors yet." The kettle whistled and Wesley returned to pour the water,
breathing in steam already scented with bergamot.

"Would you? Help them?"

Wesley loaded a tea tray with kettle and cups, sugar and cream, carried it back before he answered. "In a heartbeat."

"So you're still on the side of the - angels. What about the Twosome? They doing good or just doing each other?" Gunn watched as Wesley assembled two cups of tea - the precise, graceful movements of the Englishman's hands unchanged after so many years. Sugar tongs hooked just so, slice of lemon, for fuck's sake and little pot of cream that was probably kept chilled by a spell. Fancy cups that were a plain, dull green on the outside and a riot of color and pattern on the inside. A lot like Wes, really.

"Oh, they - well, they run errands for me. Supplies and books and things. And I know they've stepped in and helped people in need from time to time. They're not heartless. Or cruel. If you asked them,
they'd say they quit, but... It gets to be a habit, the Champion business." Wes held out a cup and Gunn took it, letting his fingertips stroke along Wes' hand.

"Yeah, I guess it does at that."

Wesley's fingers tingled and warmed where Charles stroked them and he cupped them around his tea, sitting back in his chair. "It doesn't do any harm, letting them think they're retired."

"They know how well you've got them figured out?"

"I sincerely doubt it." Wesley inhaled deeply, tea and bergamot, lemon and sugar. "They aren't very different from Angel in some ways."

"'Cept they'd kick your ass for sayin' that where they can hear it." Gunn sipped his tea gingerly - and added two more sugar cubes. "How do you figure?"

Wesley thought a minute. "Well, with Angel - he would have 'the plan' - and my goodness, he was proud of his plans." Wesley grinned and Charles
grinned back. "And of course, if you saw a hole in it and said something, you generally got -" 

"You got 'do not question me, mere mortal, for I am old and know that which you do not wot of," Charles said, adopting a pompous air. A very 'Major-General' sort of air, but it...fit. Wesley huffed soft laugh.

"Yes, exactly. So I tended to pick 'the plan' apart in private and then come up with backups - or safeguards - that I could introduce when the time was right."

"The last-minute, my-god-English-is-damn-smart save. Oh, yeah, know and love those."

"Precisely," Wesley said, sipping, and ignored Charles' eye-roll. "With Xander and Spike it's a little different. They're so - eager, they don't see the flaws, or if they do...they assume Spike can just...kill something."

Wes wasn't looking at him - was looking into his tea
like he could read the leaves. Which wasn't out of the question except there weren't any leaves in his cup to read. So unless the china patterns in Wes' cup were doin' the Neutron Dance, he was avoiding eye contact. "What's Spike planning to kill this time?"

Wes drained his tea in one bracing go and poured another. "Xander."

Gunn felt a little shiver go over him and he put his cup back down onto his saucer with a little click that seemed much too loud. "You wanna - elaborate on that one, Wes?"

"He's going to sire Xander."

Gunn's stomach hollowed out and he set the teacup on the table because he had no business holding onto china that nice when his hands were shaking and wanting to crush something. "And you're letting him?"

"As you can imagine, it's not a question of 'letting',
Charles." Wesley set his own cup down - folded his hands over his stomach and *looked* at Charles - at his gutted expression and at fingers that shook as they curled around the carved haft of the cane. "It's a question of...seeing the flaws."

"There ain't nothin' *but* flaw in that plan, Wes." And *damn* he wished his hands would stop shaking. Just when he thought one vamp might be *okay*. Might not be a fuckin' leech. "Thought Blondie Bear was better than that. Not like all the *others.*"

"He *is* better - Charles, you don't understand -"

"You gonna *explain* it to me, Wes?" Charles snapped, and Wesley snapped his mouth shut - sat in silence for a moment.

"Charles, I - I know - how you feel. I also know how much they love each other and believe me, this isn't something they've decided lightly. Charles?" Charles was sitting hunched over his knees, his hands tight on his cane and his head bowed. A picture of utter misery except for the white-knuckled grip that
screamed rage.

"Love means living together and being happy and - and stuff like that. Wanting the person you're with, not a damn demon in their shell."

"Charles..." Wesley laid a hand carefully on Charles' - over the stiff, cold fingers - and eased it off his cane, folding it in his. "Spike loves Xander. I believe he wouldn't willingly hurt him."

"Can't trust a vampire's love, Wes."

"That...is not entirely true. Spike is famous for the depth of his fidelity to the one he loves."

"Like he's famous for killin' two Slayers? Damn, man, I can't believe -"

"Charles. Please, please listen. Spike loves him. Spike would do - anything for him. Spike was with Drusilla for over a hundred years - their relationship is infamous in Council circles." Wesley chafed Charles' cold hand - tried to make Charles hear him.
"And when he loved Buffy - he endured torture and physical abuse...he died for her and for her - cause, Charles. When Spike loves - he loves with everything he is. And he - he has a soul, now - the soul he got for Buffy. It makes - a difference."

"Like it made a difference when Sailor boy strung us up like Christmas cards for Papa Angel?"

"Yes."

"Are you out of your fuckin' mind?"

"Listen to me. Lawson was damaged. He needed something from Angel and was denied that. He needed affirmation." Affirmation from the father. Wesley ran a hand over his face.

"You can't tell me you're goin' by blind trust."

"I'm not." Wesley gave Charles' hand a squeeze and stood, retreating behind the counter. For an unopened courier box. He brought it back and set it on the table with a pocket knife. "Damage control,
Charles."

"There ain't no damage control for bein' dead."

"No. But there is for losing one's self."

Gunn watched as Wesley slit open the box - carefully drew out a pottery urn - one that seemed - very familiar. "Wes - is that - what I think it is? The Moo-ping - uh, thingy?" Soul catchers or...something. Gunn couldn't remember as clearly as he'd like. He blamed the memory spell that Angel had...gifted them with. Still wasn't sure his memories had gone back all to the right places - wasn't sure what was real and what was the shiny fake.

"Muo-ping and yes." Wesley lifted it from its wrappings and set it on the table - then lifted out a second, arranging them side by side. "If there's a more secure place to store a soul for safekeeping, I'm not aware of it."

"Uh - Wes? Why're there two of them?"
"The second is a gift for Spike."

"You're gonna do a de-souling on William the Bloody?"

"That decision is Spike's."

"You mean - here's the key to the banana farm, Mr. Monkey? Don't you think that's a little - well - crazy?" Wesley touched one urn - straightened it a bit where it sat.

"I don't think Spike would give up his soul - not now." Wesley left the two identical urns side by side. "But someday...someday he may feel differently."

"And then what? And what if we feel differently once he's soulless and fancy-free?"

"Then," Wesley said, lifting his head and fixing Gunn with a gaze hard and cold as the ice outside, "I have two Orbs of Thesulah and no qualms about using
Something in Wes changed when he said that, went hard and calculating and capable. "Tough love, English."

"As four very wise men once said, 'all you need is love', Charles."

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"And I said no. No, I will not take a break from Spike to be sure he's what I want. I know what I want."

"How can you say that without trying to date people your own age instead of centuries older?"

"Damn it - Are you listening? You're the one who taught me no means no - also just say no. Which, by the way, I did a lot of." Xander said, pacing. There was a lot of pacing room in the house these days. "Oh yeah - just say no? Kinda overrated."
"Stop -" Willow's voice cracked and it still made him feel like a - Okay, he was a jerk to Willow. Often and in many ways. But jerking was a two way street. Or maybe a circle. Jesus, he hated making Willow cry. "Stop joking about it, Xander."

"I joke because I care."

"Xander!"

"Hey. That part wasn't a joke. Love me, love my inappropriate humor."

"I do." Xander leaned against the wall, dropped his head to the plaster next to a frieze cherub and stared out the window at the house next door. "I love you, Xander - and something bad is going to happen to you with Spike. He already made you quit your job and move all the way across the country and - and now he's alienating you from your friends."

"What? He - Willow, we have been over this. Spike doesn't make me do anything. And anyway, Buffy's
here - that's not exactly alienating behavior."

"Spike tried to *rape* Buffy."

"Failing to see the relevance."

"What happens when you leave him? He won't let you go."

"Therein lies the appeal." Xander slid down the wall and leaned against the chilled glass, watching the next door neighbor - or maybe the next door neighbor's yard boy - clear a path from their kitchen door to their carriage house. He listened to Willow cry on the other end of the line. He spent a lot of time on the phone listening to Willow cry.

"I'm losing you, Xander."

"You don't have to. There's always gonna be a Willow-shaped spot in my life - whether you're in it or not."

He closed his eye. Mouthing the next question with
Willow as she spoke. "Are you mad at me?"

"Yeah."

"But you still love me?"

Xander sighed. *Family*, the voice in his head that sounded like Wes said. "Yeah."

"I love you too. I have to go."

"Yeah," Xander said again and clicked off the phone, dropping it on the carpet next to him.

"Hey, Xander - everything okay?" Xander looked up from his scrutiny of the ice-and-snow shrouded back yard to see Buffy, polished and perky and so very - *herself* - standing a couple of feet away. Xander smiled wanly up at her and patted the carpet beside him.

"I'm just having a one-man mope-fest. Wanna join? Or is Salem shopping really good and you're riding that zero-percent credit-card high?"
Buffy grinned - plopped down beside him, stretching her legs out and leaning against the wall.

"I'm pooped. All shopped out. But I've got a present for everybody on the list, so - success! Was that - Willow?"

"Yeah," Xander said. He was getting a lot of mileage out of it tonight.

"And was she 'I am your friend I just love you' Willow or 'I am your friend you must do as I command you' Willow?" Buffy was smiling, but her hand came over and gripped his, and Xander squeezed back.

"She was extra-thick guilt-trippy 'don't you love me?' Willow." Xander rested their clasped hands on his knee, pearl pink fingernails looking exotic and girly wrapped around his and he smiled at the nostalgia.

"Ooh, that Willow. That Willow's kinda been the
default since the whole Kennedy - thing." Buffy sighed and leaned her head on Xander's shoulder and Xander had an intense - nearly painful flashback to nights in Buffy's room, some crazy Bollywood movie on the TV and he and Buffy and Willow on the bed, braiding hair - and god, what would Spike say to that? - and talking, talking, talking. He'd never thought that anything would be more important in his life. Those friends - that time. A warm - a fuzzy push of puzzlement, contentment and love through the link and Xander shook his head. Times had changed - so much.

"Yeah. I get that it's really hard on her - I mean, we all remember the train-ride-o-pity that was the Oz Aftermath... But it's like she's just - not listening. Deliberately."

"She wants you to be happy," Buffy said softly. She crossed her legs and traced a scar on Xander's knuckle. "Like I do. Willow just... She just can't imagine that you are. Spike - really confuses her."

Xander let Buffy turn his hand, tracing the lines of
his palm, then toying with the knotted tie on his bracelet, tucking it under the shells and out of the way. "I am, though." Xander watched Buffy rearrange his bracelet then slide her hand into his. "Really happy. Why can't she trust me to know?"

"I guess she just thinks... You know - I don't really know what she thinks." Buffy clicked her nails on the shells of the bracelet and there was a thump from down the hall and a curse which they both ignored. "I think Willow just needs to get over it." A douse hopped past - super-fast-hop mode - and Xander deduced that the thump had been Spike throwing something.

"She's right, pet - Red needs to let it go." Xander looked up, smiling automatically at a Nest-rumpled Spike. A pair of jeans so old and ratty that Xander was sure they were his from high-school hung off Spike's hips and the sleeves of the soft heather-grey sweater brushed his knuckles. Love mine love - like a beam of sunlight.

Xander caught the hem of the sweater as soon as
Spike was close enough and arched his neck for a kiss, worn yarn clutched in one hand, the Slayer's fingers in the other. He tugged and made room for Spike on the carpet between his legs. "Couldn't have decided to have your little brood somewhere more comfortable?" Spike groused and settled, back to Xander's chest, bare feet tucked under Xander's arches, warm from the fireplace.

"You know how it is when you feel a brood coming on."

"Ooh, you're all warm and cuddly," Buffy chirped, snuggling into Spike herself. Xander felt Spike huff out a breath in mock annoyance and then they just sat there for a moment and it felt like... Buffy's house, Bollywood - family. The kind you never lost, no matter what.

"I guess she will have to get over it - 'cause I'm not giving you up," Xander muttered, and Spike turned his head a little - enough to kiss Xander's temple.

"Damn straight, love. 'Til death do us part"
and...then some."

Xander wrapped an arm around Spike, an arm around Buffy and tipped Spike's jaw, laid kisses along it and then dropped to his throat, kissing there. "Death's just the beginning."

He could feel Buffy's eyes on him, feel the steady possessive thrum of Spike's nearness and dropped his cheek to Spike's hair, settling his arm over his chest before daring a look at Buffy.

"Did you - are you... Okay, it's kinda early and I did have two mochachino brownies with my...uh...mochachino. Are you saying that you're - gonna - die?"

Xander inhaled, a flutter of nerves taking away his speech and then - then Spike twisted, lay open-mouthed kisses over his throat and Xander swallowed with a soft *click* - closed his eye, held Spike's head - just there. "Uh..."

"Don't mince words, love. She's the Slayer - tell her
straight." Spike mumbled it into his neck but the words were clear enough and Xander felt Buffy's hand squeeze his - squeeze a little too tight and he twitched.

"Oops, sorry." Buffy's grip eased up but her stare didn't. "Have to agree with Spike here, Xan, and you know how often that happens. I'm a big girl now - just tell me."

"Joining the fang gang, Buff." Xander squeezed back, hoped the flicker of hurt in Buffy's eyes was his imagination. "Soon - with Spike. It's - time for me to start making really long-range plans."

"It is? You are? Xander, have you thought - Duh, of course you've thought...." Buffy looked - shocked. Looked downright flummoxed and Spike felt himself tense, just a little. Just in case. Xander had been on edge about telling her since she'd arrived and now that feeling - jangly and nerve-scraping - was bleeding into the link. Spike growled very, very softly and Buffy shot a startled look at him.
"Wow, okay - this is - new. And different. New and different and kind of...wiggy. Xander, I thought... Well, I thought you hated the thought of being - the evil undead."

"Uh - I also hated the thought of fucking the evil undead. And boy has that changed." Xander looked down - at Buffy's fingers toying with his bracelet again, counting the shells like beads. "I kinda owe you an apology about that."

"Yeah, well - it turned out to be a kind of a bad idea, anyway..." Buffy sighed and twisted around a little so she was sitting opposite them, legs crossed under her and her hands on her knees. "Okay, so - tell me why. And tell me - how you're going to keep from going all evil and...and tell me that...you'll still be my Xander-shaped friend." Her voice hitched - caught, just a little and Spike felt the surge of pity sorry love from Xander - hugged Xander's arms tight around his ribs.

"He'll be all right, Buffy - promise."
"And that," Xander said, lacing his fingers with Spike's, gripping and holding on, "is good enough for me. I promise you - if I go all evil Deadboy - " Xander pressed his cheekbone to Spike's temple, tightened his arms around him and hoped Spike would take it well. "You can stuff a soul in me too."

Spike felt a little jolt at that - growled again, not so soft. "Takes all the fun out of it, a soul does. You won't need it, love, you'll see." Said with a confidence he was almost 100 percent sure of, and Buffy raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's the 'fun' that gets you in trouble, Spike. I thought you guys were all - help the hopeless now?"

"That's Angel's gig, Slayer - not ours. We're done with lettin' the Powers run our lives." Buffy looked skeptical but that was all right - she didn't need to believe him. She just needed to trust Xander - trust what he was doing. Accept, and be happy. That was all.
"Trust us, Buff." Xander's voice sounded far away to him, drowned out by his heartbeat. Slow but strong, banging against his ribs hard enough to make him dizzy and he held out a hand to her. "I'm not a wife, kids and nine to five career guy - and I love this crazy vampire. Too much to leave him alone. And too selfishly to accept a short life with him when I could have forever. Will you let me be selfish this time?"

Buffy was looking at Xander so - strangely. Something like desolation and something like pride in her gaze - something exactly like love and Spike felt a little knot of tension break loose in him - ease up, just a bit.

"You're all grown up too, aren't you? I just don't want to lose you, Xander. You're my oldest friend - my best friend and... It's okay to be selfish about this. You - so deserve it." Buffy sniffed, looking away and joy surged up in the link - joy and a complicated tenderness and then Xander was reaching out and pulling Buffy into a three-way sort of hug and she was sniffling and laughing a little - hugging back
hard enough to make them both wince.

*Knew you had sense, Slayer. Knew you'd let him be happy without all the - histrionics.*

"Damnit -" Buffy sat back, dabbing at her eyes. "I need a Kleenex and some cake or something now. Think there's cake?"

"There's cake," Xander said into her hair and recognized the LUSH shampoo Dawn sent him in that first Sunnydale care package. "Unless the dice found it. Then there's Twinkies." He gave her a squeeze. Gave *Spike* a squeeze and let all the tension go. "Even the dice won't eat Twinkies."

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy's seven-day visit passed quickly - and slowly - and strangely and perfectly and by the afternoon of the day before she was to go, Xander lay on his back in the sitting room Nest, wondering just *what* he thought of it all. They'd talked over old times, of
course. Told all the stories of Buffy saving Xander's life - and Xander saving her life. Recounting swim-team demons and crazy spells and Xander finally confessed to the Night of the Living Dead adventure and Jack and his zombie buddies. Confessed to facing down the school 'bad boy' over a ticking bomb while the rest of the gang battled hell-beasts in the library. Spike had just smirked - pointed out that Xander had faced down Angelus, too - and Buffy had smiled like she used to, years ago.

And Xander had that feeling again. That family feeling that felt so damn good, after so long. Wes and Gunn and Spike and Buffy, crowded around the kitchen table with a mountain of take-out and the dice like little pink satellites, mooching. Laughter and jokes, love and support. A real family - a regular family that was pretty damn irregular and Xander just lay there, staring at the ceiling and grinning. Because it felt so damn good.

Warm candlelight bath with Spike after a night in the snow good - and that was in no way girly.
"Okay - a grin like that can only mean one thing." Buffy's voice made Xander blink - look around. She was standing at the edge of the Nest, a toiletries case in her hand.

"Yeah? What's it mean?"

"You're thinking about Spike."

Xander made room for Buffy, putting an arm around her when she crawled into the Nest and propped her chin on his shoulder. "Maybe I'm thinking about you. Or Twinkies."

"No way. That silly grin is only for Spike."

The silly grin Xander couldn't shake, so he turned it on Buffy.

"See? Totally in love. Trying to restore my faith in humanity, Xan?"

"Does it count as humanity when it's vampires?"
"Well - he's more human than some of the Watchers I've had to deal with." Buffy laughed softly and poked Xander in the ribs - laughed harder when he curled up away from her finger. "Oh my god! That really is the goofiest, most sappy, most head-over-heels I love my guy grin ever." She tipped her head a little, and her eyes sparkled, and her mouth shook, just a little bit. "You better still have that grin next time I see you."

Xander laid a smacking kiss on Buffy's forehead and held her close enough to smell Sensi and coconut shampoo. "It's a promise, Buff. How's the packing? Do you need to make an emergency trip to the store for an extra suitcase?"

"Ummmmmm..." Buffy looked intently at her toiletries case and Xander felt his jaw drop.

"No. No way. Wesley already loaned you his own suitcase. You've only been here a week!"

"I had to get presents! For lots of people! And then - there was that store. With the really cute stuff that
was all kind of witchy-floaty-Betsey Johnson kinda and you know Willow will love that. And -"

"Buffy. Stop. I'll buy you ten suitcases if you need 'em. I'm just not used to the power of the Platinum Card Slayer anymore."

"New and improved." Buffy smoothed his sweater - a thick cable-knit thing of dark green soft yarn she'd bought him - he was going to wear until it fell apart.

"Gotta admit it's not bad." In the kitchen, the microwave dinged loudly. "First person to bring me a Twinkie and a coke gets a blow job," he called.

"Think there'll be a stampede?" Buffy asked, fake-innocent confusion as Spike stalked into the living room, mug of blood, cigarette, coke - Twinkies. And a smile that made Xander's cock perk right up even as he mentally chastised it.

"Reckon I win," Spike said in that low, grumbly purr of a voice and Xander was ignoring the tiny intake of breath from Buffy - the sudden heat of a blush
against his shoulder.

*My* Spike - *oh, fuck yeah...*

"Oh you so do." Xander slid a hand up Spike's thigh, worn denim, and snagged a belt loop, pulling him down into the Nest. "Gonna collect?"

"Oh *god*. *World* of no, Xan." Buffy squirmed up and out of the Nest, laughing when Spike moved in. "Before you guys hop on the Happyland Express, have you seen my sparkly green hair sticks?"

"And they'd be...what, green and sparkly and - *fuck* - sticky? *Spike!*"

"M'hands are cold, pet," Spike said, letting the soda can roll into Xander's side as he slid chilled fingers up under Xander's sweater. The Twinkie packet crinkled ominously and Spike realized he was laying on them. *Ooops*

"Yeah, green, sparkly, sticky. I've looked all over for them."
"Haven't seen 'em, Slayer. Missing my lighter, though..." Spike frowned and hitched closer to Xander - looked for a place to put his mug, cigarette in the same hand and perilously close to igniting - something.

Xander sighed and took the mug with his left hand. Xander Harris - amazing human cup holder and hand warmer! - and accepted blood-flavored kisses in appreciation. Oh yeah - he had it bad. The sappy thinking about Spike smile was back. "You lit the fireplace with it last night."

"Yeah, I know - but it's not on the mantle where I left it." Spike sighed and looked around for a place to put his cigarette, now because he didn't want to ash on the Nest. Xander gave him a look and Spike sighed again - groaning for effect this time - and hauled himself out of the Nest so he could find an ashtray.

"I guess if you find 'em you can just Fed-Ex 'em to me," Buffy said and Spike took a hard puff and then
tossed the cigarette remains into the fireplace.

"Fed-Ex? What, these some kind of miraculous Sparkly Sticks of Slaying or something?"

"Well, no, but they're really cute with my -" Buffy was cut off by a muffled bang sound - like a firework - and a puff of reddish smoke from -

"My coat -" Spike growled, staring at the length of black leather that was lying over the back of the couch.

"What the hell did you have in there? Fireworks?" Xander levered himself out of the Nest, taking a hand from Spike and letting Buffy grab his wrist for help. They all stared at the clearing smoke.

The tail end of a douse was hanging limply half out of Spike's duster pocket.

"Do - do you think it's dead?" Buffy had the dead kittens in a basket and somewhere, a poker player is going to pay look on her face.
"I think I saw it twitch -"

"Better not be dead," Spike muttered and Xander whapped him. "What!"

"You're just saying that 'cause you don't want to clean douse-guts out of your coat pocket. What if it's hurt? Think of the douse!"

"I'm thinkin' the little bastards had better stay away from my soddin' coat - there - look. It did twitch."

The tail twitched again, weakly, and Buffy crept a little closer. Suddenly the tail whipped into the coat as the douse, apparently, turned turtle in the pocket. A smudged nose appeared, then frazzled-looking whiskers and the douse slithered from the pocket and thumped unsteadily to the floor. Something - sparkly - slithered with it.

And then with a *patter-clatter*, douse and trinket rocketed across the floor like a crazed ping-pong ball and up the stairs.
"Thieving bastard!" Spike chased after it - and Xander after Spike, hastily putting the mug on the mantle. A huffing thunder of bare feet and human lungs up the stairs, Slayer on his tail.

"What'd it take?"

"Dunno but it was mine!"

"What the fuck!" The douse took a hard left and skreeeeeked its way up the servants' stairs to the third floor.

"Hope that door's not locked!" Spike yelled as the douse squeezed under like a magic-trick, disappearing with a flick of pink fluff and the rattle-hiss of chain? swishing across hardwood. Spike grabbed the doorknob and pushed and the door swung open with a thunk, knob digging into plaster and rebounding into Xander, who pushed it harder. The Slayer finished it - the knob stuck tight after her shoulder slammed the door.
"Okay - what the hell is this room?"

"Box-room, pet. Where the cases live." Cases did live there - humping dimly in piles half up the walls, chintz and brown leather and serviceable black canvas. Spike found the chain and yanked and the overhead light came on. Douse-prints in the dust, going right to the back.

"Yeah - and where the dice play." With the light on, the tracks were everywhere - all leading toward the back. Xander thought non-threatening douse-positive thoughts. Nice douse, dice. Hi. It's the guy who shares his HoHo's with you. There was a scrabbling behind one of the cases.

A patter.

A bigger patter.

And three dice in close formation sprang over a wall of boxes, between Xander's legs and blasted into the hall, noses close to the floor. "Fuck!"
"Wow, I had *no* idea you guys had all this luggage. Maybe I could borrow a couple of these? Or, you know...three. Three would work.' Buffy looked up at them, guilty-little-girl look and wide, wide eyes. "Ookay, concentrating on the demonic pink puffballs. Maybe they're....mating?"

"Good Christ. I hope not." Spike started shoving cases and there were some *sqreeks* of alarm and then one hippo-sized, possibly hippo-*hided* case toppled and -

"Holy Kleptomania, Batman," Xander breathed. "Is anybody else thinking of that scene in Goonies?"

Spike and Buffy tore their eyes away from the trove of everything sparkly to stare at him.

"Okay. Just me, then."

Buffy wiggled her way between the fallen cases to crouch before the hole in the wall - if it could still be called a hole when it was tall enough for a small child, deep enough for a small *car* - mounds of
everything sparkly from a Three Musketeers bar to -

"Hey! My hair sticks! And *eeewww* - they're sticky."

"Well, they *are* -"

"*Don't* finish that, mister," Buffy grumped and Spike smirked. Buffy looked sadly at the sticks, which seemed to have - honey on them. Or - Spike sniffed delicately in their direction. *Butter*. He could see a foil-topped packet of butter that had come in - some meal. Douse-teeth had pierced it and it had somehow *melted*... Spike lay his hand on the brick he could see just beyond ragged, chewed plaster. Hot. It was a chimney.

"Everything's gonna be all melty and - gross, isn't it," Xander said, leaning far over Spike's shoulder and looking at the candy bars, soy-sauce packets and other take-away detritus scattered throughout the trove.

"'Fraid so - ah *ha!*" Spike pounced - held his Zippo aloft triumphantly just as a douse scampered onto
the trove from somewhere deeper in the walls, something dangling from its front paws. Buffy froze - Spike did - Xander started to lose his balance and the douse stood up tall, nose twitching overtime.

The douse's ears flicked forward, back - and Xander eased his hands carefully from the plaster above Spike's head to his shoulders - froze when the douse rocked back on its paws, prize clutched to its chest.

"Is it holding what I think it is?" Xander leaned further over Spike - stopped again when a tremor ran through the douse.

"If you think it's holding Wes' glasses - um - pretty much."

Buffy carefully lowered the sticks - bumped a precariously balanced heap of bottle-caps which immediately started to avalanche. The douse - flinched - and Spike lunged and Xander lost his battle with gravity and slid down Spike's flying, jean-clad legs as Buffy yelped and rolled aside, knocking into a case and bringing another, more sharply-
cornered avalanche down.

"Got it!" Spike yelled, dangling the douse aloft by its tail, Wes' glasses glinting. The douse *skreeked* furiously and from his uncomfortable sprawl on the floor - was that a *whisk* digging into his chin? - Xander saw movement.

"Guys? I have a *bad* feeling about this."

Xander lifted his eye from the treasure - black and pink and glowing red dots stared back at him - patter like heavy rainfall behind the walls, above their heads *in the attic*.

"Xan?" Who knew Buffy could speak without moving her lips? "Now's a *really* good time to talk to your little friends."

"I think...we're kinda past the talking part of this program." *Thrum* of tension from Spike - game-faced and staring down the douse with Wes' glasses. "Just - uh -"
"Got it, pet...c'mon now, little fuzz-for-brains. I'm gonna have those -" Spike put his hand *slowly* out - palm flat - under the douse. The douse chittered uncertainly and then let Wes' glasses drop. Equally slowly, Spike swiveled his body and let the douse down - very gently.

"Now. We're just gonna back away. Real slow-like. *Slayer* - we'll get your sticks later. Xander, can you actually...move?"

"I'm caught," Xander mumbled, tugging carefully at his new sweater - unhooking it from a nail and slithering backwards. Spike slithered himself, spoons and tin-foil and bits of wire clattering under him. The circle of dice - advanced.

Buffy stole a quick glance behind them. "Door's still open."

Xander eased his hands under him, and *oh yeah* there was that Scooby calm in the clutch. "On the count of 'run'?"
A large douse with only one eye lowered its forepaws slowly to the hoard, haunches up.

The dozen dice behind it followed suit.

"Run!" Spike shoved him upright - shoved *himself* upright and if there was one thing every Sunnydale survivor was good at, it was running and *not* looking back.

They thundered down hallways - stairs - skidded around corners and ended up in a breathless pile against the door-jamb to the kitchen, Spike then Xander and then Buffy with an *oof* of displaced breath.

"What on *earth* is going on?"

"Oh - hey - Wes. Look! We - rescued your -" 

"Glasses..." Buffy finished mournfully as Spike sheepishly held up a palmful of mangled metal and plastic.
Wes stared in utter silence for so long that even Gunn was starting to look uneasy.

"Oh, well - jolly good - congratulations all round, then," Wes said brightly and Spike groaned.

"Oh hell. He's gonna be understanding."

~*~*~*~*~

"Man, I'm tellin' you, Batman is way cooler than Superman." Gunn dipped into the bowl of popcorn, tossing a kernel into his mouth then reaching back to slip Wes the other two. The DVD player hovered, paused over The Riddler's first appearance.

"Okay - Batman has the cooler toys, sure. But Superman's got X-ray vision. Superman can fly."

"You don't need super powers when you got the cool gadgets."

"Except for when the cool gadgets fail. I mean -"
what, is that a Utility Belt of Holding? Eventually he's gonna run out or not have the right thing or something."

"That's what Robin is for - back-up utility belt."

"Robin's a nancy," Spike said - looked surprised at the look that Gunn, Xander and even Wes sent him.

"So says the guy who was screamin' - what was it? Oh - oh, yeah - 'Oh, Xander, please - harder!' only this morning."

'The Look' was now turned on Gunn and Wes had added his own particular variation to it and Spike sniggered into his Old Speckled.

"Okay - that was awful. I could do a better English accent than that!" Xander chuckled.

"I beg you not to." Wesley turned an anguished look to Xander just as Spike snickered and earned an elbow to the gut.
"Your accent isn't even real."

Which only got Gunn's attention. "Huh? What? It's not?"

"Real as it gets, mate. Think I learned this from a book?" Spike tried for casually confident but Xander snickered and Spike growled. Gunn tossed a kernel of popcorn at him.

"You pullin' a Dick Van Dyke there, En - uh, Blondie Bear?"

"Bite your tongue!" Spike choked a little on his Old Speckled and Xander whapped him on the back, cackling.

"Oh, it's a jolly 'oliday wit' Mar-reeeeeeee!" he warbled.

Spike *growled* and wrestled Xander under him in the Nest, nearly knocking the popcorn bowl over before Gunn could rescue it, snatching it to his chest and cradling it protectively.
"So what's he really sound like?" Gunn asked because when growls turned to groans, it was time to change the damn subject.

"You expect me to know?" Wesley took a piece of popcorn for himself and nudged Xander and Spike with a bare foot, keeping their distance from the popcorn bowl - and Charles' bad knee.

"You were the Watcher, man."

Wesley bent - cast a critical eye over Spike and Xander - then whispered into Charles' ear *just* loudly enough for Spike to hear it if he was listening. "It sounds like mine."

"Oi!" Spike's head popped up like a jack-in-the-box and was swiftly tugged down again. "Xan - pet - just let me - Wes is *barmy* -"

"Hush, you fraud. I've *heard* you, you know. When you're drunk sometimes. And when you - dream sometimes. You're all - fancy, like Wes."
"Am not," Spike snapped and then looked guiltily at Wes - flipped Xander neatly and squashed him. "Nothin' wrong with bein' fancy, of course, just -"

"That's not you?" Wes said, arch tone and arched brow and Spike gave up - gave in - and gave them what they wanted.

"All right. Fine. This is me, circa 1880 and all this - digging into my past is just not - cricket."

Xander stretched and wriggled under Spike, eye turning heavy-lidded and dark. "Fuck cricket. It's sexy. Cricket's a boring old game on ESPN at three in the morning."

"I'll have you know that cricket is a game of -"

"No, no - no. Don't go there, English. Do not go there. Next thing, you'll be talkin' down baseball and then all hell's gonna break loose. I need more beer for that."
"Oh! Yeah - beer - right, beer, Spike - *Spike* - hey - more beer!"

"Yes, there's more," Spike said, giving Xander a puzzled look and then opening his mouth to protest when Xander squirmed to the edge of the Nest and yanked him to his feet.

"Yes, it's in *here*. In the kitchen. Where we put the *mail*. You know? Those papers that - come in the little slot - every morning?"

"Xander, what on *earth* -" Wes said, and Xander just grabbed Spikes hand and *towed*.

"Real subtle there, pet," Spike muttered, tripping over a cushion and shrugging at Wes and Gunn's baffled looks.

Gunn dropped his head back to Wes' stomach and twisted around to get a look at his face, watched him watching Spike and Xander's retreating backs. "You sure the crazy's not catching?" He tossed another piece of popcorn into the air.
Wesley intercepted and ate it. "Would it matter?"

"Nah." Gunn helped himself to another handful of faux-buttery goodness. "But I'd need a new hobby. Man needs something to gripe about."

"Try getting bezoars at half-price. You'll have plenty to complain about." Wesley ran a greasy finger over Charles' lower lip, smiling - grinning when Charles absentmindedly held out his hand to the douse that was begging for popcorn. The creature - an extra-small version - nabbed the kernel and then hopped backwards, tumbling over a pillow and making its escape, prize still firmly clutched in its paws.

"Guess that was a baby?" Charles said, and Wesley nodded - cleared his throat.

"It seemed to be."

"Well all right, then," Charles said, air of a man who was surprised at nothing, anymore. "They seem extra...grabby to you lately?"
"The dice?"

"Yeah. Feel like I'm bein' *tested* all the time. Creepy shit."

"They have seemed extra attentive for the last day or so. Maybe they miss Buffy." Wesley took a popcorn kernel and fed it to Charles, glanced in the direction of the kitchen where he could see Xander's hips and legs - nothing more. "Or maybe it has to do with whatever Spike and Xander are up to in the kitchen." He raised his voice a little. "Really, it doesn't take *that* long to find the beer. It's in the pantry."

"Maybe they're afraid we're going to come and clean their little magpie's nest out," Spike said, pushing Xander ahead of him, back into the sitting room. "Oops, forgot your beer, Charlie-boy. Go on, pet."

"Well they have *nothing* to worry about. We all know better than to threaten the dice - *or* their
"Yeah." Xander cleared his throat. "Uh. What do they take us for? Amateurs?" He ignored the look Wes was giving him and folded onto the Nest, legs crossed under him, papers and pen in his lap.

"Ix-nay," Spike muttered and Gunn huffed out a laugh.

"Now, what's all this? Did something come here mistakenly for the shop, Xander?"

Wes sat up a little straighter and Xander swallowed and Spike leaned into him, loveyes love here. It'll be fine, love. Wes'll be...fine.

"This is the deed to the house." Xander set it on the pillows, love from Spike winding through the edginess and Christmas Eve excitement crackling through him. "This house. I'm signing it over to you."
A flutter of nerves clenched Wesley's belly beneath Charles' head. "Xander..."

"Let me do this, okay? This house is in my name - because if it was in Spike's, the vampires could walk on in. That's not gonna be enough anymore." Xander pulled it in - pulled it together, professional Alexander Harris putting his life together - and his affairs in order. Or affair.

"Xander I - I don't... I mean, it's admirable of you, to do such a thing but - there are wards that I could -"

"Let the man have his way, Wes," Charles said softly, sitting up and his hand finding Wesley's in the tumble of pillows and squeezing gently. "It's his choice - his to make. And if he gets caught dead, it's gonna make things a lot easier on all of us if the house is in the name of the living."

"He's not wrong." Xander held out the pen.

"Well, that's so..." Wes hesitated for a long moment
and then he reached forward - stopped - looked around. "I'm all over salt and ersatz butter, I need - oh, thank you, Charles." Wes wiped his hands on the paper towels Gunn had pulled from under his thigh and then finally took everything, his hands shaking ever so slightly. Spike leaned into Xander a little harder - let his arm creep around Xander's waist.

Gunn kept a hand on Wes' back while he signed, felt the slow, hard beat of his heart vibrating through Wes' ribs and making his hands shake. "Okay, so here's a question for you guys. I'm gonna skip over all the murdering me in my sleep shit and assume you got *that* all under control." Xander and Spike pressed against each other - like they were tryin' to merge into one pain in the ass instead of two. *Nerves.* "Why ain't human good enough for you? Everything Wes here tells me says you're this big all-human hero, sidekick of champions. Why you suddenly got a big yen for fangs and bumpyies right *now*?"

Xander sat up, pulled away from Spike just enough
to get his sweater over his head and dropped it, Spike's arms winding back into place low on his stomach.

Silver through the nipples.

Blooming bruise in the center of his chest where something *kicked* him on patrol.

Gun-shot scar under the ribs, puckered and starfish-belly white, thick and twisted tissue underneath when he rubbed.

"Human is great, Charlie. Human is - you know, what I'm *good* at. But human is *fragile* and one of these days I'm gonna be too *good* at being human. And I won't do that to Spike. So - yeah. It's now."

**Square Twenty-Three**

Xander writhed against pillows, against velvet and cotton, linen and silk, thighs shaking with the spread and with the aftershocks of Spike's wicked
tongue doing too much and not enough and then *leaving* him, opened and wanting.

"Don't want to take it too fast, do we, pet? Only get to do *this* once." Spike's fingers played up the back of a thigh, slid along the crease, brush against his balls making him whine. "Don't want to hurt you." The words buzzed into his skin before Spike bit into the back of his thigh - a bird bite that tickled and Xander dropped his face into the pillows, rubbing his cheek against a rough brocade that still had the Pier One sticker on it, laughing helplessly.

"Oh fuck - jesus. You're gonna kill me and you don't want to *hurt* me?" He twisted as far as he could go to meet sparkling gold eyes with a grin and arched, pushing his hips back against Spike. "So - *so* not the point."

A Nest-warm hand slid up his thigh, took a possessive detour up his cock in a way that made him moan and slid up - up to cover his banging heart. To hold it in and the irony set him off again, laughing until Spike mounted him and *entered* - one
stretching, burning thrust that filled him completely as Spike growled into his ear.

"Not the same and you know it." Small, deep thrust - so deep it had nowhere to go and drove a gasp out of Xander, lust and adrenaline and nerves racing through him and making him shake. "Feels good when you laugh. When you're around me... Kinda tickles, right...here." Spike's hand slid down to press his belly - stroke it like a cat.

"Yay for my inappropriate sense of humor." Xander groaned, tightening his fingers on cool muscles, groaning at the answering twitch inside him and the horny possessive vampire pheromones that made his head spin.

"One of the things I love about you, pet," Spike murmured, laying a series of nibbling kisses down Xander's neck - doing a slow roll of his hips. Love you, love you, want you so much, Xander...gonna have you forever... Pushing that out through the link as hard as he could, love and want and shh shh shh.
"Gonna be all right, love - promise."

"That's so much easier to say when you're already dead." It was hard to breathe with Spike in him, hard to think with Spike around him, talking and touching and stroking and whispering. Spike's forehead, ridged and hard pressed to the back of Xander's shoulder, nuzzle and purr and - "Fuck!"

Spike mumbled a querying sound into his shoulder, rolled his hips and Xander had to concentrate to get the words out. "Wh-what about my tattoo?"

"What about it, love?" Spike traced the arabesque, the curve over his cheekbone with a fingertip.

"Will it - look the s-same - ahh -" Spike grinned as another hip-roll cut off Xander's words - his breath - and he traced the tip of his tongue over the twisted knot tattooed at the top of Xander's spine.

"They'll be perfect, Xander - just like they are now. All of them."
"Okay - cause - grr. Bumpies. Bumps - ohhh *fuck.*" Spike nuzzled the bumps and ridges of his forehead up into the crook of Xander's neck, rubbing, nibbling like he was trying to find the perfect place to bite and Xander's pulse leapt up to meet him. Meet the tickling growls, the prickling teeth for the instant before they sank in, deep and hard and plugged in and turned on.

Xander stared sightlessly at the mantel where a douse stared back, pink head tilted so far to the side it looked like it would topple over and Spike was making the kind of noises Xander made with ooey gooey hot fudge ice cream sundaes and he wanted to laugh, shout, cry, moan - because this was *it.*

A giggle escaped - a giggle that might have been a moan, *yes,* animal whimper because the way Spike was sucking, he felt it down to his toes and they curled and wanted *too.*

In his hind brain, cave! Xander curled up under his fur blanket and was scared and Xander gripped Spike's hips in both hands, listening to his heart
pound and stumble and his breath catch, told cave!Xander it'd be okay - it'd be more and better and a whole brave new world and he was gonna love it. Love - Spike. Love. Was why. "G-gonna - have to take a picture of my tattoo in game face. Gonna look all b-ba-dass."

Around them, the house was mostly silent. Just the background noises that come with old houses - and dice. The faint tick tick of the furnace, creaks of settling timbers - the patter patter of dice-feet through the walls and up the stairs - across the floors. The soft sucking, feeding sounds against his neck. And Xander's head was spinning and it was hard to feel the heat from the fireplace on his skin.

Pins and needles and Spike. Xander's tongue was thick and didn't want to move.

Hard to talk - and that was another first and last for Xander Harris. He gave cave!Xander a pat. Gave Spike a shiver and a weak smile and the last squeeze his fingers had in them. "D-don't - bury me anywhere gross."
"D-don' - b'ry me an'-where...gr'ss..." and Spike had to grin around his mouthful of flesh and blood. He pulled Xander closer, feeling the lassitude of blood loss creep over his boy - muscles going limp, his heart...slowing. Spike moved his hips slowly, drawing out the pleasure for both of them. *Fear* in the link, but it was fading. *Love love want* fading as well as Xander took a long breath in - out - in, slower and slower. Spike pulled away, careful not to tear artery or muscle - licked the sluggish trickle of blood that followed. Xander's body was dead weight against him, back to Spike's chest and Spike settled back on his heels, pulling Xander closer - arm tight over Xander's chest. Xander's blood life blood fizzing through and through his body and making the demon whimper in ecstasy.

"Now's your part, love, now's the hard part...love you so much, Xander..." Spike sliced his wrist with one razor-edged canine and pushed it tight against Xander's mouth - squeezed him gently.

"Come on, love, drink now. I've got you and you're
safe, just drink, pet..."

*Love* and *want*, urgent coaxing, pulling from his veins, inside and out. The sinuous *thereness* of the link insisting *drinkdrinkdrink*. All warm and iron red and voluptuous lust and coming home.

*Drink drink beautiful love mine mine mine*. The demon *wanted* - the demon had played along with the wait of months, irritated and covetous - impatient and frustrated. Waited additional weeks while paperwork was finalized. Now it roared its triumph to the heavens, crushing Xander close and rutting furiously - watching with glee as Xander drank, his throat undulating and his jaws working to get more. *Mine mine love want love love havemineforever*. Wash of *yes* and *love* and *cold* from Xander. Fading fast, now. Light burning brighter and then - not at all.

~*~*~*~*~

In the beginning - or perhaps not the *beginning* but
close to it - there were pillows.

There were big pillows, there were little pillows.

There were well-worn velvet pillows and pillows which still smelled of plastic wrapping to Wesley's demon nose. There were pillows with the price tags and federal warnings still attached.

There were - a **bloody great lot** of pillows.

And under them somewhere - Spike said - was Xander.

Of course with that many pillows, it could have been an elephant sleeping under there.

"Was this **really** necessary, Spike?"

"Wha'd you mean, 'necessary', Wes?" Spike's eyes never left the mound of pillows as he spoke - long fingers fumbled blindly for cigarettes, lighter - whiskey. There was a circle of ash and spilt drink and crumbs around Spike's chair that had been
steadily growing for the past eight hours - several dice were running back and forth, collecting the bounty. They perched on the headboard of the empty bed-frame in which the massive...Resurrection Nest had been constructed. They balanced on the windowsills. More lined the fireplace mantle, flanking the two squat muo-pings - one dark and the other glowing warmly, glowing brightly, alive - and given respectful distance by the dice. Wesley clicked his biro once or twice and eyed the Nest.

It had taken a finicky Spike two hours to build - and he'd barely moved since. Wesley scribbled a note on his pad to ask Spike - later, when he wasn't quite so on edge - just what determined the waking hour of a vampire. Surely Spike couldn't intend to sit there with that sort of focus for days?

"I mean - if you wanted him to be comfortable, you only needed to lay him in the Nest. You didn't actually need to gather every pillow in the house into this room."
"Or buy a cart-load more," Gunn muttered, and Spike made a strange sort of grimace, conveying - what, Wesley wasn't sure.

"He's got to dig himself out, right and proper, Wes. Can't just have him...lying there. Not right."

A thought nagged at Wesley and he tapped his biro against his lips, willing it to take a more useful form than 'Spike is an odd vampire'. It came to Gunn first.

"This a family thing? I mean - Dru did all that weird 'among the flowers, close to the sky' shit and buried Darla in a goddamn rooftop nursery." Gunn took his beer bottle back from the two groaning dice who were trying to make off with it. "You can drink it when you can lift it," he told them.

"Did she now?" Spike absently located a Jaffa cake and stuffed it into his mouth - chased it with a gulp of very fine, aged whiskey and Gunn and Wesley winced in concert. "Dru was very traditional, you know. Liked to follow the old rituals - all that funeral stuff. Had to claw my way out of my own coffin, I
did." Something flashed through Spike's rapt gaze at that and Gunn shuddered - smiled when he felt Wes' hand come down warm and heavy on his knee.

"Not doin' that to my boy...sodding ground's frozen, Charlie-boy - tear his hands up something awful..."

Wesley glanced at the three electric blanket power cords snaking out of a corner of Nest with a small smile and tried to be inconspicuous at note taking. "Was it cold when you woke?" Spike really is...the softest-hearted vampire.

"Fucking cold and wet, besides - rained all that day. Fucking mud in my ears and in my throat -" Spike stopped talking abruptly and groped for his cigarettes. The douse who was investigating them squeaked and jumped aside as Spike grabbed the pack and tapped one out.

"I'm... That must have been dreadful," Wesley said softly. He tapped his biro on the pad but didn't write anything. "I'm sorry, Spike."
Spike stilled - cigarette between his lips, lighter lit but held awkwardly in front of him - then turned to stare at Wesley until the lighter burned him and he dropped it with a hiss.

An opportunistic douse dove for it and tumbled headlong into Spike's foot blocking its way. "Not the lighter. Sodding pests." Spike snatched up the lighter and lit his cigarette, returning his gaze to the Nest. "It was a long time ago. Forgot all about it."

Spike hadn't forgotten - his waking as a vampire had actually figured in several nightmares when he'd been ill. But he wasn't about to admit to that.

You're such an odd duck, Percy. Watcher to your core but... His gaze flickered up again, skimming over the two jars on the mantle. The one that held...something...of his boy. Soul, or essence, or conscience...Spike didn't know. He only knew that he'd been - astounded, when Wes had presented them. Astounded and amazed and the rush of love for Wes at that moment had been like a tsunami.
Wes listened.

And he trusted, and he - loved. He was an amazing man. Spike still didn't know what he was going to do with his jar. Use it, or hide it away with Xander's. The soul was a restless thing in him, but familiar now.

*Think about that later. Now - it's all about my boy. All about my love...* He barely noticed that his cigarette had burned down to the filter.

The phone rang in the kitchen. It'd been ringing on and off since fifteen minutes after Xander's 'I decided to become a vampire today' emails had gone out from Wes' computer.

Spike closed his eyes and listened to Xander's voice when the machine picked up. 'You've got Xander. I can't come to the phone right now because I'm dead. Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you tomorrow.'
You git. Only you, pet. A click, a beep, then another voice. Willow again, sounding - strident.

"Xander! This really isn't funny! Pick up the phone, mister! I'm about ten minutes from teleporting over there... Xander?" Spike tuned her out - tuned out Gunn murmuring to Wesley, and the dice and the traffic outside - folk going home from a day's work. Listening for the first telltale susurrus of flesh on cloth that would mean Xander was awake. The link had been dead since Xander had died - Spike hoped it would come back.

"That is the Willow who sucked down a bunch of magic books and tried to end the world?"

"Yes. I'm reasonably sure we have nothing to worry about."

"English - I want better than 'reasonably sure' when it comes to flayin' alive, magic-suckin, world ending witches."

"Charles! You've met her. She's perfectly sweet
when she's not -"

"Ending the world?"

Wesley cleared his throat. "She got better."

"Jesus."

Spike was about to say something - to refute that 

better because Willow wasn't better, just - more subtle. But at that moment a pillow - small and covered in black silk with dull-silver stars - moved. Shifted and slithered down the face of the Nest and Spike shushed Wes and Gunn.

"He's waking up," he hissed, hands curling tense on the arms of the chair. Gunn opened his mouth and Spike growled. The Nest shifted again, another pillow tumbling down. Wes fielded it before it bounced onto the hearth. The Nest stilled and then heaved, and Spike heard a sharp, gasping breath.

"Spike?" Querulous voice, irritated and a little confused and Spike grinned, his foot bouncing in
barely-leashed tension against the floor.

_ Flicker _ of movement in the corner of Spike's eye and he held up a hand.

"Don't - don't move, Wes. He has to do this himself," Spike said and Wes subsided in his chair, biro and pad clutched in his hand. "He'll be fine..."

"Spike?" _ Spark _ of the link coming back - of searching _ fearneedlove _ that made Spike want to roar with triumph as a drift of pillows collapsed on one side of the Nest and Xander...struggled to the surface. Dandelion-haired with static, dazed and confused and his eye wide and drugged. "Stupid - _ weird _ - vampire. B-burying me in fucking _ p-pillows._" A douse raced in front of Xander and he jerked away, stumbled and flailed.

Spike launched himself out of his chair - across the Nest and beside Xander before he'd toppled even half-way down. Cradling Xander close, fully aware of the insane grin on his face - of the demon flashing to the surface to snuffle into Xander's neck - run
hands over the Nest-warm, naked body.

_Lovelovebrightlovewant_ from Xander, chaotic and strong, so damn strong. The demon _purred_, ecstatic.

"Had to do it, love - had to bury you..." Kissing the still column of Xander's throat - hands rubbing up and down his back and pulling him close and Xander burrowed, eye closed, _brightbrightbright_ and shivering, just a little.

_Fire_ and _cotton candy_ and _sex_ and _Spike_ - and the world whirled with details where it'd been darkness before.

_In the beginning, there were pillows_, intoned a voice in Xander's head that sounded a lot like Wesley and a hysterical giggle bubbled up. Bubbled out and he pressed closer to Spike - felt Spike like a roaring presence in his veins that made him want, made him hard. Made him clutch Spike tight and he groaned with the feeling of his face changing, shifting - full - feeling that left him panting. "Fuck," he said again - because it seemed like the thing to
"God yes," Spike breathed - shifted and then twisted and got them down onto the Nest on their knees. "Xander - love -" Lips on Xander's lips, arousal and fierce possession pounding through the link - the demon drinking in scent and taste of minefamilymemine. Wanting - demanding - and Spike nipped at Xander's mouth and pulled back - gazed on the face of his beloved - transformed.

"So fucking...perfect," Spike breathed. And then he had to kiss Xander again, ignoring the tiny noises from Wesley and Gunn and the gradually closing ring of inquisitive dice.

Xander's lips tingled, teeth itched, and if he'd known dying would make him so horny he would've - "Ssspike" - been lisping for a while by now. Another giggle broke the surface and then Spike was kissing him again, lips and fangs - then lips and teeth and tongue with a feeling like melting bone and he groaned, feeling the touch...everywhere. Dizzy. "How...the fuck do they come out of the ground
acting like Bruce Lee?"

"All pumped up from - digging," Spike said - leaned back again and regarded Xander. Eye wide and dazed, still - chest heaving in irregular, half-conscious breaths. Hard - beautiful - aware. The slightly hysterical laughter had only confirmed what he knew would be true. This was Xander.

Moving slowly - not to disturb - Wesley leaned close to Charles, one hand on his thigh and lips close to his ear. "What do you think?"

"Jesus. It's like a birth and an orgy at the same time," Charles whispered.

"Technically, you need more than two for an orgy."

"Well, there's four of us, Wes, and you're lookin' like this is pretty much catnip for demon-types, you know?" Charles' voice was low - circumspect - but his hand was anything but as it crept up Wesley's inner thigh and brushed the hard flesh beneath his fly. Wesley blushed - shivered to the demon and
then back to human and Charles grinned at him and pulled him over for a kiss.

Everything smelled so damn - *good*. Like - spice and blood, sex and *food* - like life, and Xander clung to Spike's shoulders, trying not to get dragged into the hypnotizing dance of the flames - the incredible layers of brass and gold and crystal of Spike's eyes. Spike's hands made little tingles everywhere they touched his skin and Xander pushed closer, wanting more of that - more of everything and barely aware of Wes and Gunn in their chairs. He wanted to - *run*. He wanted to fuck, he wanted to bite and he was starting to shake with the conflicting cues the demon was sending out.

"Spike - J-jesus, I - n-need -"

"I know, love - shhh. I know. We'll fix it, Xander. Fix you right up."

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"Wh-where're we going?" Xander mumbled - with no circulation the cold bit and numbed, made him feel reptilian and sluggish - overwhelmed, because everything was bright and everything was scent and the wind on his skin tingled, tickled, scraped and whispered, like being tapped by a thousand invisible hands. But he wasn't shivering. Couldn't shiver - and the white puffs of his breath were - gone. Which would be really wiggy if he didn't feel so - himself every other way.

Himself with sparks and fizz and an urge for fight, fuck, feed stronger than the first hit of Spike's blood he'd had that night on the road to Ojai.

"Get you somethin' hot to eat, pet," Spike said, arm tight around Xander's waist. They were headed for a bar that catered to demons and humans - headed to a place where Spike knew a handful of lowlifes hung out nightly. The sort of humans other humans were hard put to care about even if they were viciously murdered. He'd chosen carefully, because Xander was Xander and random murder of the
innocent would probably be as foreign - and repellent - a concept now as it ever had been.

*Course, if it's not...that's a horse of a different color entirely,* Spike thought - and grinned wolfishly at the thought of that other jar, waiting for him at the house. If he wanted it.

"Got a bead on a few bad men - give you something to cut you teeth on, love."

Xander drew in a deep, quick breath, scents and impressions crystallizing like ice inside. "Does it always feel like this?" The hunger was a low throb underlying everything. Like the feeling on the cusp of orgasm - the *drive.*

"Depends on how hungry you are, love. But it's like - like wanting to fuck, that. Always there - ready to flare up - make you burn..." Spike leaned over and nuzzled into Xander's neck - sucked the flesh up into his mouth and bit gently, feeling the quiver go through Xander - feeling the blast of it through the link.
"Wait'll you taste it, Xander...god..." The bar was half a block away, spilling neon spangles onto the wet parking lot and Spike grinned - tipped his head back and growled, subdued roar. He couldn't wait to see Xander in action.

Xander reacted - shivered, shuddered at the growl, the urge to growl back nearly overwhelming - the urge for everything was nearly overwhelming.

Like puberty again.

Only when he was seventeen, linoleum made him horny - but now he'd grab the linoleum, fuck it until it begged for mercy, bite it and drain it dry. He pulled back into himself with a gasp, shaking away the itch of demon wanting to emerge and tipped his head back to the sky. "Sure you didn't slip me some vampy Spanish fly?"

"Got it bad, do you?" Spike stopped them - tugged Xander close, groin to groin and hardness to hardness, slow grind of his hips and his hands
cupping Xander's buttocks. "Some of that's me, love. You're so fucking beautiful...can feel you - so strong, now. Makes me..." *Want want want* and Spike grinned as Xander closed his eye - clutched at Spike and pulled him into a crushing embrace.

"Think you can do it, love? Walk in there and - start something?" Xander gasped into Spike's neck - shook himself. Then he lifted his head and regarded Spike with a wide, golden eye - curling grin of a feral Cheshire Cat.

"Don't think that's gonna be a problem, Spike."

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"Y'know what's weird?" Gunn asked, limping across the sitting room and falling onto his chair before the fireplace. *His* chair - that's right. Big, plush and red with wings. Class act with a matching footstool.

Wesley glanced up from his notebook, frantic scribbles to document everything - every detail
eyes, ears and nose could remember. "The sitting room without a Nest?"

Gunn looked around - had to admit it was damn empty. "Yeah. Okay. What's really weird is that was Xander."

"Yes it was, wasn't it," Wes said, stopping his scribbling for a moment and getting this look on his face.

"You're gonna be milkin' them for info for weeks, aren't you Mr. Spock?"

"Hmmm?" Wes went back to scribbling and Gunn wormed a little lower into his chair, sighing. He wasn't - *freaked*. That had been over a month ago, when Wes and Spike and Xander had first told him about the 'Kill Xander' plan. That had been...hard. Had made him think of Alonna in ways he hadn't in a long time. Running their last minutes together over and over in his head. How she'd been - how she'd acted. What she'd said.
Now he had to think - had his little sis been in there? Just - overwhelmed with the new, scared and hungry? If he'd waited - talked - tried... Gunn shook his head, hard. Not going there. Just...not.

"You makin' the rounds again?" Gunn found himself being watched by the fuckin' big one-eyed douse that'd been coming around for the last week - that'd been the first douse to sniff over Fangs Harris and declare him - whatever the hell dice declared acceptable beings who weren't lunch.

"If you're lookin' for the master of the house, he ain't here. He's out raping and pillaging - you'd like it."

The douse twitched its whiskers - one of them was bent in the middle, giving it a more rakish air. It did look approving. Gunn held out his bottle. "There y'go. If you can lift it, you can drink it."

The douse scampered off and Gunn settled back in his chair with a chuckle - less Alonna on his mind and more ha - showed your fuzzy pink ass, didn't I?
Until the douse hopped back - with a determined look and a fuckin' straw.

"You win." Gunn set the bottle on the floor and watched a crew of three dice appear and carry it away behind their - "Hey - English. Do those guys have leaders?"

"Vampires?" Wesley asked - a million miles away in a sea of yellow legal pad pages.

"The demonic Chia pets. Seems like that Cyclops one is kinda the leader. He had a straw."

Wesley blinked down at his notes - circled something - then: "Straw? Whatever are you talking about, Charles?"

"I'm talkin' about drunk dice in the attic. You're way too involved over there, Wes - haven't given me a leer in at least an hour."

"I do not leer," Wesley protested, but he put his notes and biro down - got up and crossed over to
Charles and crouched down beside his chair. Tipped his head up and tugged Charles down for a long, slow kiss.

"I do do that, however. Is that better?"

"Gettin' better by the minute."

The phone rang.

"Jesus. Not again."

'You've got Xander. I can't come to the phone right now because I'm dead. Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you tomorrow.'

They looked toward the kitchen. "Nothin' keeping us from turning the sound off is there?"

"No."

"Xander, this is Rupert Giles. While Buffy and I have talked Willow out of immediate teleportation, please call soon - whether you have a conscience
left or not, it's in your best interest. Buffy asks me to remind you that Ben and Jerry only solve a woman's problems until she can't button her jeans."

"Must've turned their damn cells off," Charles grumbled, and Wesley stood up, going for his own cell phone that was perched on the mantle.

"They probably did. Let me just - call Rupert. Reassure him and then..." Wesley turned a long look on Charles - a look that roved from head to foot and back, with significant...pauses. "Then I think that we might - retire. Spike and Xander won't be home for hours." Wesley added, and the heat in Charles' gaze went up a notch.

"Nothin' like 'my parents aren't gonna be home' to turn a guy on." Gunn levered himself out of the chair and slid his hands down Wes' upper arms - the firmness of him - the solidity and warmth. Not a damn thing like Fred, Gwen, Anne - and he was starting to think that might be some of what was right.
"They're hardly parents." Wes turned, shy-smiled the way that made Gunn forget this guy was ever Danger Man The Broody.

"The kids are out," he answered, grinning and slipping his hands down to rest in the small of Wes' back. "The scaryass punk kids with sharp teeth and tattoos." Close enough to kiss - so he did.

"What is today's youth coming to?" Wes asked - a little breathless.

Really breathless a few minutes later and Gunn watched in smug satisfaction as Wes bumbled his way through the phone-call overseas, apologizing for the late hour - even though he knew Rupert was up - apologizing for not calling sooner, apologizing for apologizing until Gunn plucked the phone from his hand.

"English has got some heavy-duty necking to get to while the Gruesome Twosome are out and about. He'll talk to you later, okay? Bye." Gunn flipped the phone shut - put it on the mantle - and grinned at
Wes' poleaxed look.

"Wanna get naked?"

Gunn gave Wes a real generous thirty seconds of verbal stumbling, then caught him up, crushed him close and shut him up with a kiss. "That a yes?"

"Yes." Wes was giving him that wide-eyed, dazed and horny look that didn't scare him anymore - hell, it made his blood-pressure rise in all the right places. A guy could get used to making his boy weak in the knees. "Charles - a-are you certain you're -" "Don't you dare go getting all chivalrous on me now."

"Or what?" That look had changed - that look had gotten dangerous. Danger Man in the house looking - god help him - coy.

"Or I might try out those handcuffs Blondie Bear's been swishin' around with."
"Oh? Big talk, Mr. High Powered Lawyer." Wesley shivered - *changed* - watched speculation and lust flare in Charles' eyes. "Better be sure you can back it up." Charles smelled - *good*. Like spiced cookies and musk and earth. Dark and rich and Wesley had to taste. Had to push into the warm crook of Charles' neck and fasten his mouth over the skin there - lick and then suck as Charles moaned. Wesley kissed and nibbled and tasted while his hands made themselves busy untucking Charles' shirt and stroking over warm, silken skin. Charles' hands, meanwhile, were doing the same - running lightly along the spines that crested Wesley's skull and lacing his fingers through the ones along Wesley's back. Sending shivery tinges up and down Wesley's spine and straight down his cock.

"Oh - god, Charles..."

"Like that?" The spines quivered and clattered quietly against each other with every shiver, Wes' lids getting heavier over those shark-dark eyes. "Naked time. *Now.*"
Wesley caught his breath, cock twitching to the growl in Charles' voice - and growled back, tearing Charles' shirt cleanly down the middle, licking a broad stripe up his chest in an explosion of salt and musk and spice until his knees buckled.

"Jesus!"

"I," Wesley said around a nipple, hard and hot between teeth he was careful not to puncture with, and emphasized his words with a thrust of his hips, "like that very much."

Gunn was amazed they actually made it up the stairs. If the Nest had still been in the sitting room, he'd have taken his chances in it. But they did make it, leaving a trail of clothing behind - and oh fuck but wouldn't Blondie Bear have something to say about that? But then Wesley - human again, flushed and panting - pushed Gunn down onto the bed and straddled him - pressed groin to groin and Gunn arched, making a squeak of surprise. Who fuckin' knew? Jesus - "Christ, Wes, that's - that's -"
"Good, isn't it," Wes murmured, and did it again - then reached between them to grasp them both in a slide that would've made Gunn weak in the knees if he'd been standing up.

"Damn good - where you been all my life good!" Gunn grasped a handful of the bedclothes and a handful of Wes, hot smooth skin under his palm and it was nothing like anything else - hard and rough and fast and no worrying he was gonna hurt Wes when too much was almost enough.

But not, not quite and Gunn reached up and wrapped his arms around Wes - pulled him down and held him, press of that fever-warm body all along his. Wes' legs were hugging his hips and Wes' cock was sliding along his hip - his belly - leaving a cool trail of fluid behind - and Gunn's cock was trapped between them.

"Just - wanna feel you. All over me -" Gunn panted, and Wes moved - did something that undulated his whole body and Gunn had to squeeze his eyes shut. "Oh god, god, god!"
"Mmm..." Wes was kissing his neck - his jaw - his mouth. Wes was scratching his nails lightly over Gunn's scalp and shoulders and Gunn was palming the heavy muscles of Wes' buttocks - kneading and pushing and pulling and Wes was grinding down, breathy little moans of pleasure coming out between the kisses.

"Wes - fuck -"

"You're so beautiful, Charles -" Wes murmured, and Gunn stilled in shock. "You feel so good...taste absolutely...wonderful..."

"You're such a girl, English."

"I realize you mean that only in the emotional sense." Wes said in a voice far too dry for a guy moving like that, for a guy that hard - for a guy who'd just been sucking Gunn's brains out through a bottom lip that still tingled. "At least - I do hope you meant -"
"Yeah, yeah." Gunn pushed with his good leg, rolled them over and thanked whichever resident hedonist chose a soft mattress for this bed, grinding Wes down into it with a groan that wasn't all English. "I noticed you're all man." His hand shook, sliding over the angles of a hip, concave curve of Wes' muscled belly - and wrapped around Wes' fingers with a tingling slide of flesh. He jacked slow - hard - good - till Wes' leg came up and around and locked behind him. "I like it."

"Yesss..." Shiver of demon not-demon and Wesley fought it back. Wanted this time - first time - to be just himself. His hands stroked up and down over Charles' back, finding the small scars - the bulge of muscles. Marks of a physical man - a powerful man and Wesley brought his other leg up, thighs wrapping around Charles hips and his body tilting - tongue flickering over Charles' collarbones and nipples. "God - yes, like it..."

"I'd like a whole lot more of it." Charles groaned, ground down against Wesley until he could feel bruises forming, sparking waves of possessive want
from the demon.

"That - oh - that can be arranged. You would have...far more trouble putting me off -"

"Than gettin' you off?" Their hands were slick now - wet and warm and fluid - and hot and tight as he could ask for.

"Yes - yes - that won't be a - god! - problem!"

"You always talk this much and I never noticed?"

"I can be quiet if you like," Wesley said, and then he was kissing Charles with everything he had - kissing and arching and squeezing their hands together, tight and hot around their cocks and his other hand was on Charles' ass, pulling him close just like his legs were doing and Charles was groaning into his mouth, and Wesley's heel was riding in the hollow behind Charles' knee and their hands were moving, grasping, clutching...

And Charles broke away with a low moan, eyes
wide and then fluttering shut and Wesley was chanting "yes yes yes" with a dry throat and swollen lips and then Charles bucked hard, his hips moving out of rhythm with hands and Wesley's hips, grinding down and thrusting and Wesley pulled him down again, mouth to mouth and his hand slicked and hot, tangled with Charles' and - oh - his world grayed around the edges, sparks jumping, trickling, rushing through his nerves.

Then Wes was arching against Gunn and breaking his promise like a sailor. All yes and fuck and fuck me and dirty, passionate English things Gunn couldn't translate - and then for one second - so fast Gunn wasn't sure if it was real, Wes shivered half way to demon and back - glowing silver all around the edges, pink and flushed in cheek and lip and - "Beautiful, English."

"You -" Wes panted, raised a shaky hand to stroke across Gunn's skull, eyes sated and half closed, "girl."
The cemetery - Old Burying Point - was old, and Spike settled himself carefully on a decrepit tombstone from 1722, lighting a cigarette and watching Xander do a little dance with an obnoxious vamp who'd followed them, apparently spoiling for a fight. He was getting one, and Spike watched - grinned gleefully as Xander twisted aside from a punch and came up fast, fist sinking into the other vamp's midsection and doubling it over. Xander's elbow crashed down on the other's neck and the vamp went down hard. A moment later it was over and Xander was up and bouncing toward Spike, fangy grin and a smear of blood on his lip.

"He caught you, then," Spike said, standing up and wiping his thumb along the blood - sucking it into his mouth. Xander shook the demon away and probed his lip with the tip of his tongue.

"Yeah - got lucky - or I got unlucky. Jesus - I'd have
been *hamburger* before tonight." A grin lit Xander's face and he tilted it up to the moon, laughing.

Spike took a long drag on his cigarette - looked around at the rows of crooked headstones. Everything silver and white, humps of wet weeds and stone almost indistinguishable and the new-Spring trees like stark sentinels over all. Old here - older than Angelus and maybe someone Darla once knew was buried here, who knew? Spike shivered slightly and hooked his hand around Xander's neck - drew him in for a kiss.

"You wanna go home, pet? Sun'll be up soon."

"Uh huh." Xander slipped his hands around Spike's waist, under the duster, under the shirts where cold hands didn't matter and rubbed his nose against the duster collar. "Home, where the Nest lives." He peppered kisses up Spike's throat to his lips and walked backwards. He didn't have super special grace. Or fancy martial arts moves - but now when he fell on his ass, it didn't hurt.
Or it hurt and felt good - and hey, not complaining about what feels good, here. Not that he'd want to try out the big pain. *Nope. Not a whip me, beat me, tie me down vamp here.*

*Okay - maybe a tie me down vamp.*

*Or a tie you down vamp.*

"What're you thinking?" Spike asked, assaulted by musky arousal and a blast of want in the link, Xander's teeth pressing into his lips.

"Thinking about...tying you up..." Xander mumbled and stopped with an *oof* of breath as he walked himself into a tree. Spike leaned in hard, hands tangled in Xander's hair and his thigh between Xander's.

"Yeah? How d'you want me, pet, back or belly?"

Xander drew breath to moan and wriggled against Spike. Prickles of oncoming dawn skittered over his skin. "On your elbows and knees. Ass up, head
down." Xander slid a hand between them and cupped Spike, felt him, hard and soft and his. "Want this where I can get at it. Where only I can get at it."

Footsteps approached - a whistle - and the demon surged with hunger but it was like...his inner kid. Who surged with the same ravenous want when it passed the Cinnabon. He breathed deep and let it out with a growl - stopped. "Hey. Does Cinnabon smell good to vampires?" Which might be a weird thing to ask in a cemetery before dawn with his hand on Spike's dick and some really lucky pedestrian passing by to work. But Xander could take weird. Weird and Xander were old buddies.

"You smell good," Spike murmured, dazed by the force of wantminewant that Xander was putting out - ready to grind into Xander's hand and get them both off. But the want went from lust to blood in the time it took for Spike to notice some human walking perilously near. He kissed Xander - distraction and affection - and tugged him away from the tree.
"Let's go see about that, then," he said, arm around Xander's waist. "Had fun tonight, yeah?"

"I've gotta hand it to you. Vamps know how to party," Xander admitted, skirting the grave of one Samuel Leech and giving him a wave, one leech to another. Xander felt another grin coming on. He cracked himself up. "Gonna let me? Tie you up and drive you to Crazyville?"

"Let you? I expect you to, pet. All spread out and helpless for you? Fucking hot..." Spike slid his fingers down inside the waist of Xander's jeans and stroked the top curve of his ass - dug his fingers in and kneaded. "Let you do anything, Xan." *Anything you want...everything.*

Xander hitched, a bolt of *oh yeah!* slithering into his libido and playing around. "Gonna show you how a construction foreman ties knots to start. I'm gonna tease you till you're begging - and fuck you when I'm ready - and not feel even a little guilty about it."

"Fuck I hope not," Spike breathed. He swung Xander
around, kissing him hard - pushing hard cock into hard cock. "Gonna make me scream, love?"

"Gonna make you sob, it feels so good." Xander growled, grabbed Spike's hips and ground into him, stumbling in the purple predawn light, the demon sated and Xander exultant.

"God I love you." Spike grabbed back just as hard - pushed his face into Xander's neck and bit at it, human teeth pinching and nipping. He felt the tremor go through Xander - felt the yes and mine and joy in the link and changed - bit for real, shuddering as the pepper-spice of magical, demonic blood hit his tongue. Just a mouthful and then he was pulling back - licking his lips and grinning.

"Last one home - doesn't get to come," he said and bolted away, laughing.

"Wh - hey!" Xander chased after him - after flapping coattails and peppermusk spice. He tackled Spike on their stoop, slamming them both into the door. He was panting - because hello, old habits - and
panting was breathing - and breathing was great lungfuls of pheromones pouring off Spike and into him. He thrust, ground Spike into their front door and bit - the *pop* of fangs through skin and rush of blood over his tongue like summer grapes if summer grapes went straight to the cock. He slid out, traced the punctures with his tongue as they closed, feeling the tremors through Spike's body rattling the door. "You're gonna have to beg so much before I let you come."

"Might...Jesus *fuck*! Might make you work for it... Might be *baaad*..." Spike arched up into Xander's body - clutched at muscle and coat and rolled his hips, trying for more contact - more friction. Xander's blood still on his tongue and the bite on his neck sending out hot little tendrils of buzzing pleasure. "Might have to...*make* me..."

Xander growled out loud and shoved his hand into Spike's front jeans pocket; got a knee between his thighs and pinned him to the door with a hip and a look as he fished for the key and jerked it out. "Might have to *spank* you. See - I learn by doing."
And being done. And fuck, does Wes know how to do." He dangled the key for Spike.

"That he does," Spike said, the growl a pleasant tickle through his bones. He took a startled step backwards as Xander opened the door, then he was pushed into the jamb and Xander was kissing him with a sharp-toothed mouth - and stepping back one, two steps.

"I guess I made it home first. Guess who doesn't get to come?" Then he whirled around and ran, giggling like a maniac and Spike sprinted after, slamming the door shut behind him and pounding up the stairs hot on Xander's heels.

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"Damn kids." Gunn muttered. He would have rolled over but damn it, he had an armful of Englishman and it felt too good to waste for drama. "Earplugs, English. I'm buyin' earplugs tomorrow."
"Doesn't help. They can shatter the sound barrier. Dampening spell," Wes muttered back, and then shifted - sighed - and was asleep again. Gunn glared at a pair of winking red eyes that were running along the baseboard and then he sighed, too and settled back to sleep. *Figure it out in the morning.*

~*~*~*~*~

"Coffee, tea or blood?"

"Do you have *any* idea how wrong that is?" Gunn lifted his head - but also his cup 'cause hey, a guy had to get his morning jolt somewhere and if a vamp could make a decent cup of coffee, he'd drink it.

"On a scale of mismatched socks to William Shatner albums, it ranks between white chocolate and fat free Oreos." Xander pivoted with a cup of coffee, a cup of blood and a package of regular Oreos, a douse hanging on for dear pink life from the crinkling corner, and set down the coffee for Gunn.
"If you dunk, I'm giving the rest of the package to the furballs."

The douse sat up instantly, whiskers quivering.

Xander pulled the package protectively closer.
"Over my dead - huh. That so doesn't work for me anymore."

"And I thought you and Spike got your meals...on the hoof, so to speak?" Gunn settled into the chair opposite Xander and sipped gingerly at the scalding - really good - coffee. He almost didn't wince when he asked that question, too. Good one, Charlie-boy. Sounded real - natural.

"Oh, I do. I mean - we do. But not cows 'cause that's - gross. This is a snack. Like Oreos. Nice warm blood and an Oreo cookie. They forever go together what a classic combination..." Xander sang the jingle, ruining it forevermore and grinning at Gunn's wince. He tore open the Oreo bag and took out a stack of eight or so - handed one off to the douse
who clasped it eagerly, tight to the furry, pale-pink belly and started nibbling along the top.

"And - you know it's just really bad guys, right? I mean - we're not eating little old ladies and girl scouts," Xander added - not that he really cared one way or another but it still felt best going after the kind of guys who'd made his skin crawl when he was human. And Gunn nodded - ran his hand over his jaw like it itched and winced

The scent hit Xander like a sledgehammer.

Fresh blood.

The douse was looking at him. Narrow limpid eyes. Then it grinned, gobbled the Oreo down and hopped off the table and away with a flick of its tail.

Xander picked up his cup in shaking hands and drained half of it, rich and thick - salty and good. Human. But without the spark. Like drinking flat orange soda when he could smell the fizz and bubble of -
He shivered and licked his lips, put the cup down and sniffed.

No harm in sniffing...right?

"Uh - Harris?"

Xander's eye popped open to find Gunn leaning way back and him leaning way forward.

"Xan, there any more of those pierogies left? I fancy a few of those before we -" Spike stopped dead in the doorway of the kitchen because Gunn was looking...spooked. And Xander - was looking a little too feral for his own good. The rich scent of fresh blood was on the air and Spike shook his head slightly and sauntered casually over to Xander - pulled him back in his chair and straddled his lap, blocking Gunn and filling Xander's senses with his own scent and feel - and taste, with a lingering kiss.

"You tryin' to scare Charlie-boy, love?" he murmured, and Xander shuddered under him -
kissed him back, his fingers digging into Spike's hips.

"No, I - I'm not...I'm really not -" Xander murmured back, sounding a little desperate, and Spike kissed him again, thankful to hear Wes on the stairs. More distraction, until Xander could get himself calmed down

"Course you're not, love..."

"Smells so good," Xander groaned, aware he was hard and breathing, flexing his fingers on Spike's hips. Trying to get it all under control with the demon turning happy circles inside like an overeager puppy - and wasn't that just his luck? He shivered, resting his forehead against Spike's, licked his lips and cleared his throat. "Oreo? Anyone?"

"Certainly not for breakfast," Wesley said, breezing into the kitchen and then shooting a hard look at Xander and Spike - a questioning one at Charles because those two looked - a bit het up. And Charles looked - a little shaken. Wesley crossed to the range, getting a mug off the rack there and
lifting the still-steaming kettle - pouring as Charles pushed himself to his feet and limped over

"Everything all right, Charles?" Wesley asked, and Charles took a sip of coffee, brows drawn down a little in thought.

"Yeah. Junior over there couldn't resist the Gunn charm." Gunn made up his mind, reached across Wes for a paper towel and slapped it onto the stinging spot on his jaw. He didn't add 'for breakfast' 'cause a guy's gotta have some standards on his lame quips, no matter how low. Being sniffed didn't rate too high on his freak scale anymore.

Course, that could have had something to do with Wes standing in between him and the Twosome.

"You do smell...edible."

"It doesn't count when you're tryin' to freak me out, English." Wes answered by covering his lips with a warm, tea-flavored kiss and that was all right.
"All right then, Xander?" Spike asked, and Xander took a deep breath - leaned back a little and smiled up at Spike. Slightly crooked smile, but real.

"Yeah. I *am*. Think I'll just finish up my Oreo's - hey!" Spike ducked as Xander lunged and Oreo's rolled and bounced everywhere as the bag split. The five dice who'd been trying to surreptitiously drag the entire bag off the table scattered, *sqreeeling*. "Oh, man! Look what they did!" An Oreo crunched underfoot as Spike hopped off Xander's lap.

"If you didn't feed them, they wouldn't be so damn greedy," Gunn intoned, and Spike flipped him two fingers, grinning. Gunn flipped him one back.

"Like nobody's caught you feeding them your extra moo shoo chicken when you think nobody's looking." Xander lifted his head with a grin and Gunn...grinned back.

"I have the right not to incriminate myself and I'm gonna use the hell out of it." Gunn poured himself another cup of coffee, the first a loss to the dice
who'd taken a liking to the metallic lettering, a tale spelled out in spilled coffee that was turning spilled Oreo crumbs to mush as fast as Xander could pick them up, casting evil looks at the dice. Gunn slipped the enterprising undersized douse a sugar cube and plopped two more into his coffee cup.

"Good lord - it's like we have...dogs. Or children. Is this what children are like?" Wesley asked, and every other person in the room turned completely blank looks on him. Nearly blank. "Spike - when you were -"

"Don't go there, Watcher. Wasn't married, was I? And no, I did not have children. Unless you count the strays Dru picked up and brought home. She read those bloody books about that bloody French girl with the hat and wanted to have two rows of girls in hats -" Spike stopped talking abruptly as Xander shoved an Oreo into his mouth.

"Oi!" Only it came out more like "Uuuh!", with an accompanying spray of chocolate crumbs. Spike spat the biscuit out into his hand. "That's got teeth-
marks on it, Xan! May be a vampire but I don't eat after bloody rodents!"

"And we do not corrupt my childhood reading habits." Xander scooped soggy handfuls of cookie off the floor and onto a napkin.

"You read that shite?"

"Uh - well - Willow..." Xander tried to look like a vampire who'd never worn a yellow hat and marched around for a summer behind a little Jewish girl in a nun's habit - at least until Mrs. Rosenberg had caught them.

"Just when I thought life could get no more weird and disgusting." Gunn moved aside for Xander to drop his soggy handfuls of cookies into the garbage disposal. "I am never gonna be able to eat an Oreo again." He realized Xander was grinning at that. "Ain't none of your Twinkies gonna be safe after this, Harris."

"What? It's just - crumbs and stuff and Spike spitting
cookie everywhere - I didn't even dunk!" Xander grabbed some paper towels and went back to mopping up sodden cookies as Spike fixed himself a cup of tea-with-whiskey *standard* and opened the 'fridge, rooting around enthusiastically.

"Besides, this is your coffee down here making things all gross and melty."

"Says the vampire who put *Cheerios* in his blood two days ago - you don't get to say *anything's* gross anymore, my man. And besides - I can't get down there with this knee -" Gunn smirked.

"That's right, trot out the war-wound Lord Nelson," Spike said, wrestling with a Gladware. Xander snickered - saw the grin on Wesley's face quickly hidden behind his mug.

"Besides - the Cheerio thing was an experiment. Spike said I should try something new." Xander scooped the last of the mess up and tossed it - went to the sink to wash his hands. "And clean!"
"Not hardly," Wes drawled, looking with a raised eyebrow at the streaks of mushed Oreo that still decorated the floor.

"What?" Xander asked, looking at the streaked floor with the young American male's blind eye for messes.

Wesley handed him a mop.

Xander took it with a mutter and bent to work - and it was in no way disturbing watching him lift the kitchen table with one hand so he could mop all under it with the other. Gunn shook his head and downed his coffee. "Need a hand, Blondie Bear?"

"No, I - bugger." The lid popped off and pierogies scattered, much as the Oreo's had done and Wes snorted into his tea. "Bloody hell. These? Suck." Spike shredded the 'ware with a jerk of his hands and glared at the food on the floor - stalked over to Wes as he continued to grin much, much too widely.
"All your fault, Wes - you bought the sodding things. Told you we didn't need them." Wes opened his mouth to protest and Spike pounced - kissed him long and hard, hearing with satisfaction the hiss of in-drawn breath from Xander - and the smaller noise from Gunn.

"Tryin' to domesticate us, Wes?" Spike murmured, hip to hip and lips brushing, and Xander was suddenly there, pushing in all eager and grabby, claiming his own kiss before Wes could even blink.

"Yeah - trying to make us into Susie Homemakers," Xander muttered, finding that spot on Wes' neck and sucking gently, sucking up the pepper smell that was stronger now - and slipping Gunn a sly glance when the human lust ratcheted up abruptly.

"Surely - a vampire is clever enough to defeat a simple piece of kitchen equipment."

Xander pointed at the shredded container on the floor. "That? Is defeated kitchen equipment." Gunn's breathing, on the edge of his awareness,
was ragged - heart a steady pound and Xander felt a rush of love for Wes - for Wes' timing. For Wes' ability to make it all normal again and pushed into his neck, sucking and nibbling his way to Wes' ear, whispering. "Thanks, Wes." And then kissing the incredible heat of his mouth with a sigh.

"You're - you are quite welcome, Xander," Wesley said, once his mouth was free to speak. He smiled at Xander, a little bewildered and then glanced over at Charles who was...looking. And not a look of disgust or amusement or jealousy, a look of...

Oh ho - is that how it is? Well, then... Wesley smiled - tugged Spike a little closer and ran a hand up Xander's back - into the thick, silken hair. And Charles...watched.

Watched but oh no it was not turning him on. No way was he turned on by two vampires kissing and sucking on Wes. Down boy, he told the part of him that stopped listening to him around the age of thirteen. "When you're done macking on my boy there, remind him we've got a shop to open and an
order coming in."

"Our boy," Spike objected, but he grinned at Gunn - pried Xander loose and gave Wes a small push towards the other man. "Better go be the shopkeeper, love. Maybe we'll have a...family night tonight," he added. Then, pierogies forgotten, he got his arm around Xander and started pulling him toward the door. Need to go talk to my boy and then need to fuck him unconscious. Or maybe the other way 'round and save the talk for later.

"Some family. It's like the fuckin' Addams Family around here. Plus incest," Gunn added when Spike's hand dropped to Xander's ass and copped a feel. But before they got out of the kitchen, Xander was squirming like a fish - and then Xander was right there smelling like blood and chocolate and Wes. And then he - licked Gunn's jaw, little coldfire sting. "What the fuck, Harris?"

Xander darted away with a grin, eye dancing, mouth wide and bright - like that was one happy soulless guy. "Would you believe me if I said vampire saliva
heals minor wounds?"

"Not in a thousand years."

"Don't be a Doubting Thomas, Charlie-boy," Spike added - sidled in next to Gunn and then snaked his head down to do the same - sucking kiss right over the tiny cut and Gunn's blood tingled on his tongue, rich and sweet and peppery with some sort of magic. Gunn twitched away reflexively but Spike knew. His spicy musk was spiked with lust - the same wantwantwant that was pulsing from Xander and from Wes, even.

*Oh yeah, family night. Wonder if Charlie-boy'll ever...*

"You should always be up for trying something new, pet," Spike purred.

"First man who says I'm *up* all right is gettin' staked." Gunn wormed out of the cool embrace and backed to Wes. The two vampires gravitated together like some kind of two-bodied organism,
winding around each other and sharing his warmth, he was pretty sure.

"Is that a no?" Xander's forehead rested against Spike's - a pose Wesley knew he'd seen before but couldn't place. He rubbed his fingers over Charles' back in a comforting gesture.

"That's a - " Gunn flicked a look at Wes, whose hand in the small of Gunn's back was soothing but not pushing. He licked his lips. "That's a maybe."

Spike grinned - fangs and golden eyes and a cant to his hip that made Gunn swallow, hard.

"Good enough for me, pet," he said - his voice low and rumbling and beside him Wes shivered, just a little.

"Stop teasing now, Spike and - oh my, it's nearly half past, we really must be going. Charles? Are you ready?" Wes' hand never stopped its soothing pressure and Gunn blinked - licked his lips and watched Xander change as well - watched them
both watch him and - Jesus fuck. It was...turnin' him on

"Just - need to get my coat, English," Gunn said, his throat feeling much too dry and his trousers too tight.

Xander sniffed the air once they'd both gone - in a swirl of the kind of scents he'd have described as 'musky' as a human and 'pure fuck me now' as a vampire. Strong enough to make his head spin and the little taste of Gunn's blood sparkled on his tongue. Control - control he had. But the want - Jesus, that wasn't getting any easier.

"I think we're wearin' him down, love. Gettin' him turned around to our way of thinking," Spike said, doing a slow hip-roll against Xander's thigh.

"He wouldn't be the first white-hat seduced to the dark side by the wiles of a sexy vampire or two. Even construction foremen aren't safe these days."

"Mmmm..." Spike nuzzled into Xander's neck -
kissed a slow trail up to his mouth. "Now then, love - want to talk about it?"

Xander pushed into the kiss, comfort and promise of sex - heat that took the edge off the hunger that never went away. "I can resist but god it's hard to remember why I want to sometimes."

"That's why we hunt, love - that's why we fight and fuck like the demons we are. That need... And you can resist anything, Xan. Know you can." Spike kissed his way around to the other side of Xander's neck - nibbled the scar that had claimed his life and grinned at the hitch of breath - the jerk of Xander's hips. "Even I don't wanna drain Charlie-boy. But he did taste...fucking good."

"I could give up Twinkies for that taste." Spike went still under Xander's petting and gave Xander the most skeptical look in his repertoire. "Okay, so I couldn't." He buried his nose in Spike's neck, nipped with demon teeth and sucked on the coppery brightness of Spike's blood - intimately familiar now. *Home* and *family* and sex - no longer unmixy
things. "But I'm an evil soulless monster so I can lie if I want to."

"You can do all kinds of things if you want to. Like -" Spike got his arms around Xander's waist and leaned back - looked up at Xander through his lashes, pouty smile and grind of groin to groin - cock to cock. "Like that thing you did last night..."

Suggestive lift of an eyebrow and Xander's demon shimmered and fell away as he leaned forward to kiss Spike hard. Spike pushed his own demon away and let himself be roughly kissed for long, long minutes. They both jumped when the phone rang. Xander pulled back and eyed the handset on the base - frowned.

"Let's get upstairs so I can try that thing again," he said, and they both walked out of the kitchen. On the way past, Xander picked up the handset and dropped it down into the cradle. "I'll call you back," he told it over his shoulder, letting Spike tow him up the stairs two at a time.
The air, that early, was still crisp with cold but the bone-freezing bite that it had had in March was nearly gone. Recent rain had brought out a strong smell of earth and growing green and Gunn breathed deeply as they walked along, enjoying the day - enjoying the clean air and the sight of budding flowers in tidy gardens and empty lots. He was happy here. Happier than he'd been in a very long time and it was all down to Wes. *And the Gruesome Twosome. Don't sell 'em short. Disturbingly...sexy and wrong as they may be...* Gunn pictured the Xander-Wes-Spike clinch from the kitchen and felt a warm rush of blood go from head to toe - and then return to his groin.

"Oh, my god. They've done it, Wes. They've actually done it," he moaned.

"Discovered cold fusion?" Wes looked at him with that mischievously *thick* look, the *'I'm too proper to*
know what you're talking about' look.

"And why do you have to be so English? I'm having a crisis here."

Wesley unlocked his shop door and smiled over his shoulder, catching the scent of lust instead of panic. Helpless amusement instead of anxiety. "Stronger men than you have fallen to their charms."

"Oh, you're stronger than me now, are you?"

"Oh, I fell ages ago, Charles - I won't deny it. But, you know - Rupert has confessed to me -"

"No - no. Stop right there." Gunn stomped inside - turned on the heel of his good leg and fixed Wesley with a gimlet eye. "I do not wanna hear the Secret Life of Watchers confessions about lusting after Blondie Bear. Bad enough he and Angel -" Charles snapped his mouth shut at Wesley's look and Wesley took pity - shut the door and locked it and then leaned forward to kiss Charles cool, mint-and-oranges mouth.
"It's all right, Charles. I'd actually find it a bit...odd, if you didn't have some sort of - reaction. Vampire hunters are known to be more...susceptible. It's the appeal of the forbidden."

Gunn snorted and slid a hand under the back of Wes' shirt where his skin was always hottest. "Forbidden is the castle on the hill where the master will be with you and he bids you drink. These guys are...something else. Hell, even Angel had an air of forbidden mystery. These guys are...less like a Nocturne and more like the Monster Mash."

"I always thought them more as Frick and Frack, but that could just be me." Wesley pushed into Charles' caressing hand - nuzzled into the warm bend of his neck and breathed deeply - slowly. "You smell divine, Charles. It's no wonder they flirt with you - any demon in its right mind would want you."

"What is it with you types and neck?" The snuffling breaths against his neck were making him shiver and making that tuning fork feeling crawl up and
down his spine.

"It's primal." Wesley pushed in - darted the tip of his tongue over the place where he could taste Xander on Charles' skin and nuzzled, replacing that scent with *his* with a secret smile. "Instinctive. And it turns you on." He let go of Charles - checked the Book and jotted down the day's warnings and notes and flipped on the shop lights. "Dominant."

"You are *so* getting your ass smacked for that tonight." Wes froze and Gunn groaned. "Don't tell me it's true - what they say about Englishmen and spanking?"

"What *do* they say about Englishmen and spanking, Charles? Please - tell me," Wesley said, hiding his grin as he turned on lights and flipped the sign - unlocked the door. Wondering if Charles would say - anything. Wondering - if he'd carry out his threat. Wesley shivered in delight at the thought. At Charles being so - open, and at the affectionate teasing - the warmth in his voice. Spike and Xander would never let them live it down, but... Wesley
simply did not care.

"That y'all got your first stiffies bein' thrashed by the nanny or school master and never got over it." Gunn caught up with him and handed out a stinging swat to Wes' ass, grinned when his breathing went harsh and he had to grip the counter. Gunn rubbed the sting from his palm against Wes' slacks, squeezed the firm muscle beneath until he shuddered. "So - is it true?"

"I can't - speak for all my fellow - Englishmen, but I can say that the thought of you -" And suddenly Wes had turned and his blue eyes were nearly violet they were so dark. Dark and hungry, staring at Gunn and Gunn almost took a step back. Felt a wave of heat rush through him and felt his heartbeat drop right down to his cock.

"Th-thought of me what, Wes," he asked, mouth suddenly dry

"The thought of you holding me down - heating up my arse with your hand and then - your cock,
sinking into me..." Wes took the single step that bridged the gap between them and his heat and hardness were suddenly pressed tight to Gunn. "It makes me...very, very...eager, Charles. It makes me...weak." Wes' voice had dropped to a whisper and Gunn took in a sharp, hard breath.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Wes."

Because Wes was holding his eyes with that blue-violet gaze, licking his lips and looking...fuckable. And looking like he knew it too, the way the phone rang and he picked it up without breaking that eye-contact - or the contact of his palm burning a circle on Gunn's chest. "Wyndam-Pryce Occult."

*Sex line. So what're you wearing?* Gunn added privately when Wes kept his bedroom voice on.

"Wesley? Is that you?"

"Rupert!"

"It's Charles, English - the hormones fryin' your
brain?" Gunn said, but Wesley shook his head slightly, still eye to eye - still *touching*, fuck. Gunn tentatively put his hands on Wes' hips and grinned slowly when they moved, twitching toward him.

"Have I called at a bad time, Wesley?"

"I - I - no, of course not!" Wes bit his lip but didn't pull away from Gunn. Blushed high up on his cheekbones. "Charles is here." He closed his eyes and leaned back, slow push and grind and his fingers curling on Gunn's chest, finding his professional voice. "Did the box of enchanted *potentilla ansarena* arrive in time?"

"It arrived two days ago, thank you, and it was wonderfully fresh, really top-quality. But that's not *why* I called, Wesley."

"No?" Wesley said, breathless and - *grinning*, because Charles was returning the pressure - was pushing into Wesley's groin with a slow roll and grind that felt - bloody good.
"I beg your pardon?" Rupert said, and Wesley gaped at the phone. Surely he had not -

"Nothing, Rupert. Is there a problem? Something I can help with?"

"I certainly hope so. It's Willow, Wesley."

"Yes. She's rung several times. Xander has her messages if the bloody dice haven't stolen them again." Wesley swallowed a groan hastily as Charles thrust into him, unmistakable rhythm that made his blood pressure soar.

"Dice? Oh - yes. The thing is, Wesley, that I really must insist that Xander return her calls. She getting frantic and frankly - we're all afraid she might...do something."

"Do - something? What - do you mean, exactly?" Wesley asked. Hoped to god his voice sounded normal and not - breathless and desperate and *horny*. Dear god. And Charles was *looking* at him - his dark eyes hooded and his mouth turned up in a
slow, seductive smile.

"Something rash," Rupert said. "And something magical. And - are you listening?"

"Every word." It wasn't a lie. Wesley had discussed far more complex matters - with far more complex activities going on. He spared a rare blessing for Lilah and had to smile, catching Charles' lips in a kiss.

"You could be in danger, Wesley - all of you."

"Really - do you think so, Rupert?" Wesley stifled a groan as Charles shifted against him - ran a callused hand up his back. "I realize she's probably upset with Xander but... Surely she wouldn't hurt him."

"I - I would hope not, Wesley but... Listen, just tell him to call her, please. We'd all be very grateful."

Gunn ran his fingernails down Wes' spine, watched the morning foot traffic passing by outside the shop window and got a little thrill being this public - this
casual together. Wes was promising to pass on whatever message, then hanging up the phone and Gunn didn't wait to claim his kiss, he went in for it as soon as the phone was down and ground Wes into the counter.

Then the bell jingled and Gunn stepped back with a groan because there was public - and then there was public and thank god and Xander for building a high counter in the shop.

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"So what you're sayin' is - basically - most of the real heroes down through history were gay?" Gunn kept his eyes fixed on the subtitles as Hephaestion insinuated more than political loyalty to Alexander.

"Well, not as such -" Wes started, in that very proper 'Watcher' sort of voice that meant he was going into teacher mode. Xander promptly stifled him with a pillow.
"The first kissing scene is coming up, you guys - quit with the lectures!" Wes yanked the pillow away from Xander and tossed it across the nest - after bopping him with it - and Spike leaned across Gunn to bop Wes back with his own pillow.

"Cut it out! I'm gonna miss the good stuff." Gunn got an arm around Spike's neck and an arm around Wes' and dragged them both down to his chest, trapping them there and watching the screen. "If there's gonna be big gay historical smoochies, I'm gonna watch 'em."

"Don't you get enough big gay -"

"Shh!" Xander snuggled up behind Spike and clapped a hand over Wes' mouth, eyes glued to the screen.

Gunn watched the two men - a bit froofy for his tastes - talking in a tent, armor and maps and gear spread everywhere. Reveled in the blissful silence. Wes tended to keep up a running commentary about how that particular type of armor was the
wrong century, or that kind of cloth was not sold to Greeks, or whatever. And then Spike would chime in, and he and Xander would roll their eyes. But now, Xander was keeping Wes quiet and Spike was - Spike was -

"Is that your tongue, Blondie Bear?"

A sharp tug at his right nipple and Gunn hissed. "Shit - no fuckin' biting."

"Can tell you like it," Spike muttered around abused flesh, lashing it with his tongue, salt and musk and the orange-clove soap.

"Not by vampires."

"Vamps do it best," Xander tossed over Spike's shoulder and flashed Gunn a flicker of gold in his eyes.

"It's creepy, so knock it off," Gunn said - but not too sternly because it also felt - pretty damn good and no way was he saying that out loud. Wes finally
managed to pull Xander's hand off his mouth and he tugged at Gunn's arm, settling more comfortably and dropping his hand onto Gunn's chest - absently stroking. The combination made Gunn shiver. On screen there was kissing. Hard-core kissing with groping through armor and Gunn bet that was no fun. Nothing like lying in a Nest with three horny demons pawing you. Xander's hand was stroking his ribs now and Gunn sighed and squirmed happily - winced as he twisted his knee.

Three heads popped up and with a click of the remote, Alexander and Hephaestion froze in the liplock that dare not speak its name.

"What?" Gunn fought the urge to squirm - 'cause they weren't looking at him like dinner. Way worse. They were looking at him like they wanted to fix something.

"Is your knee bothering you?" Wes' hand came down warm and soft on his thigh, above the constant grinding ache that used to be his knee cap.
"Nah. Just twisted it. Come on - get back with the gay love fest." He pushed himself further into the pillows with his good leg and settled in to play Sultan - in his head. Though he had a feeling these three wouldn't object to that idea if he voiced it out loud.

"Shall I fetch your pills?" Wes asked, and Gunn almost wanted to snap - but didn't, because Wes' hand was so warm, and Spike was looking at him with speculation and - commiseration, and Xander looked ready to do anything from fetch heating pads to give Tantric massage. Gunn snorted softly at that thought, and Wes smiled at him.

"Nah - I'm good. Damn things make me all groggy, anyway - I'd miss the rest of the movie and whatever you guys got up to afterward."

"All right," Wes said - reached to the edge of the Nest and snagged his beer. "I have been doing research, you know. There isn't anything that will - make it like it was but... There are some promising things that will take the pain away, without the
soporific effects."

"You mean - Gunn won't be a zombie?" Xander asked, leaning in over Spike, his hand stroking gently at the tensed, strained muscles in Gunn's thigh. Spike's hand slipped underneath - attacked his calf - and Gunn groaned in pleasure.

"Yeah, no pain, no zombie-effect. Sounds - god - yeah - great to me, English."

Xander slid his hands around Gunn's thigh, sitting up in the Nest and working his fingers into the muscles the way he did for Anya when her legs hurt after a day at The Magic Box. Gunn's half closed eyes and incoherent groan said the Harris magic fingers hadn't lost their touch. Spike squirmed around to a half-sitting position, too, concentrating on Gunn's calf.

"Gonna keep the slave boys too." Gunn folded his arms behind his head and grinned at Wes.

"You may find them to be more trouble than they're
worth."

"Not when they can do - *fuck me* - that."

"Just wait 'til I *am* fucking you," Spike said, knuckle-deep in calf-muscle and there was another pause. "What?"

"Perhaps you -"

"Fuck, Spike -"

"Hey, guys, it's cool." Gunn raised his head a little - took Wes' beer out of his hand and took a sip. Gaze locked on Spike's.

"Too fast for you, Charlie-boy?"

"Just a little, Blondie Bear," Gunn replied, and Spike dropped his lids over his eyes - looked up at Gunn from beneath his lashes and smirked at the jump in Gunn's heartbeat.

"I'll take it slow, then, pet." *Want yes love want*
want in the link and the Nest thick with the scent of lust.

"Until it's time to take it fast." Xander flicked a glance at Spike, wickedly curved grin and no secret of the hardness tenting his pajamas. "Spike's good at fast." He heard Gunn's heartbeat trip and slid his gaze up along Gunn's body.

"What about you? What're you good at?" Gunn heard himself ask and blamed it all on the beer and the vampires turning his leg to jelly. Clearly, he'd lost his mind somewhere flying over Kansas.

"Learning." Xander dug in his knuckles in an imitation of Spike's maneuver in his calf and Gunn hissed, blissful numbing warmth spreading through his thigh.

"Christ." Gunn eyes were wide - so dark - and Spike took a deep breath of his spicy scent - rolled it over his tongue in appreciation. He kept up the kneading massage of Gunn's calf but leaned over to take Wes' mouth in a slow kiss.
"Like -" Xander said, a little breathless, "Wes likes it when Spike does that."

"Uh huh," Gunn muttered, and Spike broke away - smiled up at Gunn.

"Think you'd like that too, Charlie?"

"I think - thh-ink I'll let Wes give me the trial run," Gunn said, his voice low and little rough.

Xander let go Gunn's thigh with one hand and caught Wes to him with the other, holding him with a hand behind the neck and easing his lips apart with nips of teeth and tongue and lightly scratching fingernails that made Wes shudder all over. "Free sample with trial run of the other," he explained to Gunn with a grin.

"Sweet fucking Jesus." Gunn dropped his head back into the Nest and gave up, opened his eyes to find Wes hovering over him, smelling like Spike and Xander and himself and Gunn gave up to him like a
lifeline, groaning into the kiss because damn it, why should the twosome have all the fun?

"Our padawan is learning quickly."

Wesley glanced briefly at Xander, smiling, and then concentrated on kissing Charles - on making Charles groan softly into his mouth and curl his hand behind Wesley's neck - breath in panting little breaths through his nose. After a bit Wesley looked up - at Xander and Spike who were leaning together, eyes wide and hot with desire - bodies pressed together and - moving. Gently. Seductively.

"Once I've learned everything there is to know about kissing Charles...you lot can have your turn."

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Spike hit the Nest hard and then Xander was on him, frantic hands, frantic kisses, flickering in and out of game face and so hard he forgot not to breathe, cool panting breaths feathering over
Spike's throat and chest. A leg over his shoulder, lining up and pushing in with a shaky groan, hunger in the link like tribal drums and Spike's fingers marking bruises in his hips.

"Fuck -fuck," Xander said - with feeling, mouthing wet kisses into Spike's throat, missing the thunder of his heartbeat but loving the needy electric fizz and crackle that'd replaced it. "Jesus yes."

"Christ - thought I was gonna - go crazy -" Then Spike lost the ability to talk and Xander's mouth was on his, making it a moot point, anyway. Shuddering slide of Xander into him - sharp points of fangs and nails and a tingle, a buzz -

That grew. That became a sort of hum and - why was the ceiling going all - swirly?

"Xan - love - ah, god - what in bloody hell -"

"If you don't know - you shouldn't be doing it. Or - wait. What?"
Xander stopped - stared at Spike - stared at the ceiling and suddenly -

"Fucking hell!"

"Oh my god -"

"You're in big trouble, mister." It was Willow.

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**Square Twenty-Four**

For one moment Xander was locked into...utter panic. He wasn't the man who had the remnants of a hyena-spirit in him, or the man who had William the Bloody for a lover. He wasn't even the vampire without a soul who was taking his mate in the most primal and savage way.

He was, instead, the snot-nosed twelve-year-old,
caught with Jesse in the Harris garage, smoking the cigarettes they'd stolen from Ralph's. Then Spike - *undulated*, the outside *and* the inside of his body doing - something amazing and Xander felt his eyes flutter shut and his lips curl up in a grimace of pure bliss. Exposing bloodied teeth because Willow gasped, a squeaky sort of noise and Xander could *smell* her.

Sulfur and pepper stink of magic, acrid tang of fear, the salt of her sweat and the scent that was, he realized, just *her*. Sage and earth, sandalwood and electricity and sugar.

"Willow, Jesus *Christ* -" he gasped out, and Spike growled.

"Piss-poor timin', Red."

"Would you two just *stop*? TMI, guys! Big TMI!" Willow's voice was muffled and when Xander forced his eyes open to look at her, she was standing with her hands over her face.
"Our bedroom, our Nest, middle of a bloody brilliant shag - fuck off," Spike snarled, and Xander made his own sort of growl as Spike clenched down on him. His hips, Xander realized, hadn't even faltered in their insistent in-and-out drive into Spike's body.

"Private time with the boyfriend, Willow. Now."

"Xander -"

"After!" The word wheezed away from him when he forgot to take in air to make it and he inhaled the brine-smoke smell of Spike's precome spicing the air. "Please." The ghost of embarrassment or shame pulled the please up from his belly and he - didn't like it. Shook it off and felt the harsher planes of his face surface with a growl - drove into Spike hard enough to make him gasp. "Not now."

"Xander, I can't believe you -" A wordless, bone-shaking snarl from Spike and Xander heard Willow's heart kick up to a faster beat - saw her face pale and her eyes go wide and wantprey in the link - from both of them.
Then Willow was backing out of the room and Xander turned his attention to Spike, the demon and himself dismissing her as soon as she was out of sight.

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On the mantel in the second suite, a candle always burned. Whenever it guttered in the holder, Wesley woke and replaced it. Gunn'd watched him swap the damn thing four times since he'd moved in, once when they'd been having themselves a nice session.

Tonight, the candle flame flickered a lurid purple-red and that wasn't boding any kind of good.

Problem was, Wes was still asleep.

The two dice who'd woken Gunn stared at him from the footboard, noses twitching impatiently at him. "What the fuck am I supposed to do?"
Later, he'd swear the damn furballs rolled their eyes at him before racing up the bed and leaping on Wes' head.

"Bloody hell!" Wes went from asleep to awake in .5 seconds, sitting up fast and sending the dice slithering down and off, one thumping to the floor with an irritated sqreek. Gunn stifled a laugh and reached out to smooth Wes' hair which was, at the moment, rivaling Spike's for wild disarray.

"Sorry, man, they jumped you before I could wake you up. The -"

"Candle, yes." Wes scrubbed his hand over his face and groped beside the bed for his robe. He slipped out from under the covers, tugging it on and fumbling for his glasses - finding his slippers. Gunn sighed and did the same, shivering a little.

"What d'you think - it is?" Gunn said through a yawn and Wes stepped up close to the candle, examining it, adjusting his glasses.
"The wards have been breached."

Gunn tried hard to pretend it was normal watching a man tuck a pistol into his bathrobe. "Breached as in we got trouble right here in River City or breached as in blown wide fuckin' open?" He tied the belt of his robe extra tight because a man did not need to worry about some things when he was facing down unknown evil.

"Breached as in - we have a visitor who did not use the front door -" Wes cocked his head, listening to the house settle and whatever else little half-demon ears picked up. "Whoever it is, they haven't prevented Spike and Xander from pursuing orgasms."

"Ain't nothin' prevents those two from pursuing orgasms," Gunn muttered but followed Wes out into the hall with a cast iron fire poker. It wasn't an axe but it was heavy and pointy and it'd do. And he had his cane in his other hand for back up.
They both stopped stock still in the hallway. Three doors down, just outside of the 'master' bedroom were a cluster of dice. In the dim passage they were looking - up - and Wesley followed their gaze to a form hovering motionless about four feet above the floor.

"Nice little...mice. Little fluffy pink mice. Dice! Maybe - maybe I've got some cheese somewhere?"

"Willow - what on earth -?" Wesley felt an unaccustomed surge of - irritation. *Doing magic in my house - uninvited - who in hell does she -*

"Oh, great," Gunn mumbled, gripping his cane a little tighter - lifting the poker. "We've got Destructo Girl in the house."

"They started it!" Willow pointed at the dice and eeped when one leapt straight at her finger, double rows of teeth snapping.

"You might find that they disagree." Wesley withdrew his hand from the pocket concealing his
gun and held it out to Willow, addressing the dice. "This is a friend of Xander's. I suppose you'll have to trust me on that at the moment."

"Hey!" Willow hit the floor with a jolt and glared up at Wesley. "I'm the wronged party here - I got an email saying Xander was dead a week ago and then nothing."

"I did tell him to call you back. He's been - busy," Wesley said vaguely and Willow snorted. "Yeah, I kind of saw the busy. They growled at me!" Willow's wide eyed stare - and crimson ears - made Gunn chuckle.

"What, they didn't invite you to join 'em?"

"What? No! Ewww! Gay now!"

"Yes, we're all well aware of that." Wesley sighed and pushed his hands back through his hair. "Let's go downstairs and have some tea and - and talk about this. They'll - be awhile," he added, when it
looked like Willow would protest. She made a face - looked down at the dice who were still watching her with a fixed, whiskers-forward intensity that made Wesley remember the stray-dog bones they'd found in the basement, under a broken window.

"We'll have some cake, as well," he said deliberately, and the dice seemed to waver. "Come along, Willow - Charles. I'll make you a hot toddy, if you like," Wesley said, smiling at Charles and Charles leaned the poker against the wall - tucked his arm through Wesley's.

"Sounds good, English."

Willow twisted around to watch the dice, backing away from them. "They sounded a lot cuter in Xander's emails."

"He tell you about their favorite delicacy?" Gunn could see Wes' quelling look in the corner of his eye and ignored it.

"Twinkies?"
"Nah. They'll eat 'em but what really gets 'em going is dog."

"You feed them dogs?"

"Charles!"

Gunn figured it was fair payback for getting him out of bed at three in the morning. "We don't feed 'em. They kinda help themselves. Found a whole skeleton in the basement with their little gnaw marks and -"

"Puppy!"

"Charles, that's quite enough." Wesley battled a helpless laugh at the smug expression on Charles' face. "They only attack when provoked, Willow."

"Yeah, like - when you do magic in the house without asking first," Charles said and Willow sidled around Wesley and Charles both, away from the dice.
"Come along, everyone," Wes said, put-upon sigh that made Gunn smirk. Wes shot Gunn a small smile and they led Willow downstairs and along the hall to the kitchen, flanked by the dice. Once there Wes put on a kettle and Gunn opened up the cabinet over the sink, lifting down the brandy and then getting the little plastic honey bear from the table.

"Think we're outta lemons," he said, and Wes nodded, assembling tea-things on the counter.

"Spike used them all doing shots to that - movie," Wes said, a look of mild disgust on his face.

"Dusk to Dawn is a great movie for drinking shots to," Gunn defended, and Wes just shook his head. Gunn leaned into him for a moment - kissed his rough cheek, ignoring the look the witch shot them. "Next time we'll drink shots to Goodbye, Mr. Chips."

"No. Next time, we'll drink shots to - we will not drink shots." Wesley shook his head. "Honestly, Charles - how the three of you ever remember the
end of the movie -?"

"We don't. That's why we gotta watch it again."

"Xander and Jesse did shots to Bollywood movies." Willow said, sitting in a chair and looking - too small and young for a witch who'd almost destroyed the world. "They drank root beer and had to belch whenever a god appeared."

"And good little girls never did that, huh?"

A sudden smile lit Willow's face. "I don't like root beer. I did apple juice."

"Hittin' the hard stuff young."

"Oh yeah, that's me, I'm a rebel," Willow said and for a moment Wesley saw the cheerful, earnest girl she'd been in high-school. "I could never do the burp-thing, anyway," she said, putting her elbows on the table and leaning forward, watching as Wesley found a new box of sugar cubes and filled the sugar-bowl. A douse had crept up onto the table
in anticipation and Wesley carried over the bowl. Charles followed with the brandy, settling into his own chair.

"Here - give it one of these," Wesley said, shooting the douse a quelling look. "They'll be much happier with you if you feed them."

"I just can not convince these boys that demon mice on a sugar-high is bad," Charles said, and Willow chuckled. She lifted a cube out of the bowl and held it out flat on her palm, like you'd offer to a horse. The douse cocked its head left, then right - minced forward and delicately took the sugar, its whiskers whiffing over Willow's palm, its tail standing straight up.

"Oh! Did you see? It took it!" Willow grinned happily and the douse skipped backwards. Another was scaling Charles' robe, and a third had leapt up onto the counter and was examining the honey bear, hefting it experimentally with both forepaws.

"Oh, no you don't!" Wesley snatched the bear and
set it on the cooker. The dice didn't like the open flame of the gas ring - anything put there was safe as long as the cooker was in use.

"Hey, mister!"

"Sqrrreeel!"

Wesley whipped around to find a douse hovering above the table, three sugar cubes clutched precariously to its fluffy chest, hind legs flailing. "One at a time. If that's the rule, that's what you're gonna do. So I'll put you down if you put down two lumps. Deal?"

Whiskers twitched furiously. "Willow - I don't think it's a good idea to -"

"I'm not hurting him. I'm making a deal with him," Willow said reasonably, holding the douse still and not too high. "You drop two and I set you down. Or you can let the spell wear off. It takes a couple of days."
The douse appeared to consider these two options, clutching the sugar more tightly.

"Okay. You wanna be a balloon for a day, that's your business."

Two pieces of sugar thunked to the table where the douse scaling Gunn's robe and a third snatched them up and ran.

"See? That wasn't so hard." Willow let the douse down gently and waved as it ran. "Have a nice day!"

Wesley set a cup and saucer down on the table with a bit too much force and Charles winced ever so slightly. "Willow. I'll thank you to stop using magic in my house. Especially that sort of unnecessary stunt. It upsets the dice and it upsets -"

"What in bloody hell were you thinkin', Red, doing a sodding Houdini into our bedroom?" Spike, in the doorway, Nest-headed, barely swathed in the heavy brocade robe Wesley had gotten him for Christmas. And Xander right behind him, pajama pants and a
worn t-shirt.

"It upsets the vampires," Charles said.

"The witch isn't Miss Calm Girl either!" Willow folded her arms, turned and glared daggers past Spike at Xander. "I had to teleport all the way across the Atlantic to get a word out of you, Mister. So let's have it."

Xander reached for the indignant coal burning in his chest but he seemed to have misplaced it and left the great sex afterglow where it belonged - though Spike was still a seething tangle of annoyance and bristling, offended demon. He stroked Spike's arm until he felt sparks of calm through the angry red streaks and tugged Spike to a chair. "Hi."

"Not that word."

Xander picked up the coffee carafe and shook it before pulling down a mug. "Coffee?"

"Xander -"
"Lay off, witch," Spike snapped, striding over to the range and bending down, lighting a cigarette on the blue flame under the kettle. "You didn't need to come over here at all and you sure as fuck didn't need to -"

"Well, maybe if somebody would have called me, instead of sending very-not-funny 'I am dead' emails out -"

"Look, Wills, I -"

"Oh no, you don't get to be all reasonable and calm, Xander -"

"Shut! It!" Spike's hands slammed down stinging-hard on the table-top on either side of Willow's elbows and she jumped - gaped at him - and then Spike snarled as he felt the tell-tale prickling surge of energy as she started to gather her power.

"Willow. Stop," Xander said, and she deflated, her hand going to her head.
"Wow, that kinda made me -"

"Feel sick? Supposed to. It's Wes' wards." Spike stalked around the table and yanked out a chair - pushed Xander into it and stood behind him, hands on Xander's shoulders. "Stop with the bloody magic and talk."

"How could you do it, Xander?"

"Do you want the flip answer that's going to give you another headache or the real answer you're not going to like?" Spike's fingers brushed the nape of Xander's neck and he pushed into the touch, blinking slowly.

"I want any answer. Please?"

"It's like you said when you and Kennedy left for Brazil, Wills - you have to follow your heart."

"My heart led me into a rainforest, quicksand, a family of mean monkeys and Rio during Carnival."
"My heart bleeds for yours." The words came quickly, smoothly and hey look ma - no guilt even though Willow was giving him hurt eyes and trembling her lower lip. "The point is you followed your heart. So it didn't work out. I'm following mine. Keep following yours - maybe next time it will."

"What about your soul? Does it bleed for mine too?"

"Sure."

"Sure?" Willow leaned back irritably as Wes poured tea into her cup, waving off the offer of cream and the brandishing of the ReaLemon squeezable plastic fruit.

"Yes, sure. What do you want me to say? I thought I explained it all pretty clearly in my email." Spike's fingers rubbed, rubbed, rubbed and frustration irritation mine in the link.

"That's just it! You decide to give up your life and -
and your soul and you send an email? Who are you, Bill Gates or something? This is serious, Xander!"

"It's done, Red. No going back now," Spike rumbled, the demon barely leashed.

"No, it's not done. I brought an Orb of Thessulah, Xander. I can give you back your soul."

"Hey - not Deadboy here. Or - " The phrase stopped Xander and he looked to Gunn for help - Gunn wasn't helping. He was snickering into his tea. "Not that Deadboy. Willow..." Xander reached across the table and took her hand - shock of warmth and the electric tingle of power. "I'm still me. It's not - natural putting a soul into a vampire." He flicked a quick look of apology to Spike. Not you sweetheart - never you. You're...more than a vampire. Special. Crazy. The last made him grin.

"But you're evil now."

"Is that what he is?" Wesley murmured, and Willow shot an exasperated glance at him as he settled into
the chair next to Charles.

"Of course he is. He's a soulless vampire. Hence, the evil!"

"Shouldn't talk about what you don't have a single, sodding clue about, witch," Spike snapped, and Wesley winced a little. Perhaps this would go better if Spike -

"I think I know a little about soulless vampires being evil, Mr. Bottle Through the Brain!"

"Yeah, those were the bloody days -"

"Play nice, children," Charles sing-songed, and Xander grinned at him - snagged a sugar-cube and crunched it.

"I appreciate the gesture Wills but - not very evil here." Xander spread his hands and ran them up Spike's arms.

"I don't want you to be evil at all." Willow's voice
was tiny - and Willow was tiny. And it was broken yellow crayons time. "I don't want Buffy or Faith or Kennedy to slay you."

"They'd have to get me before I got them."

"Xander!"

"I'm a vampire now, Willow! Slayers slay. Vampires try not to get slain. It's the way it works."

"You'd kill Buffy?"


Willow raised her hand to her head again, rubbing between her eyebrows and Wesley abruptly stood up, dislodging a clinging douse. "It's nearly four. I say we all go to bed and sleep on this and in the morning - err -" he cast a glance at Spike and Xander - "the afternoon, I mean, we'll all sit down and talk. All right?"
"Perfect. Me and Spike weren't really done, anyway," Xander said, jumping up and slinging an arm around Spike's waist. Willow took a breath as if to speak and then sighed.

"Yeah, okay. My head's killing me. That sounds like a good idea, Wesley."

"I'll show you to your room, then - any luggage?" Willow climbed stiffly to her feet, shaking her head and Wesley ushered her toward the doorway, just wanting her out. Scenting frustration and annoyance and a whisper of sorrow from Xander and nothing remotely like sorrow from Spike. And Charles looked tired, as well, and really - the sub-sonic buzz of the wards was giving Wesley a bit of a headache too, on top of it all.

"Thanks Wes - we'll clean up in here," Xander said, and Wesley nodded and led Willow out.

"I'm doomed to bring wacky in-laws into every relationship." Xander dropped his head to his folded arms.
"Not like mine are any better, love," Spike said, leaning down and brushing the hair away from the back of Xander's neck - kissing the frail skin just there. "There's my girl Dru, who's certifiable, and there's BatVamp, poncing it up on the Hellmouth."

"How 'bout me and Wes? We part of the bride's party or the groom's?" Gunn poured a healthy slug of brandy into his cup and swirled it around.

"The bride's." Xander stretched his neck to give Spike more skin, flexing his hand on a cool thigh.

"Wait - which one of you is the girl?" Gunn asked, and laughed when Spike and Xander spoke in chorus:

"He is!"

"Oh, yeah, you're married all right," Gunn said, and drained his tea. "Let's get this stuff put away before we have to buy another sugar-bowl," he said, glaring, and the dice who were circling bowl
number three tried to look innocent.

"I'm not buying another sodding lighter." Spike fixed the dice with a gimlet glare. "Want mine back or I'm taking hostages. Understand me?"

One douse nodded.

Two blew raspberries and heaved at the sugar bowl.

Xander watched them. "I say we bribe them."

All three turned to look at him, tails high and twitching.

"What sort of bribe?" Gunn asked, pushing himself upward and standing still for a moment, getting his balance.

"I have a plan," Xander said, eyes fixed on the dice. "We'll put up a sort of - offering tree."

"Xan, love, they're not bloody druids."
"Like a Christmas tree - they'd like -" Xander watched the dice go into an orgiastic frenzy. "Okay - they know about Christmas trees. Come on, guys - it'll be fun."

"It'll be a sodding nuisance." Spike eyed the dice who were trembling with excitement and doing the nose-whisker whiffly thing that meant, maybe, they were talking. Or getting ready to groom, or possibly to mate. He tried not to notice. "But no - err - Offering Christmas Tree until I get my lighter back, you capisce, you little buggers?"

The dice disappeared into the pantry with three quivering flicks of their tails.

"Think they're going to get the lighter?"

"I think we'd better be gettin' a tree."

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Spike fought the noise - fought the growing
consciousness the noise was bringing but - he was losing. And there was something on his head, for fuck's sake and it wasn't a pillow and it was not Xander. It moved - tugged painfully at his hair and he shot his hand up and clawed at it - encountered downy fluff and pistoning limbs and he pulled - yelped - and glared at the douse trapped in his fingers.

"Little bastard," he growled and then he and the douse froze as chimes rang through the house. Again. Accompanied by a rather irritating - irritated? - knocking.

"S'early yet," Xander mumbled, buried under pillows and a tasseled, velvet throw and Spike set the douse aside with a glare - reached over and plucked the throw off, exposing a mass of tangled, mink-brown hair.

"Xan - 's the door."

"Doors don't make noise."
"Ours bloody well is." The chime sounded again and Spike growled - wormed out of the Nest and found his robe, jerking it on and lapping the edges but tying the belt so sloppily it would be open and flapping by the time he got downstairs.

"Gonna go eat whoever the sodding bastard is," he muttered, and stomped out the door.

"Kay." Xander yawned - rolled over and tugged the throw back over his shoulder. "Save some for me!" He listened to Spike's snort, tracked his stomping progress down the hall, down the stairs - listened for the yelp of bare vampire feet on cold tiles in the entry and -

"What!"

"Bloody hell, Spike! I've been standing on your stoop for -"

"Middle of the sodding night for our type, Rupert."

Xander sat up fast enough to fling a napping douse
to the foot of the Nest and scrambled into his pajama pants, yanked on the first tee shirt he found and pounded after Spike. "Don't eat him!"

Spike glared at the rumpled, frowning Watcher standing on his front step, bulging overnight bag in one hand and a wool coat in the other. Giles was sweating and looked - anxious. Spike felt after his cigarettes and lighter - cursed when the lighter was still not in his pocket, and turned away, stomping toward the kitchen. It was a stomping sort of day.

"Come in then, Rupert - bloody hell. I suppose you'll want tea. And a place to sit. And probably food, too, won't you, you demanding bastard." Spike listened to Xander pounding down the steps and grinned. "This one'd stick in my teeth, pet!" he yelled, and winced when Giles slammed the door.

"Too old for you?" Xander bounded down the last few steps and across the foyer, snatched up Giles' luggage and coat and trotted them through to the kitchen.
"I'm not that old, Xander!"

"Yeah - Spike's a picky eater." Xander turned at the entry to the kitchen, inhaling the musky male and magic and books scent of Giles' coat and suppressed the urge to bury his nose in its folds. "You smell good enough to eat to me."

Giles rubbed between his eyes - the headache place - and gladly took a chair. "I'm not certain if I should thank you or pull a cross on you."

Xander licked his lips and stole a quick sniff of the coat as he passed Spike on his way to hang it up. "Then I guess a lap dance is out of the question." He could feel Spike's eyes on him and the wickedly lustful amusement in the link.

"Oh, right - forgot about that," Spike said, perking up a little and lustyesyes in the link. Xander shot him a look.

So not the time.
Xander hung up the coat and draped himself over Spike, growling into his ear. "Just keep on forgetting."

Giles was still rubbing at his forehead - looking tired - looking...old and Xander felt a sudden clutch of fear, like claws in his belly and Spike looked sharply over at him. "Giles! Why are you here? Is everybody okay? Is Dawn okay and Buffy? Nobody's hurt, are they? I mean, why else would you just show up unannounced at our house unless somebody was -"

"Xander. Stop," Giles said, holding up his hand - then moving it back to his forehead. "Everyone is fine, I promise. I was...concerned for your welfare, actually."

"I'm fine. Fit as a really fit fiddle."

Giles looked him over - "I think you'll find not everyone will agree with you."

"I don't look fine to you? Do I look fine to you?" Xander appealed to Spike.
"Look more than fine to me, pet. If you've got something to say, Rupert, be straight about it."
Spike bussed Xander's lips and reluctantly let him go, drifting to the cooker and Wes' tea things.

"Really, have both of you suddenly gone daft?"
Giles looked up at them with a hint of that darkness Spike well remembered flashing in his eyes. "You sent out 'I'm not dead, I'm just a vampire' emails, Xander, and then you utterly failed to follow up with any sort of communication whatsoever! I had to call Wesley to find out everything had - worked -"
Spike snorted, snapping on the burner and setting the filled kettle on it with a bang and Xander repressed the urge to roll his eyes.

"All very well for you, you didn't have a hysterical witch hanging on your arm every minute of the bloody day! Would it have killed you - stop it, Xander! - to have picked up a phone? And then Willow goes popping out of the Council Headquarters like - like -"
"The Wicked Witch of the West?" Spike asked, settling into a chair and puffing furiously. His lighter, he'd been pleased to note, had been lying on the table with a handful of change and some Mardi-Gras beads. Looked like the dice were taking the Offering Tree thing seriously and acting on their best behavior.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Giles said, slumping a little and Xander sat down as well, leaning his elbows on the table.

"Wait'll we tell you what she popped in on," he smirked. Giles looked up at him - stared at Xander's chest.

"Going by that shirt, I don't have to guess."

Xander plucked at it, looked down at the colorized image of Count Dracula and the dripping-blood style words. 'Vampire's do it in coffins.' He shrugged. "Deathday present from Wes and Gunn."

Giles stared at him.
"Okay. Mostly Gunn." Xander picked the string of Mardi Gras beads from the table and ran them through his fingers. In the corner of his vision he could see the littlest douse wringing its paws. "Was this yours?"

It took a hesitant hop forward, whiskers twitching - stopped.

"Here you go." Xander held it down at floor level. "You can have it back."

It rocked back and forth on its hind-paws.

"The gods are appeased."

It fiddled with its tail.

"Trade for a spoon."

Ears and tail sprang upright and the douse disappeared into the pantry.
"So *that* is a douse," Giles said, watching the retreating pink-tufted tail. "They seem quite - did it really understand what you said?"

"They seem to," Xander said, shrugging. He could feel the nervous energy of being woken up out of a sound sleep creeping over him and he jumped up and went to the pantry himself, perusing the shelves. "You hungry, Giles? We've got tons of stuff - Wes believes in stocking up and I swear Gunn's a closet *Mormon* or something, the way he buys canned food. Let's see -"

"A bit peckish myself, love - any of those crackers left, the ones with the bits on? Got some of that smoked cheddar -"

"Xander - Spike - you can be honest with me. Did you kill Willow? Because really - you're being remarkably...calm." Giles looked pretty calm himself for having made such a statement and Xander blinked at him in bewilderment, at a loss.

"Would you be very mad if we *did*?" Spike asked,
perking even more and Xander closed his eye.

"Yes. Extremely. As I would be with her if she'd dusted the two of you."

Xander's eye popped open and he stared at Giles. Spike was...goggling. Xander recovered first. "Willow didn't. I mean - obviously - but we didn't either. She's - " Realization that he didn't know where Willow was hit Xander's sleep-addled mind with the speed of a lazy house fly. "Where is Willow?"

"Reckon the dice ate her?"

"The house is still standing so - guessing no."

The kettle's whistle began its rapid climb toward a scream and Spike got up and crossed to the cooker - turned off the gas and paused. "Hang on - here. Looks like Wes left a note." He put the kettle back down, ignoring Giles frustrated sigh - moving aside gladly as Giles came over to make the tea himself.
"He says - 'Gone to the shop, took Willow with us, please don't give the dice any more sugar' and...home by six. Also - message on the phone." Spike picked up the house phone - it had been holding the note down - and dialed the voice mail. Winced when the message was Giles, telling them when his flight would be in.

"That's sorted, then," he said, following Giles back to the table and then scowling as he realized the Watcher had only made one cup. He returned the kettle to the ring, drumming his fingers on the counter. When it whistled again, he made a second cup and liberally dosed it with whisky, ignoring Giles' longing look and tuning back in to the conversation.

"I wouldn't exactly say she's happy for us." Xander made air quotes, had his legs hooked through the rungs of his chair like a little boy.

"Biding her time's what she's doing." Spike slid into a third chair, balancing his cup on his thigh; a disheveled Victorian gentleman after a bender. And
the bender wasn't over if Xander had anything to say about it. He dragged himself back to the point.

"She'll come around."

"Around from what, exactly?" Giles asked casually - too casually and he asked the question into his tea.

"From me dying, I guess. So uh," Xander flickered his fingers - indicating Giles and all his invisible friends. "How many of you are in on this little 'soul Xander' plan? And how many guest bedrooms are we gonna need to fix up to convince you I don't want one?"

"Soul Xander plan? I wouldn't call several - well, let's call them rants - about soulless, evil vampires a plan of any kind. I know that Willow is concerned for your - soul, Xander."

"She needs to take her nosy self back off to Merrie Olde before it gets bloodied, Watcher - won't put up with her high-handedness." Spike gulped his laced tea and sighed as the warmth hit his belly and
traveled out. "She dropped in on us, practically *in* the Nest with us - makin' demands - she's got no *right* -!"

"She's a friend, and she's worried. You two really should have called." Giles sipped his own tea - made a frustrated noise. "For god's sake, give me the whiskey, will you? My head is throbbing and I'm starving and I'm really just too tired to deal with this right now." Again that snap and flare in his eyes and Spike grinned.

"All right then, Rupert. Whiskey it is."

"There's leftover Chinese in..." Xander gestured to the refrigerator.

"God yes. Anything that isn't growing mold will be fine."

Xander ran a quick checklist of the food they'd ordered that week - the Chinese was recent. He checked it under cover of the refrigerator door. "I think it's MuShu Pork. Want it warm?"
"I think I can manage." Giles held out a hand for the box and Xander jabbed a fork into it, passed it over. "This really is appalling," Giles mumbled through a mouthful of cooked - questionable - meat.

"Welcome back to the good old US of A, G-man."

Giles took another bite, a large bite and washed it down with a sip more whiskey than tea, eyes closing in pleasure - muffling a yawn that threatened the entire mouthful.

"Cheese for Spike - oh, I'll get the crackers - and Sesame Chicken for me. And spring rolls!" Xander shoved the chicken into the microwave and fetched crackers and - ah ha! - the jumbo box of fortune cookies. Then he got a root beer from the fridge, grabbed the steaming chicken and settled at the table. Giles took a spring roll and munched thoughtfully and Spike started slicing pieces of cheese to go with his crackers. There was a clatter and then the littlest douse crawled out of the pantry, dragging a spoon.
"Tiny Tim!" Xander called, grinning. "You found a spoon!"

The douse dropped it at his feet with a glittering silvery clatter. It then staggered another pace and sprawled across Xander's foot on its belly, tongue lolling to one side.

"I thought you guys were supposed to have super strength. Like ants." Xander lifted his foot and scooped the douse off it, sweaty pink fur sticking to his fingers as it turned pathetic deep-indigo eyes to him and twitched a whisker.

'Do I look like a fucking ant?' the whisker asked.

Xander had to admit he didn't and plopped the douse on the table next to the beads. "They're yours. Cracker?"

"You - feed them?"

"You kinda feed them or they feed themselves." The
kitchen still smelled a little like Oreos and spilled coffee.

"And they like sparklies," Spike said, eyeing the douse who was sniffing toward his tea-cup. "So watch your keys and whatnot, Rupes." From nowhere, another douse suddenly appeared at the table's-edge. This one was big and a little rough-looking and it sauntered with authority over to the sugar bowl, nosing the tongs aside and snatching a cube.

"Good lord, you let me put those in my tea. After they'd been - douse-handled." Giles looked disturbed and a bit sick and Spike shooed the big douse away.

"No, no, they just take one and go - don't play with 'em or anything."

"But, still -"

"Relax, Giles," Xander said - said it around a yawn and Spike found himself following suit.
"Too bloody early. Got a room upstairs, Watcher - fancy a kip? Got a bath attached and everything."

"That sounds -" yawn "- absolutely wonderful. Flying coach is absolutely appalling - I couldn't stretch my legs once and there was a small -" yawn "- sticky child kicking the back of my seat. Lead the way, please, gentlemen." Giles stood up, holding his food and cup questioningly aloft and Xander took the cardboard box from him.

"Lemme get that. C'mon, Tim, you can have the last spring roll." Tiny Tim shook himself and ambled over to Xander's outstretched hand as Spike stood up, drinking down the last of his tea.

Xander shoved boxes of food into the 'fridge, forks still inside, while Spike got cheese and crackers wrapped up and put away. Cups in the sink, lid on the sugar bowl. Xander shouldered Giles' bag and stood with the littlest douse in a pocket, beads clutched in one paw and spring roll in the other. "Let's get this safari on the road. And if you hear
any howling or banging down the hall -"

"I assure you, I'll sleep straight through it. And in the event I don't, I'll -"

"Pretend it's ghosts?"

"No. Know the two of you are having a bloody brilliant shag in spite of your utterly exhausted guest, you rude bastards." Giles turned on his heel and followed Spike to the stairs while Xander stared after him - rewinding and replaying that tape until it frayed around the edges.

"Well, you don't have to listen, you could always -"

"Do not finish that sentence if you value your unlife!"

"Gotcha, G-man."

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The day that had started out mild and breezy had gotten chilly by the time the sun was well down, and the only good thing about the interminable hours spent talking in circles with Willow and Giles had been that Spike had gotten the sitting room fire roaring and then wound himself around Xander and settled on the hearth, too close for mere humans to be comfortable for too long. So the Watcher and the witch had been forced to circle and retreat, circle and retreat, with Wes trying to run interference and Gunn asking lots of distracting questions.

It had still been fucking exhausting. Now - finally - everyone was tucked up in bed and Spike and his boy were going out. Going to hunt a little, get drunk - feed. Stop for greasy diner eggs and home fries and coffee from the Black Lagoon on the way home because that's what they did, and that was what Xander liked and Spike would be damned twice over if he couldn't find some way of cheering his boy up before the night was through.
Maybe just grab him and fuck him senseless up against a wall - works wonders, that does. Xander was tucking his keys into his jeans-pocket and they both strode quickly and silently down the hall to the front door - turned the lock and the knob and flung open the door - practically bolted out onto the steps but there was a collision of bodies and a small shriek and they ended up fighting for balance and clutching at -

"Good Christ! Have you all gone completely fucking barking?"

"Buffy, that's my foot!"

Buffy shuffled off Xander's foot with a step-hop and guiltily tucked Mr. Pointy back into her coat. "Not...completely fucking barking." She bit a fingernail, looking harried, looking from Spike to Xander, looking...over her shoulder.

Xander sagged against a porch column. "Who else is coming?"
"Nobody. Can I come in? We should probably get to bed. A sleepy Slayer is not a perky Slayer and airplane air is really - *fuck*."

"*God* Buffy! As if I didn't already have the address!"

"Dawn, I told you to *go home*!"

"Uh huh. And I didn't. Go me!" Dawn stomped up the walk and dropped her bag, eyeing the vampires with her impatient face on and Xander felt his heart lurch. "*Well?*" Lurch and ache and swell and - "*Ew! Hey! Put me down! Vampire kisses! Help! Buffy!*"

"What the *fuck* does that mean - *'Ew, vampire kisses'!*" Spike growled - snagged Dawn's chin and planted a smacking wet kiss on her forehead - in game-face to boot - as she beat at Xander's shoulders and flailed her feet.

"*Gross! Wet! Buffy!*"

"I thought you were a *grown up* Dawn - I thought you were a *responsible, reasonable* adult who could
cope on her own?" Buffy drawled, obviously quoting from some earlier - discussion. She stood with her arms crossed and that *look* on her face - that 'I dare you' look that had pissed Spike off more times than he could count.

"What? I am! I'm just not superpowered! *Xander*!"

"Oh, all right," Xander grumbled and put Dawn on her feet - but not without a second kiss, sloppier even than Spike's. Dawn took in a sharp breath, obviously preparing to shriek something else when there was a thump and a groan somewhere down the hall. They all turned to look.

Wes was standing with his head pressed to the striped silk wallpaper, eyes closed. As they watched he lifted his head and thumped down again.

"Tell me I'm having a nightmare, someone, *please*."

"You're havin' a nightmare." Gunn intoned and limped past him on the stairs, one hand on the banister, the other on his cane. "*I'm* havin' a
nightmare. We're all havin' a nightmare. Nightmare an' a drink."

"God yes!" Dawn squirmed her way past Xander and Spike. "They actually cut me off on the flight over, can you believe it! They have some kind of stupid limit or something - hey!"

"You don't get to drink. You're - you're underage!"

"I drink all the time at school, Buffy!"

Only Dawn didn't flinch from the withering glare that Buffy directed at her. "Okay - first? So not wanting to hear about what you do at school. And second - school is in France where even the little kids drink."

"The little kids drink here too, Buff." Xander hooked a Summers under each arm and steered them toward the kitchen, hoping Spike would read his if we get them drunk, they'll go to sleep and we can leave look. "They just don't tell the parents about it."
"Yeah, and then when the parents do find out, the kids are grounded for five years!"

"I'm almost twenty, Buffy! You can't ground me anymore!"

"Try me, little sister," Buffy snapped and Spike slammed the front door - snatched bags and stomped after Xander and the girls, giving Wesley a gruesome look on the way past. Charles was already pouring out whiskey into a row of glasses and Wesley went on automatic pilot to the kettle and the cooker even though he'd drunk enough tea to float the Titanic earlier. When they were arguing with Willow and Giles.

Oh lord, please - let's not start all that up again now. Not...tonight. His headache had just barely receded - thanks to Charles' skillful fingers - when they'd heard the taxis and the row downstairs.

Thank god tomorrow is a work day. Charles and I can escape.
"What're you gonna do? Chain me in a basement?"

"No - I'm gonna visit you at school - and make sure everyone knows I'm your sister."

Dawn snatched a whiskey the moment Gunn was done pouring and downed it in a single gulp, slamming the glass back onto the counter. "Hit me again."

"And you are?"

"Dawn Summers," Spike filled in - a touch of pride in his voice. At least one of the Summers girls could handle her drink. "The Slayer's little sister."

Gunn poured a double. "Way I'm thinkin'? You need that."

Dawn took her glass with a smirk and wedged herself smugly into a corner. Then she stuck her tongue out at Buffy.
"Oh, so mature." Buffy picked up a whiskey glass, sniffed it and put it back down. "Um - Xan - do you have anything less...Spikey?"

"Xander has some 'Cherry Fizz' wine coolers in the back of the refrigerator," Wesley said dryly, assembling practically by touch alone the tea things onto a tray. "He thinks he hid them behind all the left-over sushi and the super-sized container of mayonnaise, but I saw them." Spike made a groaning sort of noise and even Dawn pretended to gag, sticking her finger into her mouth.

"Hey!" Xander cried, looking for support - somewhere. "It's got fruit!"

"You are the gayest white boy I have ever met," Gunn said, incredulous. But Buffy was perking up.

"Oh! Cherry Fizz is really good! Have you tried the Bahama Mama ones yet?"

"Uh - well -" Xander avoided the wicked grin on Spike's face and the look of disgust on Dawn's and
plodded head-down to the 'fridge. "I didn't like them as much as the Calypso Colada ones," he mumbled.

"Do you have any?"

Xander saw two fat-bottomed dice struggling to roll a distinctive orange, yellow and gold bottle deeper into the pantry. "Not anymore." He pulled a Cherry Fizz from the fridge and grabbed a beer for himself. Good beer. Manly beer.

It didn't smell as good as Buffy's Cherry Fizz. "Okay. You're here. You're all here. Why are you all here?"

"We're here to -" Buffy looked confused. "Save someone. You or Willow...whoever needs saving. Or maybe Giles."

"Me," Wesley muttered and drained a scalding cup of tea. Then he poured himself another.

"Why on earth would I need saving?" Giles leaned in the doorway, rubbing his eyes, his robe tightly
cinched and his legs looking pale underneath. Spike rolled his eyes.

"Fucking hell - what is this - a pajama party? Why are you down here, Watcher?"

"I heard the distinctive noise of bickering Summers sisters. Once you've suffered through it, you never mistake it. Oh, tea, Wesley? I'll have a cup, thank you."

"Of course you will," Wes snapped, and Gunn moved rapidly to him, saying something very low while his hand rubbed Wes' back in small circles. Wes' shoulders were slumped and Spike felt a jolt of anger go through him. He glared around the room.

"Me and Xan are going out. Gonna go kill something or someone. You lot get to bed and stop irritating Wes. Let's go, Xander, before the bloody witch shows her face.

"Too late," Xander sighed, and Spike turned with a snarl to see a rumpled and pajama-clad Willow
standing just behind him, eyes brimming with tears.

"You - is that what you think of me?"

Xander got there before Spike could growl out more than a 'yes!'. "Me? No. I love you." Xander circled the table to stand as close to her as he used to, when she was his other half - her flinch at his nearness stung. He kissed her forehead. "But right now, I don't like you. So sort it out, have a snack, go back to bed - whatever. Spike and I are going out."

"Xander!"

The door banged shut behind the vampires and Wesley grimly drank down another cup of tea.

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It was past ten when they dragged themselves up the access ladder and into the Chestnut Street house basement. The scurry of startled dice seemed to be the only sound and Spike wearily heaved the
cover closed - kicked the heavy bolt into the groove and slung his arm around Xander's shoulders. "Think they're all still asleep?" Spike asked, hopeful and tiredlove in the link.

"Fuckin' hope so," Xander mumbled back, yawning. They'd stopped by the shop long enough to tackle-hug Wes and kiss him breathless - belated and inadequate thank-you for dealing with unwanted house guests. Giles - who'd been admiring the stacks - had grinned faintly and gone about his business and they'd grabbed Gunn for a little action, as well, because he'd had to put up with a tired and cranky ex-Watcher.

The house was dim and curtained - silent - and Spike could hear heartbeats on the second floor. They went slowly up the stairs - down the hall - and stopped dead. Dawn was sprawled over their Nest, a pile of magazines beside her, headphones on. Balancing a nearly-overflowing bowl of Fruity Pebbles on a puffy, silk-covered pillow. She choked on her spoonful when she saw them.
"Hey!" She wiped her mouth on a paper towel and coughed - pushed the head-phones down around her neck. A tinny rendition of *Middle of the Road* - The Pretenders - bleated out and Dawn shut off the player. "Where have you guys been! It's way past sun-up!"

"After hours demon bar," Xander said through a yawn and staggered toward the bathroom, *cleanhotnownownownow*. Struggling with his shirt and almost banging into the doorjamb. "Stayed till last call." Spike followed him in and Dawn scrambled out of the Nest. Xander wondered if she was planning to stand there and watch him and Spike strip. With a mental shrug, he decided he was too tired to care.

"Demon bars have a last call?" Dawn made herself a fruitylicious presence against the door-jamb, bowl in one hand, spoon in the other.

"Gotta clean 'em -" Xander stifled a yawn "some time. Know how disgusting a demon bar can get?" He flopped onto the edge of the tub, twisting the
hot tap on full and nudging the bubble bath out of sight behind his back.

"Why aren't you all tucked in like big sis and the witch, Bit?" Spike asked, yanking at his boots and finally getting them off - sending them sailing out the door. His coat and button-up shirt followed, and then his t-shirt, but his fingers hesitated at his jeans. Xander was down to jeans, too, and looking shiftily at Dawn from behind a fall of tangled hair.

"Turn around, for fuck's sake," Spike said, and Dawn grinned but turned, wolfing down more cereal. Xander hastily uncapped the bubble bath and poured some out, then shoved the bottle into a forest of other bottles and tubes. They'd kind of gone a little crazy the last time they'd gone soap-shopping.

"I was in bed, but Buffy kicks and I think I'm still kinda...drunk. So I got up and looked around. The dice are really smart, did you know that?" Spike sent his jeans flying over her head and crawled into the tub - pulled Xander backwards with a splash and
got the bubbles evened out over the surface of the water.

"Okay, we're in," Xander said, snuggling back, and Spike sighed hugely and slid down the side of the tub a little, arms around Xander's ribs. "And yeah, we know how smart they are - they're damn amazing."

"They're not to be trusted - watch your trinkets, Niblet," Spike mumbled. "So - what happened after we left?" he asked as Dawn turned around, spoon in her mouth and eyes going wide at the sight of the mound of bubbles. *Think he poured in too many bubbles. Bugger.*

Dawn choked on her cereal - or a giggle - and cough-snorted her way to the closed toilet seat. "Really manly, guys. Is that Mango?"

"Papaya peach," Xander mumbled, too tired to care. "And how many whiskeys did you have?"

"All of them that stuffy English guys didn't get to
first. Does Giles always bogart the good scotch?"


"Anyway, Gunn and I split the bottle of JD you hid above the stove, Buffy drank three Cherry Fizzes and Willow kinda nagged us until Giles poured her a shot and told her to shut up. You should've seen her face!"

"She's hurting, Dawnie."

"Duh. So she was hurting a lot less after she drank and then Giles pulled out a few joints and his guitar and we sat around toasting marshmallows and feeding the dice. They're starting to waddle."

"Very funny. Giles didn't bring his guitar."

"How do you know he didn't bring joints?"

"Stingy bastard," Spike said again and slouched lower in the water.
"Then everybody mellowed out and went to bed," Dawn said in her 'I'm not leaving anything out - honest' voice.

"That's all that happened? You got drunk, you got stoned, you toddled off to bed?" Spike had closed his eyes but he opened one now and squinted it at Dawn who shoved a huge spoonful of cereal into her mouth and tried to chew innocently. The suspicion rippled through the link and Xander roused himself - tipped his head to give Dawn a sort of half-asleep glare.

"Give, Dawnster. What really went down?"

"All of it," Spike added, and Dawn swallowed and sighed and put her bowl on the sink-edge - put her chin in her hands and stared at them - at Xander.

"Are you really evil, Xander? You seem exactly the same to me. Not like Evil-Angel at all."

"Course he's not like the poof, Niblet. You should know better than that."
"Well, I don't have much experience with evil vampires, you know? There was Angel and then there was...that one in the sewers that tried to kill us all when Willow did the memory-spell, and..."

"And there was *me,*" Spike snapped, and Xander giggled, closing his eye again.

"Well, yeah, okay, *you,* but - *I know* you! You baby-sat me! I mean - not so evil, okay?" Dawn's eyes were wide and her voice was reasonable but there was a sly twist to her mouth and Spike snorted in exasperation.

"Most evil thing in the state, Bit, and don't you forget it. And *no,* Xander's not like the poof and he's not - really - evil."

"Uh huh. What *is* he?"

"Right here. Hello?"

Spike ignored the protest and tightened his arms,
even slipped a hand down to give Xander a stroke under the suds. "He's himself, bit. When we turn, we're more what we were before than ever. All those simmering, seething resentments we've kept tucked away like good little humans come trotting out to surface."

"You're trying to tell me Xander didn't have any issues?"

"Tryin' to tell you the issues were already right there on top, bit. A bloke deals with things alive and damns the consequences, he won't be much different when he's dead."

"He wasn't this rude when he was alive."

"Still sitting right here." Spike's hand tightened and Xander arched and moaned, sinking several inches into the suds, glassy-eyed.

"Well you weren't." Dawn hopped up and turned off the taps - stared down at them until even Spike thought he might squirm, just a bit. He really was
not used to her being...a grown up.

"Look, Willow is sure you're as evil as they come and she wants to stick your soul back in you whether you want it or not. Giles thinks the soul couldn't hurt but he's against forcing it on you, and Wes and that Gunn guy kept saying it wasn't necessary so could everybody just go home."

"What about Buffy?" Xander asked, twisting a little and getting his own hand onto Spike's thigh, lazy caress.

"Buffy thinks...if you don't kill anybody then she won't have to kill you and that she - get ready for it - trusts Spike to know what's best."

"World comin' to an end, then?" Spike chuckled, but it felt...good, actually. Felt nice to be...trusted. Even if he'd never let on. Xander knew, of course - love and yes and trust in the link, plus a little bubble of pleased surprise and Spike had to kiss Xander's soap-foamy neck.
"That's what I said. And I think everybody should just butt out. I only followed Buffy 'cause I was bored and it's been forever since I've seen you guys and it wasn't *fair* that everybody got to come over and I didn't." Dawn grinned down at them and then went back to the toilet - grabbed her bowl and sat back down and started eating again, slurping her milk.

"So this is a vacation, is it?" Spike asked lazily, soapy hand petting Xander's chest until he purred, subsonic rumble under Spike's fingers.

"Uh huh."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "Excuse to play truant, is it?"

"Mmmhmm."

"Good for you, niblet." Spike settled against the rim of the tub and let the warmth soak in.

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Wesley began to spoon tea leaves into the biggest teapot he owned.

"You didn't say it was gonna be *that* kinda discussion." Gunn glared accusingly at the blue willow monstrosity.

"What kind?"

"The kind that makes you break out the *big* teapot and eat your weight in sweets, English."

"It's a - " Wesley stared at the tray, Jaffa cakes and biscuits arranged in attractive patterns. "Well I suppose it's a family thing." He turned when he felt Charles' warmth at his back, letting his chin be tipped, lips kissed - oh all right, enthusiastically participating in the tipping and kissing - and leaning against Gunn's chest after.

"Family? As in 'We are a big gay family?'"

"As in Rupert is a second cousin on my mother's
side. We share a maiden aunt whose solution to everything in the world was tea and Jaffa cakes."

"Not home baked -?"

"God no. Don't even ask. The woman could have - did - burn water."

"Dear lord, you mean Aunt Harry, don't you? Her cakes could sink battleships." Giles made a pleased sort of noise and took a cake from the tray - popped half of it into his mouth and then wandered away again, peering at book-spines with that head-tilted posture that Gunn was intimately familiar with.

"So what, exactly, are we gonna talk about?" he asked, reluctantly letting Wes go so he could pour the boiling water from electric kettle to teapot.

"Souls and ships and sealing wax," Wes said airily, capping the pot and casting about for spoons and Gunn rolled his eyes.

"You gettin' cute is almost as bad as all this cake."
"You eat Twinkies."

"Yeah. And I don't see any Twinkies here. This some kinda discrimination against the American?"

"No." Giles returned for a second cake. "It's a show of bloody good taste."

Gunn snorted and snatched up a cake, nibbling around the edges. "What? Never said I didn't like Jaffa cakes."

Wesley set the teapot on the table and sat, one of his ubiquitous yellow legal pads on his lap, glasses pushed up his nose.

He was wearing his steely-determination face. And oh, look. The other Watcher had one, too. Gunn pulled out the coffee maker and his jar of Folgers ground. He was gonna be needing it.

"Now then," Wesley said, looking at Giles. "Two sugars, yes?"
"Yes, please," Giles replied and they both ignored the snort of amused irritation from Charles. As Wesley prepared a cup of tea for Giles he mulled over his arguments in his mind. To tell the other Watcher - other Council member - about the jars? Or not? Just how much of Xander's new life did he want to reveal? And really, was the man a bottomless pit? That was his fifth cake. Frowning slightly, Wesley passed the tea over and then made his own cup, fussing with the sugar tongs while he tried to think of a good opening gambit.

Charles got his coffee brewing and came over - sat carefully and picked up a cake and took a bite - spoke through a brief shower of crumbs. "So - what exactly makes you think you need to do some kind of soul-mojo on Harris? 'Cause frankly, the only thing I care about at this point is gettin' the two of them to stop havin' sex in the living room."

"A soul would return some of Xander's human sense of propriety."
Gunn snorted, swallowed another tart-sweet bite and waved the cake at the shop counter. "They had sex up there when Xander was human." Gunn twisted, pointing. "And over there. Over there. And on that couch you're sitting on." Giles shifted to the edge of his seat. "Don't bother. They had sex in the chairs, too."

"Have you tried squirting them with water and saying no in a firm voice?" Giles picked up his tea looking more disturbed than his words suggested. "I'm told it works."

"Yeah - if they were dogs."

"Even before Spike sired him, Xander wasn't the same young man you knew, Rupert."

"So it seems." Giles seemed upset by that thought and Wesley sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"He had grown up a great deal, and he had been...alone, for some time. Suffered losses but learned to deal with them on his own terms. When I
met him again, when he and Spike called me for help... I met a confident, caring young man who was rapidly falling in love and desperate to help the one person that you would imagine he would have been happiest to see suffer." Wesley smoothed the leg of his trousers - took a sip of tea.

"He'd grown up, Rupert, and taken on responsibilities that would make most grown men despair. But there he was, holding Spike and....caring. Loving. He gave up so much, in his life, and now he's found true happiness. This new - thing. Him being a vampire... It's made very little difference. He's a bit more - selfish, maybe? But I'd say he's earned that, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not so sure he would." Giles set down his teacup and took off his glasses, rubbing at his eyes. "It's what the Xander I knew would have wanted that concerns me, Wesley. He was always a good man."

"He still is."
"He is a vampire. Soulless. Seven years ago, you wouldn't have hesitated to dust him yourself."

"I wouldn't have hesitated to try." Wes looked embarrassed, had that 'baby pictures' look on his face and Gunn put a hand on his leg.

"Cause god knows none of the rest of us have changed in seven years, right?"

"Yes, I suppose we all have," Giles said, and Gunn was a little surprised by the frankly wistful tone in the man's voice. He squeezed Wes' leg again and then turned to Giles.

"Listen - I know where you're comin' from here. My own sister..." He took a deep breath. "My own sister got turned. And I was the one that had to dust her. So I - understand. But..." Gunn held up a hand to forestall what looked like sympathy from Giles.

"But. Harris chose this. And he chose it when he was - happy, and healthy, and basically at the top of his game, you know? It didn't happen 'cause he was
hurt or - or found out he had a brain tumor. It happened 'cause the man was crazy-ass in love."

"With a vampire," Giles said dryly, and Gunn nodded.

"Yeah, with a vampire. With a vamp that, according to - everybody - did a lot of good even before he went off to Africa and fought to get his own soul back. Things aren't black and white - and the Gruesome Twosome, believe me, is shades of gray ain't none of us ever seen."

"How much has Angel told you?"

"What's Angel got to do with -?"

"Rather a lot," Giles said dryly and helped himself to another cup of tea. "Fifteen minutes after I received Xander's email, I had Angel on the line with dire warnings."

"Really." Wes fidgeted in the direction of his cell, grip tightening on the tea cup. "Odd that he didn't
call me."

"He didn't want to worry you." Giles lifted his eyes to meet a skeptical gaze. "No. It wasn't very convincing to me, either. He's concerned that Xander will be a bad influence on Spike."

"How's he figure that?"

"Spike's soul isn't the most reliable muzzle for his tendencies even without the influence of a soulless partner."

"Could say the same for every human on the planet," Charles scoffed, and Wes had to smile in agreement. "Considering he's got a demon in there eggin' him on to all sorts of stuff, I'd say he does pretty damn good."

"And let's face it," Wesley said sadly, "Angel isn't... Well, the three of them simply do not get along. I'm rather inclined to take anything Angel says about Spike and Xander with a grain of salt." Wesley felt a twinge of guilt at that, because Angel really was
trying - and had done for Wesley something Wesley hadn't thought possible.

"Yes, well, they never did get along," Giles agreed, sipping slowly at his tea. A glint of something passed across his eyes and he set his cup down. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose to get to know them as they are now, Rupert." Wesley drained his teacup and set it next to Giles'. "There's no going back," Wesley said, thinking of almost a year when his memories weren't his own, when everything felt...off. "But forward isn't always as terrible as it seems."

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"You know it's not exactly helping your big bad image trying to sneak out of your own house every evening. Kinda lame." Dawn closed the master suite door behind her and leaned against it, arms folded.
"We're not sneaking. We're - giving Willow and Buffy their privacy." Xander blew hair out of his face, tightening the laces on his boots. Dawn didn't look impressed. "And since when don't you knock?"

"Since when do I have to knock with you guys?"

"Help me out here, Spike."

"Knocking's overrated, Xan - learn all kinds of fun things when you don't knock." Spike dug through the jeans he'd worn the night before and found his lighter right where he'd left it - went in search of cigarettes as Dawn smirked triumphantly at Xander. "Shouldn't you be layin' down with a cold towel, Dawn? Don't tell me you've already shook off your night of drinkin' with the Watcher."

Dawn pulled a blown-glass bottle out of her pocket and shook it. Fiery purple lights glinted inside what looked like sludge. "Duh. What good is it visiting Witch Town, USA if you don't buy a good hangover
Spike snatched the bottle from her - examined it, sniffed it, then corked it and tossed it back, scowling. "You get your remedies from the Watcher, Bit - not some two-bit hedge wizard in some 'magic shop' downtown. And you shouldn't be drinkin' so much, anyway - stunt your growth." Spike tried to ignore the identical dramatic eyerolls from Xander and Dawn as he picked up his coat and swung it onto his shoulders.

"If I grow any more I'm going to be taller than Giles - where are you guys going, anyway? I thought we could, you know, do a movie or something?"

"Another time, Dawnie. We're..." Xander yanked on his other boot and rummaged through the sparks of hunger for an excuse. Then he mentally hit himself over the head. "A vamp's gotta eat. It's not a great idea to bring the Slayer's little sis along on a hunt."

"Uh huh. I thought you told Buffy you don't kill anybody."
Xander tied a quick, messy bow and shot to his feet. "Hey, *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* tomorrow night?"

"Geek."

"Is that a yes?"

"Uh huh. I want popcorn, Xan. And Sno-Caps. And a cherry Icee."

"Anything your little heart desires, Dawnie," Xander said - twisted his control down tight and reached over - pulled her into a hug. Maybe it was the hunger - maybe it was the stress of the last few days but Dawn smelled...extra good. Smelled savory and sweet and something else and Xander was pretty sure it was her Key-ness. He let her squeeze him back - let her press a kiss to his cheek that was sweethotwant and he backed off, trying not to push her - smiling in relief when Spike stepped up and put an arm around him and his mouth on Xander's throat. Teeth and tongue on the scar there and it
was a flood of distracting sensation that let Dawn grin at him and flop onto their Nest, remote in hand.

"Cool, then. You guys have got more channels then I've ever seen so - see me do my potato impression for the rest of the night. I mean - do you *know* what they consider a lot of channels in England? It's *criminal.*"

"Going now, Dawnie."

Dawn waved a hand, already clicking through channels. "Don't kill anybody where Buffy can find the bodies. Willow's all 'he's hiding the bodies in the basement!' and Buffy's all 'whatever'." She stopped clicking. "You *don't* hide bodies in the basement do you? Because that's *gross.*"

"Only amateurs do that, love - or bloody stupid psycho humans," Spike said, conveniently forgetting his own lapse into basement burials. *Wasn't all there then, was I? Couldn't be helped.* Xander tugged and they walked toward the door, dodging a
douse that had come running at the click of the remote. TV meant snacks.

"We take 'em to the local DoubleMeat - they've got this biiig meat grinder -" Xander started, breaking into laughter as Dawn yowled and covered her ears. "Got 'er," Xander chuckled, and he and Spike grinned at each other - went silently down the hall. Passing and then pausing outside of Willow's room. Because Willow and Buffy were talking and right after 'never knock' was 'always eavesdrop' in the Big Book of Evil.

It'd also been rule two in the Harris Book Of Survival - right after 'be invisible'.

"I do love him, Buffy. That's why we can't let him stay this way. This isn't his choice!"

"I - " They listened to Buffy sigh, the shuff-tap of slippered feet pacing. "I don't know. He doesn't seem very evil."

"And Angel did?"
"Angel's not evil - much."

Spike made a silent huff of displeasure, anger and irritation in the link and Xander squeezed his arm, shaking his head a little.

"Yeah, 'cause he has his soul - Angel without a soul equals big evil, Buffy, and you know it!"

"Yeah, I know, but - this is different, Willow. Look at Spike - he wasn't all that evil before he got his soul - he baby-sat Dawn! Anybody that can baby-sit Dawn and not kill her has to have some good in them."

Spike growled - poked Xander who was stifling giggles behind his hand. Sodding hell. Never live that down. Ever.

"He wasn't good, though."

There was silence in the room then and Xander didn't like it. It was the kind of silence that considered things, and he'd heard enough. So had Spike if the thrum of anger vibrating between them
meant anything - vibrating under Xander's hand which was sliding circles over Spike's back, pulling him around to fit his mouth over where Spike must have had a scar once and nibbling.

"Let's go." Whispered for vamp ears only.

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They walked in silence toward the shop, the link saying everything that needed to be said - their fingers entwined and tight on the other's saying just as much, if not more. The demon in Xander was angry - was irritated and nervous, unhappy with all the people in the house. Family, but not quite. Human emotion and memory didn't override the demon's territoriality or need to sort everyone into a hierarchy. The Slayer and the Witch were enemy - the girl and the Watcher were prey and they all upset the Family - upset the balance of the house. Its patience was nearly nonexistent and getting shorter every day and Spike - Spike only encouraged it. Safety in family - safety in dispatching enemies
and Xander felt like he was starting to unravel, just a bit.

Because he understood it - a little. The part of him that still felt the way Xander Harris had always felt - except the whole vampire thing - got why Willow was upset. Afraid, he admitted, felt Spike considering him and squeezed his fingers. Afraid but try telling that to a demon who smelled human fear and drooled like Pavlov's dog.

He imagined himself in a tweed suit, talking like Wesley. '*I must admit I am of two minds about the situation.*'

"What're you getting all giggly about?"

"Giggly? Who's giggly? That was a manly chuckle, pal."

"You're more falsetto than the Niblet, pet," Spike murmured - pulled Xander close and nuzzled in, feeling the riot of unease - of mixed, strong emotion that was pulling Xander every which way. "It'll be all
right, Xander. Promise you that if I have to eat every last one of them. Hear me?" Spike growled that last but he was holding Xander tight - love want you mine mine as hard as he could. At the end of his own patience but trying. "Won't let it get bad, love."

"I'll settle for mediocre and the return of long distance communication." Xander pecked Spike's cheek and shook off the roil of emotion - put it out of his mind and the demon was happy to oblige. "And a crazy night of darts, billiards and brawls at the Frog."

"Get a little something hot in your belly first, love - you'll feel right as rain," Spike said - grinned a fangy grin at Xander and deliberately shook off everything but want hunt kill. Heading for the part of town that served those needs very well. Beside him Xander shivered and changed - settled into that head-down, loose-hipped walk that meant hunter and Spike's demon grumbled in pleasure and anticipation. Ready to vent some tension - ready to rend and tear, bite and drink.
Xander licked his lips, grinned wide around the fangs and sniffed the air, scenting booze and brawl, cheap cigarettes and cheaper women. It smelled...good. "Friday night. We're gonna get a head start on our drinking."

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The bell over the door jangled and Wesley looked up, his 'hello, how may I help you?' smile on his face. Smile that turned genuine when he saw that it was Spike and Xander. Both vamped, both looking a little wild around the eyes and Wesley's own demonic self rose, fast and hard. For a moment they stood, bristling and sniffing like junk-yard dogs and then Xander was moving smoothly forward - pushing Wesley back into the counter and kissing him with a cool, iron-and-whiskey tongue. Wesley sunk claws into the heavy leather coat Xander wore. A moment later Xander was being pushed aside as Spike moved in and Wesley heard some sound from Giles - heard 'not with the fangs, boy!' from Charles.
And then Spike was kissing Charles as well, grinning.

And then there was a soft, strangled sound from Rupert and Wesley turned to find Xander pinning him against the counter, back in human guise - crushing his lips to Rupert's with a possessive growl and Wesley sincerely hoped Xander had fed and Rupert didn't have any holy water on him.

Xander straightened, drew a deep breath that smelled like books and tasted like tea and went back for more until a smack on the shoulder made him jump.

"Stop mackin' on the Watcher." Gunn tossed his newspaper down onto the counter and caught Xander around the back of the neck, kissing him again. "Jesus. You Council people put vampnip in your cologne?"

"Guess I'm just hot for English guys," Xander said, eyeing Giles who was - breathless. And speechless and looking startled and a little pleased rather then murderous, which was good.
"Was it like you imagined?" Spike asked, slithering up and boxing Giles in on the other side, his eyes nearly violet with blood lust and just plain lust.

"Ooooh, yeah," Xander purred, and Giles stared at him.

"Think I should have a go, then?" Giles transferred his stare to Spike.

Xander licked his lips. "After I have another."

"Whu - while this is quite charming, and rather unexpected." Giles put a hand on each vampire's chest, holding them there. "I -"

"Still talk too sodding much." Spike brushed the hand aside and pushed his way in, kissing with long slow strokes of lip and tongue and teeth until Giles' heart beat double time. "Not bad."

"Not -!" Giles' voice rose, offended disbelief and Spike yelped, caught by the hair and crushed to the
Watcher, plundered and pillaged and pinned to the counter hard enough to make his spine creak. "Not bad," Giles huffed, letting go and folding his arms. "I have developed some skill in my years."

"Man, what is it with you guys! Can you make any man gay or is it just stuffy English types?"

"I'm not stuffy -"

"They didn't make me do anything -"

Gunn snorted in amusement at the identical looks of outrage on Wes and Giles faces. "Yeah, right," he said, to both of them.

"So how has your evening been so far?" Wesley asked, shaking the demon away and smoothing his shirt-front. Giles ran a hand back through his hair and tried to look nonchalant as he adjusted the waist of his trousers.

"Fruitful," Xander said, helping himself to a Jaffa cake and hopping onto the counter. "Fulfilling." He
grinned.

"You know it is really gross and disturbing when you do that."

Wesley cleared his throat. "We had a productive afternoon here as well. Didn't we, Rupert?"

"Yes, we did, actually. Wesley has told me about - the jars, Xander. About what they do and - that there are two." Giles looked serious, finally - serious but also - relieved? Spike found a cigarette and lit up, watching the Watcher and leaning against the counter next to Xander, hand on Xander's thigh.

"So where do you stand then, Rupert? Do you think Red should be trying this re-souling mojo? Or do you think we know what we're doing?"

"I think - and god knows why - I trust the two of you to do what's right. Or at least not to cock it up too badly."

"Oi!"
Giles a small smile on his lips and looked...mischievous. Relaxed and Xander slung an arm around his neck, unbalancing him like a toy. "Your confidence in us is overwhelming. Also? Surprising."

"When you get to be my age -" Giles started - looked at Xander and for a moment, fleeting sadness crossing his face. "Well, eventually you do learn things. And I've learned quite a lot, just lately. About demons, and about humans." Giles turned in Xander's loose embrace - reached hesitantly and put his hand on Xander's shoulder, squeezing just a little. "And I've finally learned that you're all grown up, Xander, and that - you know your own mind. Congratulations on your - death."

The words wrapped Xander's heart and squeezed - like a beat. He licked his lips and looked down to the hair peeking out of the neck of Giles' shirt. It was going from gray to white. Eventually, it'd be all white and the warm pressure in his chest twisted. "We're going to the Frog - drinks and darts. Do you
wanna come...?"

"The Frog?" Giles asked, and Wesley stepped up - put a hand on Xander's knee because he'd seen that expression - of longing and sorrow - sweep over Xander's face.

"The Frog and Flagon. It's a pub - quite a good one, actually. You'll enjoy it, Rupert," he said - watched Spike tuck his chin down onto Xander's shoulder and kiss his jaw - watched Xander deliberately shake off any sort of...mood.

"Oh, well - yes, then. I'd be delighted. And I could do with a little something, I think, after that display earlier." Giles seemed to be shaking off a mood as well - turning a devilish smile on the two vampires - eyebrow going up in near-perfect imitation of Spike.

"Get a few drinks in me and you might get a repeat," Spike rumbled, sliding down off the counter and tugging Wesley over for a quick kiss.

"I'll remember you said that," Giles said, over his
shoulder and jaunty as he looked for his jacket. Xander hopped down as well - gave Charles a sort of cat-nudge, cheek to cheek.

"Take Wes out and get him a good dinner and then take him home and fuck him unconscious, okay? The girls can fend for themselves one night." Charles sputtered a little and Xander grinned and then the three of them trooped out, arm in arm.

"Xander does have a good suggestion."

"Wes -" The nervous flutter in Gunn's stomach developed into full-blown butterflies then calmed under Wes' touch, warm hand resting there then sliding around to the small of his back. And a kiss that tasted like the last chocolate chip scone. Damn him.

"The good dinner and a night to ourselves. We have plenty of time for the rest."
"Hey, little lady. You look like you could use a drink." Xander toed a pillow in the sitting room Nest, nudging Willow through it. She did look like she could use a drink, all pale skin and blue circles. And a red nose that meant she'd been crying. Willow was never pretty when she cried.

She gave him her Brave Little Toaster smile and rubbed the back of her hand across her cheek. "I could use a lot more than that." Willow lifted a hand to pat the pillow next to her then hesitated.

In spite of...fuck, everything - it hurt to see. Xander settled down next to her and stretched out, pulled her close and tucked her head under his chin. She smelled so good. Like childhood and magic. "You need a long hard fuck."

Only vampire strength kept her from flying upright - and maybe into the fire. "Xander!"

"C'mon, Wills. You're so fucking wound up it hurts." Xander kneaded her shoulder with his hand and she
flinched a little then sighed, trying to relax. Her back was hard as iron.

"Well...maybe," Willow mumbled, poking him. "But you're not supposed to say stuff like that! I'm not... I'm not gonna be getting any snugglies any time soon, anyway... Not since Kennedy..."

"Yeah. I heard," Xander said, digging his fingertips into her back just a little - stroking her arm. "Wanna - tell me about it? We've got Ben and Jerry's. And vampire snugglies." He lifted her head and pushed her hair out of her face. It was brighter red now. Hennaed and short but it still ran like cool silk through his fingers. Different from Spike's pre-Raphaelite curls.

Across the room Wes lifted his head from the perusal of some book or other and smiled at him, and Xander smiled back. Giles, Wes and Gunn were huddled in arm-chairs around a small table, studying some book that had caught Giles' eye. Prophecies or - apocalypses or - something. Buffy, Spike and Dawn had settled down to kitten-free
poker in front of the fire and were vainly fending off a massed dice horde, who wanted the M and M's they were using for chips.

"It's the same old story. Girl meets girl. Girl seduces girl and moves to Rio. Girl comes home to girl nailing a Brazilian beach bunny with her new vibrating tongue stud." Willow choked on the last two words, sniffled. She looked down accusingly. "And I thought you were gay."

"Hey. Lesbians - still a favorite. And might I add - ouch. That was...mean."

"Yeah, well..." Willow sniffed again - sighed. "We'd been kinda - drifting apart, you know? I mean, first there was the whirlwind romance on the Hellmouth with death and pain and uber-vamps and dismemberment... After that, everything else just seemed -"

"Dull as a box of rocks?"

"Yeah. Not that we didn't try to - you know -"
Willow made a gesture that made Xander's eyebrows go up and she giggled - blushed - and then giggled again. "Lesbian here, doesn't mean I'm dead and doesn't mean I can't enjoy - things."

"Things like double-ended vibrating di-"

"Spike!" Buffy yelped, putting her hands over Dawn's ears. Trying to, but Dawn was rolling on the floor, laughing hysterically and trying feebly to fend off both Buffy and an opportunistic douse. "Not in front of my baby sister!"

"Just seeing to her education, Slayer."

"That is not a part of Dawn's education I want you seeing to."

"So, things," Willow said, gesturing vaguely again and blushing.

"If you can't say it, you shouldn't be doing it." Xander waggled a finger at Willow but let her catch it and tuck it against his chest.
"Sisters are kinda doin' it for themselves these days." She frowned, shrugged and dropped her head to his chest. "There're a lot of spells for that. I'm really in practice."

"Ah, spells," Xander says in his best obnoxious voice - remembering when the thought of spells and Willow and Tara were enough for him. Now - it's a pleasant little bump in a long slide of coziness and nostalgia and Xander blamed the neo-Victorian lounging like a honey-gold and ivory cat on pillows by the fire. Spike'd let his hair grow out a bit - dyed the ice-white back to something more mellow-amber. And now the dark roots were coming in, framing the pale face and black brows and there was nothing in nineteen-year-old Xander's mental porn store that compared.

Gunn said something, shooing a douse away from his beer and laughing and Giles laughed with him, leaning back - at his ease. Making a new friend and re-connecting with Wes and the demon rumbled a short purr - settling at last.
"You just don't have to say it like that." Willow was still blushing and he could smell it on her. He could also smell something else, warmer and muskier and sweeter.

"Somebody has to." Xander shuffled Willow closer, listened to her heartbeat and imagined what it'd be like if it was always like this - calm and peaceful. *Family*. Sister. He kissed her forehead.

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"Wait! Wait, wait, wait. Did you say they had *vegetarian* spring rolls or *vegan* spring rolls? There's a difference."

"There's no dead animal flesh in either - *no* sodding difference," Spike said, snatching a menu out from under Willow's hand and shoving it at Wes. "Get her a number four and a number nine, those'll go down a treat."
"No, but - Spike -"

"But she wanted a number seven," Wes said, scribbling frantically, and Gunn shot Spike a death-glare.

"Shut up, Blondie-Bear, let 'em order what they want!"

"It's been a bloody half hour already! I can see Xander's ribs!"

"Oh you cannot!" Buffy snatched a menu from under Spike's hand and waved it aloft. "I knew it! They've got Greek here! Remember those gyros we got, Dawn?"

"Ooh! Gyros! Wes, cancel whatever I ordered, I'm goin' for gyros!"

Wesley held up a hand, his pen and one of the dice clinging to his sleeve. "One at a sodding time! You." He pointed at Dawn.
"Gyros. With spanakopita and baklava."

"Ooh! Baklava - " Buffy swallowed the rest when Wesley fixed her with a glare.

"Willow."

"Number seven at the Pink Panda."

"Rupert -?"

"Uh - did I come at a bad time?"

"Connor?" It was Wes getting up - Wes dropping pad and biro and crossing the kitchen floor, shaking the douse off his arm and putting his hand out only to be pulled into a brief, hard hug. Xander was bouncing along right behind, grinning like a fool and Gunn was limping over now, too, smiling and slapping Connor on the back. Spike glanced around the room - snagged biro and paper and scribbled names and numbers fast - tossed the pad down and joined Xander in welcoming Connor in.
"I knocked but nobody came and I could hear you guys and - uh - these little pink guys were - *staring* at me - uh. Like they're doing now."

Half a dozen dice *were* staring at him. Spike thought one might even have been *grinning* at him.

"Connor, meet the dice. Dice, this is Connor. He only smells funny."

"Oh, nice way to welcome a house guest." Connor shoved Xander away from him and dropped into a chair, picking up the Pink Panda menu.

Xander staggered, giggling, and added his order to Wes' notes, noticing Spike had changed Willow's order back to the four and nine.

"Connor, why on *earth* - oh, for heaven's sake, *shoo*! Charles, please, could you break out the Hershey's Kisses?" Wesley shooed at the apparently mesmerized dice who circled in on Connor - intent. Until Charles crinkled the plastic bag and then they turned as one and hopped fast and furiously over to
Charles, who handed each douse a Kiss. Connor watched with an expression that clearly said 'help!'

"Giles, this is - this is Connor, Angel's son. Connor this is Rupert Giles, and Buffy and Dawn Summers. You've met Willow."

"Hey" Connor said, tearing his eyes away from the vanishing dice. "Hey. Andrew talks about you guys. A lot. And he's got this...video -"

Buffy's eyes went round with horror. "Not the towel video! When I get my hands on that little geek - "

Xander's head popped up. "There's a towel video?"

"So not grasping the whole 'gay now' thing, Xander," Willow said, face scrunching in confusion. "Or the vampire-Slayer thing."

"I live life on the edge."

"Edge of a good smack-down," Willow muttered, but she was smiling and Xander was and Spike
leaned up next to Xander, slipping an arm around his waist.

"Not that I'm not just - terribly pleased to see you, Connor, but - why are you here?" Wes asked, absently gathering up scattered menus while Gunn got the pad and pen and glared down at it, making corrections.

"Oh, well, see - there's this whole end of the world thing going on -"

"Again?" Eight-part chorus and Connor rolled his eyes.

"You guys are way too jaded. Can't I even get a 'dear lord'?"

"Dear lord," Giles muttered under his breath.

"Thank you." Connor turned to Xander and Spike. "By the way, Dad said if you can't turn on your friggin' cell phones, he's gonna come himself next time."
Spike snorted. "That'll be the day, mate. Peaches has never been comfortable in airplanes unless they were Wolfram and Sodding Hart's necrotempered models."

"So much for having a vacation." Buffy tossed her menu onto the table with a pout.

"Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Exactly what do you mean when you say 'end of the world', Connor?" Wes had his 'Watcher' face on and Spike felt his own true face - fanged and ridged and snarling - shift to the surface in a matter of seconds.

No. We are not doing this. "Wes - you even think of gettin' involved in some half-assed prophecy or apocalypse or - hell, a sodding rain of frogs I'm gonna take you upstairs and use Xander's Christmas present on you. And those chains are padded, love - I can leave you in 'em for days."

"Spike, it's hardly necessary to -"
"And I'm gonna help him," Xander said, arms folded and looking stubborn.

Wes shot a look of exasperation at Gunn. "Don't look at me, man. I was gonna lock you in the bathroom."

"Oh! Now you're all being ridiculous. I never even said I was going to -!"

Giles took Connor's arm. "Is Angel talking about the Rathburton Prophecies? I thought those had been nullified by the closing of the Hellmouth."

"Guess not. Sionn's been ringing off the hook with visions about it for weeks." Connor scooped up a straggler douse and rubbed its tummy, leaving it wriggling and flailing in bliss on his palm.

"Aren't they sort of opening the Hellmouth again? I mean, with that deal A.I. made with those demons?"

"No, they're not actually opening it -" Wes started,
and Buffy interrupted.

"I thought Angel got the idea that an open Hellmouth is a bad Hellmouth!"

"What about the Hellmouth in Cleveland? Would that - uh - unnullify anything?" Dawn asked, and Giles started shaking his head.

Spike sidled up to Connor and crouched down next to him - inhaled slowly, tasting Angel and Darla on the back of his tongue. And something new - something demony and decidedly male.

"Never seen one do that," Xander said, crouching down next to Spike and leaning into him, eye on the wriggling douse.

"I had a hamster once - he liked this, too." Connor looked up at the cluster of arguing Watchers, Slayer, lawyer, witch and ex-Key. "Uh - can I get a drink and maybe a bathroom? It was a loong ride in the taxi."
"Hark. I hear someone rapping at my chamber door," Xander mumbled beneath his arm which was flung across his face. The rest of him was starfished nude in the Nest, soaking up heat from the fireplace.

"Berk." Spike rose up on his elbows, nudging a snickering Xander with his toe. He could hear a heartbeat on the other side - too strong and sure to be all human but too fast to be Wes. Connor. "We've got company, pet. Come in, then!" Spike added, raising his voice a little and the door creaked and swung wide and Connor stumbled in.

"Help. Me. Please? They're worse than Dad and Andrew arguing about 'vam-pyre' lore. They're worse than the Slayers with a new Cosmo. In fact -" Connor flopped face-down into the Nest, barely missing Spike's legs. "In fact, they're worse than Illyria on a 'you are all just worms to me' tear,
jacked up on Mountain Dew and Cheetos. And they're all pissed you're not joining the A-team. What is wrong with those people?"

Xander rolled over, rested his chin on Connor's shoulder and wriggled close to his body heat. "They're the in-laws. And heroes. By definition, the two craziest, freakiest bunches of people known to man."

"Here." Spike shoved a mostly-full bottle of whiskey in front of Connor's face. "Best solution to family, mate." He and Xander made room for Connor to shuffle over onto his back, prop himself up in the pillows and take a long gulp from the bottle.

"Technically, I only have Dad for family - why do I have to have all these other freaks, too? At least Sionn's not a freak."

Spike caught Xander's eye over Connor's head - grinned at the curiosity amusement humming through the link. And the prey that was more of the 'pounce and play' kind of feeling then 'pounce and
drain'. And the frankly besotted tone to Connor's voice - the way it lingered over 'Sionn'. "Tell us about Sionn, Connor," Spike said, his best coaxing voice and Connor took another long swallow of the whiskey and grinned.

"Since you've wanted to all night," Xander added with a snicker, ducking a swat.

"He's got pink dreads. And he's got these tattoos... And his voice - man - here, listen -" Connor struggled halfway to one elbow - pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open - concentrated on punching buttons for a moment. Xander took the whiskey from him and took a drink himself.

"I mean - just listen - that accent -" Connor held the phone out and Spike and Xander both leaned in, listening to the message.

"Connor, man, d'ya ken the noomber fer yer Da's cell? He dinna leave it fer me. Tha messages 'r pilin' oop, man. Ring me back straight awa', a'reet?"
"Fuckin' sexy," Connor said, and sighed happily, flipping his phone shut.

"Fuckin' Scottish," Spike grumbled, and Connor poked him.

"Don't get started. Dad's bad enough. What is it with you guys and the Scots?"

"Bloody savages," Spike said vaguely, taking the whiskey back and drinking, aware of Connor's gimlet eye on him and a knowing smirk on Xander's face. "All right! All right. Nothing wrong with a bonny Scots laddie. I just can't abide those bloody pipes. Like somebody killing a duck with a paper-clip. It's fucking horrible."

"The accent is kinda sexy," Xander admitted, grinning when Spike fixed him with a glare and set to draining the bottle. "Lilting, exotic - yet not incomprehensible. Traditional and aged like a fine wine but keeping current with the times."

"Least its not sodding Irish," Spike grumbled and
stared back at Connor who was watching him with raised eyebrows.

"What's wrong with the sodding Irish?"

"What isn't?" Xander and Spike asked together.

Connor looked back and forth between the two of them, then started struggling up out of the Nest. "I am Irish, you know."

"And we don't hold it against you," Spike said, while Xander got an arm around Connor's waist and hauled him backwards, pinning him with a leg thrown over Connor's thighs.

"Right. Not your fault your father's a - what do you call him, Spike?"

"Bog-trotting poufter," Spike said, hitching closer to a squirming Connor and adding his own leg and an arm over Connor's ribs.

"Right, with no sense of humor. We like you,
"Even if you are Irish," Spike added, grinning, and yelped when Connor elbowed him.

Xander snickered, snuffling against Connor's neck, breathing in a scent like burning peat and iron under the clean young man smell and sugar sweet douse-musk. "What was Darla?"

"American, pet." Spike snuggled back into place against Connor's warmth, soaking it in, rubbing his fingers across smooth skin and the ghost-scents of family. "Born and died a whore in the Colonies."

"That's so weird." Xander's voice was muffled against Connor's skin, tingling itch burning under his gums to change and bite - just a taste. It was like holding off orgasm.

"You know this is equal parts disturbing and hot right?"

"Yeah."
"And dad would stake you if he saw us like this."

A snort from Spike, tightening of arm and leg. "He could bloody well try."

"So is this some sort of whacked-out, uh - family thing? Or am I... Never mind." Connor flung an arm over his face and Spike leaned up onto one elbow - looked at what he could see of his flushed and unhappy face. Reached out and stroked a finger over Connor's throat where the pulse beat, tiny sparrow-flutter that Spike could just see.

"It's family, mostly," he admitted. Because Connor smelled like Angel and Darla and that was family, hardwired into Spike's brain and nerves and soul, when it came down to it. Disturbing, familiar - comforting. Sensual, because it meant trust and love and acceptance. "But it's - you too, Connor."

"I don't have the family excuse," Xander admitted, lifting his head to look into an unhappy expression he'd seen in the mirror more days than not in high
"You're just hungry," Connor said without accusation.

Spike pulled Connor's arm away from his face. "How 'bout you tell us what all this is about, mate. Didn't have to come all the way across the country to deliver a sodding phone message."

Connor sighed and stared at the ceiling - flinched ever so slightly when Xander's fingers joined Spike's - traced down his throat and over his collarbones.

"It's...really stupid -"

"Not a problem. We get stupid," Xander said, his voice low - his gaze intent on the pale skin and curve of bone that showed between the unbuttoned halves of Connor's shirt. Connor closed his eyes.

"It's just that - I really like Sionn. And he's really - cool. And I think I want...wanttokisshim," he
finished, rapid mumble and Spike grinned.

"So do it, mate! Just step up to him and stare him straight in the eye and kiss him! He'll be fallin' at your feet."

"But what if he's not?"

"Generally? You'll be humiliated and it'll be the worst thing that ever happened to you - ever. You'll want to lock yourself in your bedroom forever - or blackmail a witch into helping you out with a little spell to end your humiliation with disastrous results. Then you'll get over it and realize it wasn't all bad and at least you got to kiss him."

Spike and Connor stared at Xander.

"Hey, that happens to be the voice of experience. Have you got anything better?"

A vision of stumbling through darkened London streets, words scattering behind him like confetti slinked before Spike's mind's eye. "Nope."
"The point is, you get over it."

"Yeah, okay, sure. You say that - you get over it. But I see him every day. And I know he's - he's into guys. But I don't have a lot of... Jesus Christ." Connor closed his eyes again, thumping his head back into the pillows and Spike shared a look with Xander over him. A look that morphed into a grin wicked enough to make Xander's whole body tingle.

"Are you sayin', pet, that you don't have any experience? You a virgin?" Spike didn't say it mockingly - he said it like Indiana Jones' dad said 'Holy Grail' and Xander took a deep, shaky breath, scenting want and lust and feeling yes.

"No! I mean - not exactly. Well, you know, demon dimension, weird junkie girls looking for a warm body, Mrs. Robinsoned by the parasite of a god in Cordelia's body - mostly I'm the geeky guy with weird nightmares and too much strength... Not exactly been a chick-magnet. Or a guy-magnet." Connor sighed and his voice dropped down low.
"Just a demon-magnet mostly, and a freak."

Spike's touch gentled, settled over Connor's chest and heart. "Don't have to worry 'bout that with the seer, pet. He knows what you are - can't lay claim to normal himself now, can he?"

"And being a demon-magnet? Not all bad." Xander propped himself up on his elbow, hand still framing Connor's narrow jaw and covering the flutter of his pulse.

"Voice of experience again?"

Xander and Spike exchanged another quick look. "Oh yeah. The wacky broom closet tonsil Olympics with Cordelia in high school are the closest I ever came to normal."

Connor raised his head, staring curiously at Xander. "You dated Cordelia? Huh. I think - I think my dad was in love with her, you know? Sometimes he'll talk about her and..."
"Really?" Xander had to smile at that, imagining the sheer torture Cordelia had probably put Angel through. "Well - we kind of lost touch after our Mayor turned into a giant snake and I wired the high-school with several hundred pounds of homemade C-4 to kill him."

Connor was *staring* now and Spike was looking like a proud father at graduation and Xander let his fingers slip up into Connor's shoulder-length hair.

"Why'd you break up?" Connor asked.

"Therein lies a longer and more painful story in which I do not come off in a good light." Xander grinned, pushed into Spike's touch against the scar on his temple, souvenir from a drunk vampire armed with a microscope. "So, anyway, back to the topic...what *was* the topic?"

"Our boy's inexperience." Spike's finger was back to stroking, playing tag with Connor's pulse.
"Insecurity."
"Insanity," Xander added. "Because let's face it - even dead guys think you're hot."

"My life is a freak show." Connor threw his arm back over his eyes.

"Join the club, buddy," Xander said, curling his fingers into Connor's hair again and again. It was oddly baby-fine, like raveled silk wisping over his fingers. Or maybe that was just another new vamp thing that made it feel so...slippery-smooth.

"He's right, pet - dead guys do think you're hot," Spike murmured - let a fingertip drift down and brush over Connor's nipple through his shirt and Connor sucked in a hard breath - lifted his arm a little, staring at Spike, this time.

"Prove it." His voice was husky - whisper-quiet and Spike felt the rush of want lust pretty from Xander as he let his gaze slide over Connor's face and body - looked back at him from under long lashes and leaned in, slow. So, so close - close enough that his lips touched Connor's when he spoke, close enough
to feel chapped skin and taste Hershey's kisses and toothpaste. So the boy had had fresh-breathed hopes when he came in.

"You sure?"

Spike's words rumbled through Xander, spiked Connor's body heat and Xander closed his eye, pushed against human warmth and want and tried not to hump Connor's hip like a badly trained dog. Christ. If he isn't, I sure as fuck am. Jesus...

"Bring it, Blondie." Confident words, breathless voice and Spike could feel Connor hard against his hip, heart banging against his ribs - totally...completely...irresistible. He covered Connor's lips; toothpaste, chocolate, family and himself, drank down the husky moan and slipped within the kind of welcoming heat and slick that made humans - so worthwhile. And Connor was absolutely still under him - shocked - and then a slender hand, strong hand, tangled in Spike's hair and crushed him down - made up its mind and took.
The boy kissed like Angelus with Darla's lips.

"God..." Xander's voice - Xander's want want want like a velvet hammer-stroke through the link and Spike finally pulled back - looked down at Connor with a small smile on his lips - rocked his hips into the warm, warm body beneath his.

"You're gonna take his breath away, pet," Spike said - watched the smile bloom across Connor's face - light his eyes - and laughed softly when Xander made a noise like a frustrated puppy.

"What about my breath?"

"You don't have any," Connor said - tipped his head a little and shot Xander a look that was much - more than it had been a moment before. "I could give it a try though," he said, and pulled his lower lip into his mouth, white teeth on red, swollen flesh - and went easily when Xander scooped him up, devoured him like those bloody Chocolate Hurricanes, him and the whimpery wanting noises in the back of his throat.
And Spike smelled - blood. Xander's.

As Xander drew back with gasp and growl, eyes shimmering gold in the firelight - staring down at Connor like dinner, licking at the nick in his bottom lip, hissing and wide-eyed - stunned - when Connor did the same.

"It tingles," Connor said, contemplative and so fucking calm and Xander sent a wild glance Spike's way because the bite had more than tingled - it was a point of throbbing heat that was echoed all through his body - that was making the demon want to flip Connor over and have him, right there. Bite him hard and deep and rut until it was satisfied. *He could probably take it - Angel's son...Angel's son, oh fuck - Spike - help!*

"Any breath left?" Connor asked and Xander just stared - shook his head mutely while Connor smirked in triumph. And then Spike was turning Connor's head back - was looking at him, suddenly very serious.
"In about one minute I'm gonna strip you and fuck you through the floor," Spike rumbled and Xander's demon growled - mine flashing through the link and startling them both. "Only chance to say no," Spike warned - pushed his face into Connor's neck and breathed, rumbling grumble that was half snarl and half purr.

"Fuck." Connor gasped, tangled his fingers hard in Spike's hair and looked at Xander through wide, bright eyes and the tingling flush of a human with a taste of vamp's blood.

"The best parts about being a demon magnet," Xander growled, demon so close to the surface he itched all under his skin and Connor was hard - so hard under his palm, twisting and bucking up against him, something feral in his eyes, "Best parts happen when you give in."

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"There're the taxis, Dawn, c'mon!"
"One more pancake! Lemme just -" Dawn buttered her pancake - sprinkled brown sugar on it and rolled it up - grabbed a paper towel and jogged toward the front door, carry-on bag swinging from her shoulder.

"Okay, that's just - gross," Gunn said with a grimace, and Willow grinned up at him.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it. Are you really not going to come to L.A. with us?"

"Really not. My apocalypse fightin' days are over, little girl. Got a bum knee to prove it."

"But -"

"Willow! Come on!" Buffy yelled - taxi-wrangler and douse intimidator as several of the creatures tried to climb into purses and bags.

"Coming! Giles, your jacket!"
"I doubt it's any colder in L.A. than it is here," Giles grumbled, but he turned back from the kitchen door for his wool coat, gathering it up as Wes stacked plates and Gunn limped doorward, as well. Happy to be seeing this particular branch of the Council out.

"Be prepared," he muttered, and looked up at a bang - someone slamming a door upstairs.

"Oh, did they finally decide to get up?" Wesley asked, coming out of the kitchen and following Charles' gaze upward. A moment later there was the thunder of feet and Connor, Spike and Xander appeared at the head of the stairs, moving fast. Spike had Connor's bag in his hand - Xander had his boots. Connor himself was struggling to button his shirt and his pale chest showed -

"Man, the boy's got hickeys like he was attacked by a Hoover," Charles muttered, and Wesley shut his mouth with a click. Connor skidded on the tessellated floor of the hall and caught himself against the wall - oofed out a breath as Xander did
the same and plowed into him.

"Oh, man, they made pancakes for dinner! I told you guys!"

"That you did, pet, but - we asked you if you wanted to stop -"

"You said something about syrup," Connor objected, attempting to finger-comb his wildly mussed hair into some sort of order.

"Uh huh. And you said fuck syrup." Xander had his hands tucked into his jeans, flushed face, casual pose, utterly human and at ease and Wesley felt a prickle at the back of his neck the way Willow looked at him when she came out of the kitchen.

"And now my priorities have changed. Hold the cab!" Connor ran for the kitchen, dodged Giles and slammed cabinets.

"Napkins are in the draw by the cooker, pet." Spike called out and yanked a squirming douse out of
Connor's bag by its tail - dropped it onto the floor where it zipped around Willow's feet and raced after Connor, leaping a chair in a single bound.

"Xander - " Willow stood not quite touching Xander - and the look on his face was one of...love. Spike turned away to see to the rest of the baggage, shouldering two and marching out the door.

"Come on, Slayer. Best get these away from the dice before they make off with a new crop of souvenirs."

"Willow." Xander held his arms open for her and she slid into them immediately, laying her head against his chest.

"I'm sorry."

Red hair was all he could see, looking down. Red hair, and shaking shoulders in an orange tee-shirt with Gumby smiling up at him from the back of it. He gave her a squeeze, breathed in lemony shampoo and peppery Willow. "Go save the world."
Connor bounced back out of the kitchen, something held in both hands, licking his lips. Wes and Gunn started moving toward the door and Willow finally leaned back a little - looked up at Xander with a small, tired smile.

"You know I love you, right? You're my best friend and I love you?"

"Course I know, Willow. And I love you, too." Xander tucked a lock of hair behind her ear - gently turned her and steered her down the hall, hand sliding into hand and squeezing. A horn honked outside and Gunn turned at the door, looking back. "It's that time, Wills. Call me when you get in, okay? I promise I'll pick up."

Willow laughed softly. "You better." And then they were stepping outside into a soft spring twilight. Damp scents of grass and the budding lilac from beside the walk - deep purple sky just beginning to show the pin-prick of stars. And a new moon riding sickle-thin just above the tree-tops.
Xander held the gate for Willow, slipping through it behind her, soft *clang* and clatter as it latched behind them. He pulled her hand to his chest and pressed it there, a spot of familiar warmth. "Don't get killed."

"Don't get killed deader because you *know* I'm not gonna leave you alone, mister."

Spike kept one eye on the witch and Xander. Xander *looked* happy - was laughing - but he didn't see Buffy's flinch or hear her suitcase snag and clatter on the rim of the boot.

"I'm not the one flying to the Hellmouth for end of the worldly fun."

Willow stood on tiptoe, kissed Xander's cheek with cool lips and looked up at him sadly. "It won't be the same without you."

"Sure it will! Rains of frogs, opening Hellmouths. Gross demons of the week. Send me a postcard."
"Xander, are you sure you won't come along? I mean - a vampire could really be a big help - look at how helpful Spike was last time!"

"Bursting into flames might have been helpful but it felt bloody rotten. There's not one thing on this earth would make me send Xander to that, Red, so stop asking." Spike was uneasy - was angry, suddenly, and he wasn't sure why. But he didn't like Willow's coaxing and cajoling when she'd already had her answer.

"That's all the bags, then, and everybody got their ticket?" A round of pocket-patting and purse-checking and then Willow was fishing in her pocket for something and Spike tensed. Probably nothing. Probably just a - keepsake. Leave already, you people, and let us have some peace!

It was a green crystal, spinning on a cord, catch-flashing the street lights back at them and Willow held it up for Xander who was eyeing it with the same wary look Spike knew was on his face. It stank of magic. "Even if you don't want to come, I know
you want us to be safe."

"I'll know. Angel will call or California will crumble into the ocean." Xander grinned - tried to joke but gave up when Willow's eyes filled with tears and Spike felt unhappiness in the link. Unhappiness and - frustration. And the desire for them to all go. On the surface, Xander was smiling, leaning closer to Willow and kissing her forehead. "Sorry Wills," he said - not sorry at all. "So what'll happen? Will it glow, change colors or - "

The moment Xander's fingers closed around the pendant, the string still in Willow's fingers, a flash shot out from it, blinding them - and when Spike's vision cleared, Xander and Willow were in a shimmering bubble. Xander suspended, frozen in air and Willow with a glowing orb in her hands beginning to chant.

*Rage* surged up and out and Spike knew he was roaring - knew he was *moving* but it didn't register until he hit the bubble and it flung him back with a sick sizzling shock, burn of it all through him like the
fucking walls in the Initiative. He shot to his feet, pushing off some anonymous helping hand and stalking back to the bubble - stood there, directly behind Willow. *Waiting*. Because when it was gone, and Spike could reach Willow - he was going to gut her.

"Willow, *no*!" Buffy's hands hovered - inches from the barrier, magic crackling along her fingertips and Spike saw silvery streaks down Xander's face, opening like cracks in the sidewalk, light inside.

Light glittering off tears in Willow's eyes, off the orb trembling in her hands. "I'm sorry, Xander. It'll be okay once it's in you. It won't hurt as much then."

Brighter, brighter, brightest until Spike had to turn his face away as the night turned bright as daylight.
"No, no - that's l-y-p-s-e. Yeah. Right. Now read it back, just in case." Spike watched as Xander pushed impatiently at his hair - as the strong, salt-tanged breeze lifted it up and swirled it right back into his eye. Spike reached out and tucked the strands back behind Xander's ear and Xander grinned at him, listening intently to the person on the other end of the line.

"Right, the First Birthday Baby Bouquet with extra - everything. I know, you told me - I don't care if it's double that, I want it big. Right..." Spike snorted softly, imagining the look on Angel's face as a huge bouquet of mixed pink and blue flowers - with noisemakers, party hats and balloons attached - was delivered to his office in Sunnydale. A 'Happy First Apocalypse' bouquet - Xander's brilliant idea, of course. Spike had thought maybe a singing strip-o-gram but they hadn't been able to find anything vulgar enough.

Spike rolled the cigarette between his fingers back
and forth, back and forth. Imagining that he could still taste the lingering sugar-pepper-fire taste of Willow's blood in his mouth - replaying the moment over and over in his head. The moment when Willow's containment spell - expanding rapidly to hold the wild energies that were roiling inside it - had met Wes' house wards. The bubble had shattered like thin blown glass and Spike, free of the hot, invisible hand that had been pushing him back and back...had leapt. Had felt sweat-sticky skin and cotton under his hands - bird-bones and a woman's soft curves as he bore Willow to the ground, snarling. Felt the flesh of her throat part under his fangs like a ripe plum, spilling *firesugariron* onto his tongue. The memory made him snarl silently and Xander's fingers caught his - squeezed hard.

"Okay, great. Thanks a lot." Xander clicked his phone shut and tugged and Spike came into his embrace, settling with a sigh of pleasure into that familiar hold. "I'll call Connor and tell him to take pictures."

"Brilliant, love," Spike murmured.
"Just a little something I thought up to say 'I love you - and by the way, still evil'." Xander pushed, rolled Spike onto his back. He could see the crackling flashes of the ward-lights above them reflected in Spike's eyes and tangled his hands in honey and chestnut curls.

The aged boards of the widow's walk were dry and silken under Spike's bare heels and he settled his hands in the small of Xander's back. He could faintly hear Wes down on the sidewalk, pacing the perimeter and re-setting his wards. They'd faltered a bit under the enormous surge of energy that they'd leeched from Willow.

"And it's perfect, pet. Niblet will enjoy it, at least."

"She'll want copies of the pictures." Witchfire - man-witchfire this time - danced over Spike's skin - pink, blue and colors Xander didn't have words for. "Buffy's gonna have to lock herself in a soundproof room and laugh herself sick. It's bad form for the Slayer to laugh at the troops."
"Or she'll wet 'em - either's good," Spike said, watching sparks drift slowly upward and vanish in the mackerel-clouded sky. A few stars showed, here and there, and the moon made a patch of mercury-silver in the east. "Suppose she's gotten over her mad, then? Kept tellin' her it was an accident, my boot in her face..." Spike couldn't quite suppress the grin at that memory, and he felt Xander shake with silent laughter.

"And yet, she doesn't believe you. What's the world coming to when a slayer doesn't take a vampire at his word?" Xander shook his head sadly and propped it on his hand, turning his head to look up at the sky through the wards, sparks zipping along invisible lines like short circuits. They could hear Wesley curse three stories down. "We owe him."

"That we do. Any ideas? I say we drag him into the Nest and don't let him out for a week." Spike combed his fingers through Xander's hair, pulling it into a veil around his face - nuzzling his cheek into the soft, curling ends. "Charlie-boy'd get an
education and we'd finally see just how many times a demon can get it up in a row, triple-teaming Wes like that."

Xander snorted. "I think he wants us to go away more than he wants us to triple-team him." There was love still there - love still growing but Wesley's tea consumption was beginning to make Xander wonder if there was a twelve-step program to help him. "I say we give Wes a chance to finish Gunn's education. Then we come home and triple team Wes till he can't even fantasize about getting it up again."

"Hmmm..." Spike wiggled until he was more comfortable, Xander settling onto his body just right; hill to hollow and bend to curve. "Got a line on a scroll that's supposed to have been written by some mad Arab about some mad demon who knew about some mad prophecy or other about...well, madness. Fancy a trip to Istanbul?"
Crackles and *pings* of magic danced between Wesley's fingertips and made him itch - made him irritable and made his hair stand on end as if he had ants pole dancing on the strands at his scalp.

Dear god, he was starting to think like Xander.

He paused on the landing, listening to douse-feet overhead and in the walls and the deep, even breathing coming from the bedroom. He could turn right at the stairs instead of left, toss his clothing into a messy heap on top of Charles' and crawl into bed with him.

If he was fortunate, he could compound matters pleasantly with a wake up blow job.

It was a pity that Wesley was a man of responsibility.

Bugger it.

He continued toward the attic.
Up there, the magic seemed more concentrated—seemed *thick* and Wesley supposed it was the added influence of the portal that the dice came and went through, spilling its own energies like a slow-leaking spout of treacle. Wesley toed a few mesmerized dice aside - the sparks were dancing through the humid air, following invisible patterns and leaving ghost-trails behind. Phosphor and the tang of burnt tin in the back of Wesley's throat. He went to the far corner where the giant wardrobe was and opened the door - peered inside. Xander's suggestion, to use a wardrobe to hide the little doorway that led to -

"How're they looking, Wes?"

Wesley slipped his hand into the back, between faux-fur coats Xander had bought simply to *hang* in the wardrobe and into...cold. He grasped the jars, one and then the other and tucked them into the crook of his arm, brushing off flakes of frost before setting them on the workbench running the length of the attic. "See for yourselves."
The dice were creeping closer, whiskers and ears forward, tails up. "Always thought it'd be more tarnished." Xander picked up the glowing jar and turned it. Spider cracks like fractures in ice wove across the surface, testimony to the strength of magic trying to get in. "Those ancient Chinese sorcerers knew how to build these things to last, didn't they?"

"Actually," Wesley said, examining the other muoping, empty and smooth, "I ordered both of these from Henry Wang in New Jersey."

"Won't break, will it?" Spike asked, frowning at the damaged jar. At the pale, golden light that leaked out of the cracks without actually lighting anything - not even Xander's palm where it lay curved over the top.

"No, it won't. Xander's soul is still safe inside." Wes flicked a small smile toward Spike and Spike grinned back - finally lit his cigarette and blew smoke toward the dice. One sneezed and shot him a Bambi-glare.
If the jar broke, Xander's soul might go right back to his body. Or it might fly off into the ether like all good souls were supposed to do. Spike didn't want to find out which. He eyed the empty jar, dark and squat next to Xander's. Thought, for the thousandth time if he should put a glow into it, too. *Just might. Might be fun, that...* Longing and curiosity and a twist of impatience in the link and Xander looked up at that, eyebrow cocked.

"Gonna do it?" he asked.

"Might," Spike said and picked up the dark jar, turning it over in his hands. Looked like it should contain a liniment or some Chinese herb for impotence. Wasn't very impressive without the soul inside. He flicked a glance to Xander, over skin gone pale at last and the stark swirl of his tattoos, perfect casual ease in every joint and sinew. Xander glowed with or without his soul. He sucked on his cigarette and set down the other jar. "Might, some day. Your mate, Harvey - "
"Henry."

"He make many of these?"

"A dozen a year. There isn't much call for soul containment these days."

"So if that one broke - "

"I would place an order for another. This jar is yours, Spike. Not a safeguard for Xander's."

"Mine, yeah," Spike said. He patted the jar and then stepped back, letting Wes pick them up and move them carefully back into the little pocket of other-where that he'd made to house them. Safer there, where no douse or stray human could find them. Or witch's spell break them. Spike frowned at that - reached out and took Xander's hand, fingers lacing together. Did her best and it wasn't enough, thank fucking Christ. Safe, he's safe...

"Guess your magic was the better magic Wes, yeah?"
"Not better." Wesley closed and locked the wardrobe doors, pocketing the key. "Better established." He rested his hand on the wall, the warmth radiating through the old bricks and boards around the wardrobe. "I have the house on my side."

Xander's fingers tightened around Spike's, palm to palm with no spare warmth. Only smooth skin and gentle pressure. "Did it hurt her?"

"I dare say it gave her a shock and it may have weakened her for a time." Wesley absently helped a scrambling douse to the top of the wardrobe. "Permanent dampening is too much to hope for."

"Maybe if she tries again she'll burn out," Spike muttered. "If she tries again, she won't be so lucky. Bloody Slayer." He'd had the witch - had her right there, fangs up to the gum in her throat, her thrashing body stilling beneath his weight as he'd drank. A lovely moment - a moment never to be forgotten. And then Buffy had dragged him off her
and in the resulting melee the witch had managed to teleport away, blood still threading down her neck.

Her magic-spiced blood had sent Spike climbing the walls until Xander had taken him out, gotten him in a few fights, gotten him drunk and then shagged him unconscious. No mean feat and Spike had to grin at that memory.

"I know what you're think-in'," Xander sing-songed, and Spike laughed and tugged him close - followed Wesley as he went out of the attic and downstairs again.

"That so?"

Xander attached himself to Spike's back, duck-walking close behind him and cupped Spike's groin with a grin. "Yeah."

"Hardly a challenge, that. Always thinking of a good shag."
"I must concur," Wesley murmured from the darkness ahead of them and Xander laughed, let go of Spike with a grope and a promise and skipped ahead to take Wes' arm.

"What about you?"

"I'm thinking of the warm bed I left to set the wards beneath a full moon while the dew is on the ground."

"You could slip into ours for a while - want to?"

Wes sighed - turned and leaned into Xander and Xander wrapped his arms around him - wasn't surprised when Spike joined them, making a tight knot of their limbs and bodies. Wes' lips were on Xander's throat, moving in a lazy kiss that skated slowly over to Spike.

"I...I think..."

"I think you want some time with your boy, yeah?" Spike murmured, his own mouth finding that
smooth and sensitive skin behind Wes' ear and nibbling there. Wes shivered. "Just give us an hour, love, then we'll need to pack." Wes twitched in surprise and Spike leaned away a little, meeting his confused gaze. "Going to take a little trip to old Stamboul, me and my boy. Need to give you a proper good-bye."

"You don't need to go on my - "

"Save it." Xander turned his face with a cool hand and kissed him - hard. "See, we've got it all planned out. We're going prophecy chasing. You're going to get your funky weasel party with Gunn and we're gonna come back to fat dice and horny magic shop owners. But before we can go, we need a proper good-bye." That cool hand slid down Wesley's throat, down his chest and belly to mold itself to his groin, rub and tease. Rub and -

"I'll miss you." Wesley opened his eyes to a golden eye and pointy grin.

"Kinda the point."
"God." Wesley pushed into Xander's hand - into Spike's mouth, which had latched onto his throat again. He was tired - irritated - twitchy from the magics and...yes. He felt like something hard and nasty and exhausting. So he could sleep like the dead next to Charles who was still just a little...unsure. Not that Charles, naked and playful and engaged in tasting every inch of Wesley's skin wasn't enough... Sod it. Stop thinking and just do it. Time for all the melodrama later.

"Fuck yes, a proper goodbye -" Wesley's words stopped with a grunt when Xander yanked him back and tangled a leg around him, both hands dropping to his fly, working it open - friction, heat, impatience.

"A proper fuck," Xander added, rubbing against Wes fore and aft, no finesse, no preamble, only -

"God." He shivered. Whether from the cold of Xander's hands or the hallway or the heat from Spike's gaze.
"Let's see your real face, pet." Spike's fingers joined Xander's, hard and soft, rough in all the right places. "We're all demons here."

Wesley took a deep breath - reached inside for the little tick that was like a synaptic switch. The demon rose smoothly - eagerly - and Wesley took another breath, getting the sharp and peppery scents of the vampires into his nostrils - the thick musk of arousal. Spines lifting and lowering in anticipation, Wesley pushed, sending Spike stumbling back, step after step. Toward their room, the Nest - toward what he wanted. Xander crowding close behind. "Want you," Wesley husked, and snaked his head forward to kiss Spike hard. Hard enough to draw blood.

"You have us," Xander whispered, pushing them forward, pushing them through and down into a tumble and tangle of warm limbs and cool limbs and wet, clinging mouths raising goose flesh on Wesley's limbs. He stretched, felt his shirt pulled up and off, trousers down and tossed god knew where,
offered himself and felt the mouths return; biting teeth, pinpricks of drawn blood and clever slicked fingers pushing into him hard, fast, rough and unprepared.

"Spike!"

"Here, pet." Spike's voice, close and soothing, edged with lust and far too near for those to be his fingers. Wesley's eyes snapped open, met Xander's single eye, cat-gold and heavy lidded staring back at him from between his bent knees.

Then there were hands, urging him over onto his belly and Spike's fingers were petting the long spines on Wesley's back - lightly brushing and teasing them, making little quivers of sensation shoot through him, back to belly and all through his legs and arms. It made his fingers curl into the massed pillows of the Nest - sent a claw or two popping through velvet and silk. "Yess..." Wesley hissed - arched his back and pushed as someone pushed back - as someone pushed in in one hard stroke, making him cry out.
"God, Wes, you're so fucking sexy like that..."
Xander, cool lips on Wes' jaw and then on his mouth and Wes groaned - felt Spike's fingers on his back as Spike's hips rolled and pressed and slid, obscene and delightful dance. "My turn next," Xander added, and Wesley closed his eyes and held on. Opened his lips to Xander's kisses, Xander's mumbled words. "Can't let you forget about us while we're gone."

"Can't - won't -" Wesley gasped - arched into Spike's rough thrusting and Xander's greedy mouth - opened himself wide and promised with body and mouth and low, wordless cries that everything they were doing was making...an impression.

Wesley eased into bed with the tentative movements of a man trying not to wake his bed mate. A man with a sore yet grateful arse. A man with -
"The Nest. Gotta be somethin' in the Nest makin' y'all make all that noise," Charles muttered, rolling toward him and jerking him under the covers with short, economical movements and burying his nose in Wesley's neck.

"Charles, I - "

"Man, shh. Tryin' to sleep here."

In the dark, Wesley could see one of Charles' eyes open, looking at him. More than a smirk and less than a grin on those full lips. "I'm sorry we woke you up."

"Uh huh."

"Maybe just a little bit...not sorry?" Wesley asked, fingers lifting Charles' face up so Wesley could kiss him. Slow kiss that Charles returned with a sleepy little sigh, his body warm and welcoming and familiar, now. Slide of linen sheets over their bodies - press of Charles' belly and thigh. He smelled of cinnamon and spice and oranges and Wesley
stroked his hand down Charles' back, letting him lay his head back down.

They listened to the phone ring - and stop abruptly. Wesley groaned. "He's got the answering machine unplugged again."

"Jesus. Did the man learn nothing?"

"Not about telephones and calls from Willow," Wesley muttered, tugging at a pillow until he was comfortable. He wasn't...anxious to hear from Willow again himself. There would be apologies - refused - and recriminations. It was a vicious cycle. "They're going on a trip. Flying to Istanbul. There's a scroll, apparently."

"And that was the big good-bye, huh?"

"Yes." Wesley hesitated, unsure whether another detail would be welcomed. "You were invited to participate."

To Wesley's immense relief, Charles only chuckled
and squirmed his way into a more comfortable position. "Man. I am so not ready for the big leagues."

"I assure you, you're quite beyond little league."

Charles lifted his head. "You know about Little League?"

Wesley ran his fingers over the stubble on Charles' scalp, down to the smoother skin behind his ear. "Not really."

"You know enough," Gunn said - pressed a series of slow kisses all along Wes' chest and collarbone. "Those two probably doin' stuff with chains and feather dusters and live chickens in there - scare a sane man back to bein' straight." Gunn grinned up at Wes' snorted laughter and wriggled closer - kissed the smiling mouth.

"I wanna learn the basics. Start slow - get to know every...last...move" Gunn pushed his hips into Wes' thigh - ground in a slow circle that had Wes' making
small, breathy noises. "An' I think you're the guy to teach me."

"They'll be gone weeks," Wesley said, surprised at the breathlessness in his own voice - possibly more surprised at parts of him rising once again to the challenge. Parts of him which should be lying dormant until the next full moon after Spike and Xander's brand of good-bye.

"Gonna have to give me the crash course then, aren't you?" Wesley easily slipped his leg over Charles' hip at the urging of a broad hand, nestled growing hardness alongside Charles' and breathed in the cloud of warm, human lust. "Gonna be one big...gay...summer camp."

"But without all the bloody lanyard-making and bad food," Wesley muttered - felt Charles' body stiffen and then shake with laughter. "Have you ever been to camp, Charles? It's bloody miserable. Rain and insects and counselors in khaki drill shorts shouting at you..."
"Sure you wanna be putting all that in my head, English? Might never get it up again."

"Oh no?"

"Christ - okay. Not sayin' there isn't a possibility of getting it up again."

"No?"

"Fuck. Me."

"Name the time, Charles."

Slow moving, wicked fingers. Heat and sweat, precome.

"Five minutes after the Twosome are out that door."

"Done."

~*~*~*~*~
The plane was gliding lower and lower and Xander watched the silver light of the full moon ripple over the expanse of the Marmara Sea. The lights of Istanbul - Constantinople, Spike said - were like a tangle of twinkle-lights, a glowing crescent that stretched for miles.

"We'll be landing at Ataturk International in approximately ten minutes - the temperature is 21 degrees Celcius." The pilot's softly-accented voice was low and smooth - the private plane that Spike had chartered was done in greys and golds and dark, smoky green and Xander felt like he was in the sitting room of a plush hotel suite.

"Is that cold or hot?" he asked, turning to Spike, and Spike drained the last of his whiskey and shrugged.

"Dunno - never remember what the difference is."

"Water freezes at zero and," Xander closed his eye - cursing years of science teachers for never telling him when to wake up because it was a piece of
information he'd need for more than the final exam. "Fuck it. It doesn't *look* cold."

It looked *old*, twisting warrens of streets, clusters of the big villas and drifting boat-lights along the Bosphorus.

"*So* not Kansas."

Spike was staring at him.

"What?"

"Not your most original, pet."

Xander shrugged. "I'm gay, dead and a product of pop culture. The way I figure it, I'm legally obligated to embrace one cliche a week."

Spike rolled his eyes - signaled the steward who came and picked up glasses and bottle, stowing them away as the plane tilted, nose down. Heading for that old, old city of spices and silks and vices beyond counting. "Was here with Dru a couple
times. She wanted to buy a dancing girl." Spike grinned at the memory of the slim, dusky girl that Dru had chosen and who had lasted an astonishing twelve days before Dru had tired of her. "Slave girl and a flying carpet. Only found the one..."

"Slave girls were that tough to come by in the old days?"

"Git. Found the girl. Never did find a flying carpet."

They were silent, watching the ground come closer - turn from lights to domes and spires, hedges and trees, glowing under the moon. When the wheels touched down, Xander said, "I'm gonna buy a flying carpet."

"And I'm gonna chain you to the bed," Spike growled, visions of his boy stuck somewhere halfway between earth and sky, the sun on the horizon and some half-cocked mojo fizzling out.

"Promise?" Xander chuckled and Spike snagged a shirtsleeve and yanked him over - kissed him while
the wheels of the plane bumped and then rolled, the engine winding down and down until they finally stopped.

"Welcome to Istanbul, gentlemen," the pilot said, and Spike reluctantly let Xander go.

Xander flicked open his seat belt and stretched toward the ceiling, laughed when Spike snaked arms around his waist and tugged him over. He wove his fingers through loose curls and tugged on them until Spike looked at him. "We'll put it under Wes' desk. It probably can't lift the whole desk. And if it can..."

"I'd be takin' you to bed in an ashtray."

"There is that." Xander dropped a kiss onto Spike's head and wormed away, swinging an oversized duffel bag over his shoulder and bowing in his best attempted courtly gesture. "The city awaits."

"You said one cliche a week."
"It's a busy week."

The plane's door was swung open and they stepped out onto the aluminum stairs into cool, humid air. Spike took a breath but the clinging, sickly smell of petrol exhaust was too thick here and he and Xander hurried down the stairs and across the patched tarmac, heading for the small building where a Customs official waited. Money meant you didn't have to follow the rules and the demon who lurked under the peaked cap sniffed them and waved them on, red eyes winking in the dull-purple twilight. Dawn was another hour off - they had time for a little exercise. There was a car waiting and they loaded in the baggage and then sent it on. The hotel was maybe ten miles away and Spike was stiff from the long flight.

"Could do with a sip of something," Spike said, and Xander's teeth gleamed in the moonlight, feral grin.

"Me, too." Xander tilted his nose to the wind - sea air, spices and bodies crammed into a city. Animals and people. "Jesus. It's like walking into that Indian
place in Chicago." Warmth and spice. "Feel like I could eat the whole menu."

"Maybe just a young and tender lamb or two," Spike said, the rush of hunger hunger blood flaring through him as Xander caught some exciting scent. "Or something aged and mellow..."

"Or something," Xander said, catching a scent that spoke of adrenaline and heady, spicy lust - exotic and strange and making his stomach twist and want - "spicy. And local." He broke into a run, gravel crunching against the pavement beneath his feet.

Spike ran with him, his coat snapping back behind, the air heavy with the perfume of night-blooming flowers and rare spices. In a city this old and this steeped in sin, there was always something - someone - that deserved a little death. And he and Xander were just so good at handing it out.

Passionately.

The crunch-shift of bone under Xander's skin was
drowned out by the traffic noise and the air in the alleyway was humid, thick as they passed through between here and there.

Hearts beat at the end beneath crowded windows, open for the night breeze and sweet tobacco smoke drifted toward them with laughter and curses. One young man dabbing at skinned knuckles with the hem of his shirt, wet in an alley tap - the other two laughing at him, all three shoving each others' shoulders the way young men do.

Spike stole a glance at Xander's face excitement hunger swirling around him like pheromones.

They had both slowed to a walk and now music was winding out along the street - Indian pop, full of strings and rattling drums and the overspill from a club was suddenly all around them. Slim dark men and long-haired girls, a scattering of tourists. On the edges of the crowd were the predators - and the prey. They sauntered past the three boys, not bothering to hide the gleam of fangs. And there -
just what they wanted. A small crowd, drunken voices - a fight. Lust and adrenaline in the air and the thick, sweet smell of hashish. Their kind of crowd.

Spike lit a cigarette and took a long drag - tucked the slim cylinder into the gap between two bricks. Xander reached out and tangled his fingers in Spike's hair - hauled him over for a fast, sloppy kiss before his eye slid sideways to take in the fight. His tongue ghosted over his lower lip, leaving it full and gleaming in the streetlights. "Soup's on."

For a price, a man could have anything in a hotel.

For an even greater price, two dead men could have the beds removed from a hotel room and pillows brought in to form a Nest - no questions asked.

Okay - not many questions.

Most of the questions so far were about room
service, shisha and does sir require a wake up call.

Sir did not.

"Leave it to you to take up smoking when the smoke's sweeter than candy." Spike waved a plume of shisha smoke away from his face and lit up another Marlboro. "Dru loved it, you know. Loved the roses and strawberries. Said it tasted like summer parties."

"Huh. Tastes like..." Xander took a long drag - held the smoke in his mouth for a moment and then let it out, slow frost-blue stream that drifted upward into air as thick and golden as Turkish Delight. His eye was dark - half-lidded - his body the color of old ivory in the honeyed air. "Like the first time I ever kissed anybody. Easter Sunday when I was twelve."

"Precocious tyke, weren't you? Smoking up at that age."

"Not hardly." Xander took another drag, filling his lungs with cool, syrupy-sweet smoke. "Incense...and
Peeps." He licked his lip, blew out the last of the smoke and closed his eye. "And boy."

"Boy? At twelve? Not only precocious but perverse," Spike said gleefully, worming across the temporary Nest to lean his head on Xander's belly, hand over Xander's ribs. The hookah bubbled quietly as Xander took another drag. "It's not - perverse. It was a - a very sweet and innocent moment. My first real kiss with my first real crush. It was -"

"Unforgettable," Spike said, laying his head sideways and closing his eyes. Remembering his own first real kiss, that had happened with Dru in the back of a hansom, going to the house that the others had claimed. Grave dirt under his nails and in his mouth - fresh blood and Dru.

Xander wove the fingers of his right hand into Spike's hair, petting and playing. "We punched each other extra hard horsing around after that until he got grounded for giving me a black eye." Xander laid back with a grin, streamed sticky-sweet cinnamon-
orange smoke toward the ceiling and rubbed his palm over Spike's back and shoulders. The demon whispered *Dru* in every eddy and whorl of feeling coming from Spike. He didn't kid Spike for being...however old Spike lived as a human. Times were different then.

So was Spike.

"Blood tastes different here."

"Always does. Different diet. Not so much fat and chemicals. Tasted different when I was newly turned, too." Spike let his fingers do a slow sweep, back and forth over Xander's chest. Feeling nipples under his palms and the ripple of muscles and rib bones. He stretched to the ashtray and stubbed his smoke out, to have both hands free for petting.

"Do you like it, pet?" Spike asked, wondering what this boy - and he still was a boy in many ways - thought of this ancient city and ancient, alien land.

Xander liked the smooth sweep of Spike's palm and
fingers over his chest. He liked the sweet smoke and thick, spicy air. The exotic spice-salt burst on his tongue in the taste of the locals' skin. A broad and stupid grin come over him. "It's all right."

"All right? All right?" Spike rose over him like an irate lizard, eyebrow beam firing highly concentrated sarcasm at his skull. "You're in an ancient city, exotic land half way around the sodding world and it's 'all right'? Bloody youth of America."

"I don't have much to compare it to. See?"

"Well, that's so," Spike conceded, subsiding grumpily to the pillows - groping under one until he found the bottle of whiskey he'd filched the night before. "I suppose we could travel a bit more. Just because Wes grows roots doesn't mean we need to." Spike uncapped the bottle and drank - rolled over onto his back to watch the smoke curdle and fade, caught in a high, thin beam of sunlight that dazzled across the arched ceiling.
Xander caught something - unease, or could that be guilt? in the link and looked at Spike with a frown. "What is it, sweetheart? I like that plan."

"Yeah, I like it, too. My bloody soul doesn't, though. Gibbering on about duty and repentence and - and bloody destiny isn't it? Miserable thing."

Miserable and - awake - unhappy in the link and Xander rolled over to look down into eyes that wouldn't meet his. "I thought you said the soul didn't affect what you want to do anymore."

"Yeah - well - changed its mind, didn't it?" Spike chewed on a cuticle. The soul...didn't want to be here in Istanbul. It wanted to be on the Hellmouth, saving mankind. Or at least in Salem as backup when Angel fucked up, inevitably. His soul might be good but it didn't like Angel, either. Xander pushed off of him, crawling the perimeter of the Nest and peering under furniture. "What're you about now?"

Xander sat up, pushed the hair out of his eye and gave Spike a direct stare. "Looking for chains."
Spike growled - the amused growl of a tiger that's about to swat an annoying cub away - and lunged. Got Xander's ankle in his hand and jerked him back into the Nest - pinned him with his body, Xander's wrists in his hands. "Only one gettin' chained up around here is you, pet." Xander had changed and now he stared up at Spike - solemn and still, eye glowing like a flame.

"You're not gonna go to Sunnydale and you're not going to be anybody's backup but mine, Spike. I'll fight you if I have to," Xander said - low, even voice and Spike lost his smirk.

"You'd lose, love." He dipped his head down and kissed Xander's mouth - coaxed the almost-frown away with gentle action of lips and tongue until Xander sighed and kissed back. "I won't - go. Promise you, love. I won't. It's just...there, you know? In the back of my head all the bloody time."

"I seem to remember something like it not too long ago," Xander said but the memory of what a soul
felt like was fading. He still knew right from wrong from girl, don't go there - but the painful tug in the white hat direction was... gone. The gnawing, nagging knowledge he could be somewhere better being a hero - well okay that was still there, but he didn't care.

He'd been a hero.

He'd been fucking lucky to survive being a hero.

Being a hero was dangerous. "If you break that promise, I'll break your legs."

Spike felt the emotions that were concealed behind the demon's mask - felt the anger and the fear and the possession - the truth of Xander's statement as strong and clean as his love. He had to grin - had to bend his head to kiss again. To whisper.

"Won't, love. Promise you. That's all done, now - not heroes anymore, not champions, just us... Love you, Xan..." Because there was nothing - not even his soul - that could compel Spike to jeopardize what
he had. To put Xander, or their future together, at risk.

"Let the white-hats have the glory. And the risk. Have it with my blessing."

~*~*~*~*~

"Okay - that has got to be the freakiest woman in all of Salem." Gunn tossed a CVS bag onto a chair, narrowly missing a douse that squeaked irritably at him before plunging bodily in to inspect the toothpaste and chewing gum that were inside.

"I'm sure there's someone in Salem stranger than Miss Hawthorne."

"Yeah - but they're both in Istanbul." Gunn grinned and stepped up, his cane left propped in the umbrella stand and put both hands on Wes' shoulders. Whatever Wes had been putting in that god awful stinky 'fix Charlie's knee tea' was...working.
"Yes, and having 'a marvelous time, don't you wish you were here, oh, no, probably not, how's that whole gay-sex thing coming, Charlie-boy?' Wesley grinned at the elegant handwriting that had composed that strange little message - flipped the postcard over and studied the image of - what appeared to be a movie actor. Or pop star. Or - someone very popular in Turkey, with far too many teeth.

"How is that coming?" Charles asked, his voice low and rumbling and Wesley flicked the postcard away, running his hands up Charles' back to his neck - pulling him in close.

"I think it's going very well," Wesley breathed.

"Oh yeah? How well?"

"You've rounded third - and are headed home." Wesley murmured into his lips, muffling Charles' laugh with a kiss.
"Jesus, English. You with the baseball cliches. World of wrong." Gunn ran his palms up and down Wes' flanks, feverish skin too close to his ribs. Boy needed more meat on his bones but the way he pushed into touch, Gunn wasn't about to break the mood for that suggestion. Or the kiss.

Or the hot curl of nervousness and want in his belly that'd been growing there all day since he woke up and his first thought was - wanna nail Wes to the mattress till the furballs run away. No more nerves. No more slow - just take.

The kiss lengthened - deepened - and Wesley found his plans for getting takeaway and maybe a movie dropping away, pruned back to nothing by the gentle insistence of Charles' fingers at his shirt buttons - Charles hands on his hips and Charles' body pressing him lightly but inexorably to the wall. Erect - wanting - his breath catching and hitching as Charles moved his hips in a languorous, erotic roll.

"Oh, god - Charles -"
"Need to go - upstairs, Wes. Need..." Charles lost breath and voice as Wesley locked his hands behind Charles' head and kissed him, a surge of lust and adrenaline making him almost dizzy.

"Need...oh, yes..." Wesley whispered.

"Need this?" Gunn asked, part of him still fuckin' amazed he was here with a guy, wanting him with the kind of fire in his belly he couldn't tamp down - and the rest of him was fuckin' amazed it was Wes - and mutual.

Wes' cock, hard as stone grinding against his hip. Wes' sweat on his tongue, his ass in Gunn's hands and moan in his mouth when he squeezed with shaking fingers. "What do you think?" Wes' voice was rough around the edges.

"I think if we don't get up these stairs right now, the dice are gonna get a show. Need - to get you naked and under me," Gunn breathed around kisses, groans, Wes' skin sticking under his hands - humid. "Around me."
"Charles - "

"And you're gonna say that, in that voice and I'm gonna - " Gunn pulled back, pulled up, breathed deep and got a nose full of lust and salt and clean summer sweaty pheromones. "Gonna come before we get upstairs." Wes' hands were hot on his jaw, on his throat, tilting his face down, staring up at Gunn. "Done waiting," Gunn said to stunned and lusty eyes. "How 'bout you?"

"Oh - yes," Wesley said - pulled Charles down for one more hard, claiming kiss and then he was moving - up the stairs. Charles' hand tight in his and his whole body singing - floating - thrumming with desire and need. Into the bedroom and shutting the door against dice - not that that would help - and then leaning there as Charles stood, breathless, by the bed. Wesley reached up and undid a button on his shirt - undid another and Charles eyes gleamed in the low, golden light of the single lamp.

"Think I wanna be doing that," Charles said, his
voice gone low and husky and Wesley let his hands drop to his sides.

"I think I want you to."

"C'mon over here," Charles said, certainty in the words making douse-feet of lust scramble down Wesley's spine to demand compliance of his suddenly clumsy feet. Charles towed him the last foot across the floor, fingers hooked into his belt loops then sliding up sticky-warm over his belly and chest. "Yeah. Wanna see this."

Wesley closed his eyes, warm words coiling around him, into him and he traced Charles' progress by feel. Cool air on his collarbone. A brush of scuffed knuckle across his nipple and oh - tongue - flickering around and over tingling flesh. He arched toward it with a hitch of breath. "Don't - don't lose your place now."

"Oh, no need to worry 'bout that," Gunn said, his lips moving against Wes' chest. Tongue flickering and tasting the salt-musk taste of... My boyfriend.
My lover. My...mine. Gunn got his fingers up to Wes' shoulders and pushed at the shirt. Still halfway buttoned, it slid down Wes' shoulders and arms and then clung and Wes twisted, trying to free himself. Brought muscle and tendon into sharp relief and Gunn had to bite on the smooth line of Wes' throat - lick the curves of his collarbones. "Jesus, Wes, you... I can't get - enough of you," Gunn groaned.

It was utterly different from Spike and Xander. Sweetly - humanly - possessive and sure of itself in a way Xander hadn't been. Exploratory and...new. His hands were shaking, running over Charles' scalp, pressing him into his skin with trapped arms. "God - we've done this so many times."

"No way." Gunn lifted his head, then lifted Wes' arms and pulled the shirt off, dropped it on the floor and wished like hell for a second he could slide to his knees, do this right. Instead he nudged forward until Wes lost his balance, kissed him down to the mattress and crawled over on his good knee, tasted down to the belt buckle. "Haven't done this."
"No," Wesley said - arched as Charles' fingers slipped under his waistband, pressing against his belly and - god - the head of his cock. "No, this is - this -"

"Shhh," Charles crooned - leaned on one elbow and worked at belt and button and zip until Wesley felt the cooler air - felt heat again as Charles' fingers caressed him, a slow and intimate touch. "You're so - fine. Just -" Charles shifted - swooped down and licked and Wesley moaned softly, his hand fisting the sheets - locking down on Charles' shoulder.

"Like that, like that," Wesley muttered, and heard one of Charles' shoes thud to the floor.

"Got no patience," Charles muttered and the other shoe dropped moments later. "Said I wanted you naked under me - item one," and Charles squirmed down to slip Wes' shoes off and drop them, grab his opened trousers and slide them down his legs slowly enough to raise goose flesh and leave Wesley sprawled nude beneath him, breathing hard, painfully erect and he felt - bloody desirable.
"There - was something about under you and - around you," Wesley said, itching all over for contact, for skin, for - "bloody hell. I'm impatient?"

"You're - " Gunn held Wes' ankle in his hand - bent Wes' knee and put his mouth on the pale knob of bone there. Wes' leg flexed in his hand and the skin went from human to demon-slick and back. Gunn let his teeth graze that spot again - inched his way up Wes' body, ankle locked in his fingers and his mouth tasting the thin skin behind Wes' knee. Tasting the rich salt-musk that was in the crease of thigh and hip and Wes shuddered all over - spread his other leg wide, his knee bent and his toes pushing at Gunn's thigh.

"For god's - sake, Charles - Christ -"

"Mmm." Gunn hummed to himself as he licked lower - lower still - and Wes' breathing went to ragged pants. "Want to be...right here..." Press of the flat of his tongue on roseate, puckered flesh and Wes' heel dug into the mattress and his hips lifted
off the bed.

"Want you there - too."

"Right here?" Gunn's words buzzed into flesh already tingling and burning.

"Right there! Sodding Christ!" Wesley arched off the bed, arched then curled, drawing a knee up tight to his chest, thigh trembling under Charles' grasp as he was breached and suddenly understood the universal raunchy appeal of mirrors in the ceiling - well - unless one was a vampire.

But speaking as a - a demon - with a human's tongue exploring his...oh god...inner self - a mirror would have been bloody lovely.

The noises Wes was making were more than encouraging - they were devastatingly sexy and Gunn breathed hard, mouth open and jaw aching and his own hips moving in a helpless grind on the bed. Oh fuck, fuck - want to - like a damn fire, so fucking - hot and - Wes' thigh quivered next to his
ear - Wes' ankle twitched and jumped in his fist and Gunn slid upward, mouthing balls and cock, belly and nipples and throat. His own erection pressed and skidded and slithered on the saliva-wet skin and they both groaned. "Fuckin - lube, man - need it - god - need you -" Wes twisted like an eel, stretching, and Gunn ran his fingernails down ribs and flank, watching Wes' shudder and flicker. Human - demon - human. Oh fuck, so damn - fine.

Wesley fumbled the cap off the lube, a gush of the slick gel coating his hands, his wrists, dripping onto his belly and making him hiss at the cold.

"Slick me up, Wes." Charles' voice was close - deep and shaky, words cooling his skin and Charles' groan warming it up again. His eyes fluttered shut in anticipation and reaction. "You're missin' a damn fine show."

Wesley's eyes snapped open to find Charles - watching. Watching Wesley's own pale fingers sliding over dark skin, catching the lamplight - glistening and he sucked in a breath. Watched
Charles thrust slow and careful into his hand, dark head appearing through his clenched fist - retreating. And he ached and wanted, thrust his fingers with the last of the lube roughly into himself to ease the way and clutched at Charles' shoulders. "Please."

Gunn leaned all his weight on his left knee - on his fists. Looked down at Wes, who was staring up at him, eyes wide. "Help me - do this," Gunn said - voice a little shaky and a lot breathless and he moaned as Wes' hand closed around him - tugged him gently forward. Wes arched up - pulled his leg wide with a hand on his knee, his other hand guiding - pulling - and Gunn pushed forward. The first touch of that hot, slick skin made him shudder and Wes gasped softly - tugged again.

"Yes, god - there, Charles - there -"

"Fuck -" Gunn pushed gingerly and then a little harder and the flesh moved - parted - sank aside for him and then seemed to pull him in and suddenly the muscle there was tight around the head of
Gunn's cock and he still - looked down. Wes was panting now, his eyes half-shut and Gunn stared at the place where their bodies joined - jerked in surprise when Wes suddenly bore down - and he slid *in*.

"God, oh - god, god - *fuck* - Wes -!"

Gunn's hands shook on the mattress, dug in because there was tight and hot - and then there *was tight and goddamn hot* the way only a demon guy could be. He held still - right there - breathing rough and fast against Wes' collarbone, muscles like he never ever suspected English had clenching around him, snug and tight.

And Wes holding him, those hot hands stroking over his scalp, neck, back - Jesus - ass, pulling him in till there was no more 'in' to go. And made him want to do things that just weren't physically possible, more than shallow rocking, burning up inside, fucking teasing them both. "*God.*"

"You feel - so good, Charles, so -" Wesley's voice
was shaking, just a little and he lifted his head a little and kissed Charles - dart of his tongue along Charles' lips, dipping inside to taste heat and coffee and cinnamon gum. And the dark molasses-sweet that was Charles. Weight and heat holding him - pushing him into the mattress and Wesley arched his back and pulled his knee higher - pressed Charles' forward with heels and palms, wanting him deeper - deeper. "Yess..."

Charles whole body was trembling and Wesley knew he couldn't stay up on just one knee for long. Charles pressed in tight - withdrew - pushed in again. Slow, deliberate strokes that made Wesley suck in a sharp breath - knead the sweat-slick flesh in his hands.

"Charles - let me -" Wesley moved a leg - pushed with the other, urging Charles over. To his side, then his back, and Charles sighed in relief as his weight came off his good knee. Wesley knelt over him, still filled - still held. Put his palm on Charles' ribs - the other on his thigh. And started to move.
"Now this is the good life," Gunn breathed, stretching both arms up and tucking them behind his head - let his body do the talking and mostly it said god in heaven you keep doin' that and I'll keep lyin' right here. Lying right there, watching the flush spread across Wesley's cheeks and down his chest, pink on pale to angry red, standing tall against his belly.

Wes made an inarticulate sound of agreement, teeth bared and the same kind of concentrated look he got when he was deep - deep into his work - instead of his work being deep in him. And looking wasn't nearly enough when Gunn could be touching - and touching wasn't enough when he could be gripping Wes' hips tight, hips, thighs, belly, dick - and he was so far past any hang-ups he'd have to send them a postcard because he was gonna get addicted to the sound Wes made when he swiped his thumb round and round the head of Wes' cock, all slicked up.

And to the sound Wes made when Gunn tasted him - salt and musk - and a little bit of that pepper taste
the Twosome kept sayin' meant magic. Who the fuck was he to say they were wrong?

Charles had a look on his face - one part wonder and one part glee and Wesley slowed down - clenched tight - rolled and rocked and twisted his hips. Determined to make this first time something Charles would never forget. Gasping as Charles stroked hot, rough hands over him - moaning as Charles lifted a slick thumb to his mouth and lazily licked it clean.

"Oh - god. Bloody - hell -" Wesley lifted up and thrust down hard - arched in pleasure as Charles pushed up to meet him.

"What do you say, English? You and me - take this number home?" Charles' voice was rough, panting and he was sure his wasn't much better - and they were moving together now, curling into the heated, humid air between them, lips and tongues coming together, clash and clack of teeth - far more hands than two men should have and sparks lighting up, firing off behind his eyes.
"Yes - home -" Wes mumbled and then he moved again - twist and bump and jut of hip and Gunn was arching up, bad knee forgotten, his heels burning on the sheets and his arms wrapping around Wes - pulling him close as orgasm shot fire up his spine. Wes was making a shivery, whimpery kind of noise and Gunn fumbled blindly, panting - pushed between them and found the solid, hot length of Wes' cock - stroked it jerkily, his hips bouncing on the bed. Wes' mouth came down over his and Wes' hands were on his skull - his knees tight in Gunn's ribs - sudden spill of slick-hot fluid - sudden, frenzied clamp and release of Wes' body around him and Gunn subsided, boneless and dazed. Panting for air, Wes' heartbeat thudding double-time against his sternum.

"H-home fuckin' run, English."

"And the crowd," Wesley panted, unwilling - unable - to move, "goes wild."
Noise and scent assaulted Xander like a gang of drunks after last call. It pushed and shoved at him from all sides, nosed up under his sleeves and into his pockets -

Okay, the pockets thing was a ten year old kid with a broken wrist.

Now.

Bones were pretty fragile when you got down to it.

"Oh, shit," Xander said - looked down into eyes as big and dark as a douse's eyes and a thin, hunger-pinched face. A face struggling to hold back tears as the bone under his fingers grated, tiny sandpaper grit that he felt through his fingertips. "Shit," he repeated.

Spike turned around from inspecting a thick roll of -

"Uh - I kinda - broke something," Xander said and wished the kid would stop *tugging* because it had to hurt - and didn't they cut off your hand or something if you were caught stealing here? Better a broken wrist then no hand. But - he had broken a bone a time or two in his life and it was - not nice. And even if he was a soulless vampire he wouldn't squish a douse under his boot - or let this kid with the pretty douse eyes creep away all - crushed.

"Oh, here." Spike plunged his hand into his pocket - pulled out something and pushed it into the kids other hand. The kid glanced down - saw the flash of green American money and grinned. Xander let him go and he scampered away, his arm tucked tightly to his chest and the fifty dollar bill Spike had given him in his fist.

"You know, I'm pretty sure his wrist is still broken,"
Xander said as the kid disappeared into the crowds like a douse down a hole. *Fast* for a kid with a broken bone. He flexed his fingers, feeling the crackle-shift of bone and skin on his fingertips and rubbed them together. It was...creepy.

"He's got another." Spike slipped the roll of leaves into his coat in a motion nearly too quick for *Xander* to see and bought a cheap packet of local cigarettes.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay." Xander watched another kid - a girl - dip her hand into and out of the gaping pocket of a fat German's backpack and scuttle away with what looked like a wallet. *Wonder what kind of medical care fifty bucks American gets? Wonder if that's a flying carpet? "Hey, Spike -!"

"No, pet, not a flying carpet," Spike said - didn't even glance over from the display of leather belts he was looking at. Xander fought the urge to grab one and put it around Spike's neck. *On the other hand, not a bad thing*... Spike glanced over at him and *leered*, his fingers sliding suggestively over thick
leather and silver gromets and Xander shivered.

"We'll take it," he croaked because there was something about Spike and leather that should be illegal in any civilized country. Oh Xander, you rebel. On the other hand, two guys could never have too much leather - and Jesus, did dying make him more gay or what?

He left Spike behind to pay - or whatever - and picked up a pillow at the stall down the way, lurid purple and scratchy silver threads - squishy and prickly but even Spike couldn't pocket a pillow and where they were going, Xander wouldn't have room for bags of purchases. He bought a scarf instead and considered a pair of gauzy red harem pants that looked long enough for Spike.

Spike grinned after Xander - bought two belts, because really - that was just more practical. Shoved them into the carrier-bag he gotten with an earlier purchase of some truly heavenly candies and wandered down the row, watching Xander haggle halfheartedly over a spangled scarf. Guess who's
playing Harem-boy and the Sultan later... he thought - twist of wantmine through the link that made Xander start and shoot him a glare. Spike just chuckled - ignored the dark looks he was getting from some young toughs. Three or four boys with too much 'national pride' and not enough sense who were staring daggers at all the tourists. Silly sods. Come and try me then, boys. I'm a bit peckish, anyway...

Xander decided not to mention the harem pants - now tucked up into an impossibly neat and small rose-scented bundle in his pocket and fell into step with Spike. Overhead, dust caught on the sunlight in a glittering shower that hurt his eyes and they skirted a patch of light on the floor, smoothly ducking into a stall of lamps and glasses, plates and goblets, the most colorful angled to catch the light. In the back of the stall, a pair of young Australians vigorously rubbed lamp after lamp. Xander gave them a really wide berth. Because after Sunnydale? A guy learned not to tempt fate.

He followed Spike quickly out of the stall.
"Here we go," Spike murmured and ducked aside, edging between a stall full to bursting with long, embroidered robes and another one that was equally full of brightly-printed magazines with Bollywood movie stars on the covers. A gloomy alley twisted away before them, lined with three or four more stalls that were half-hidden in darkness. Stalls that sold things less touristy and more...demony, and at the end of the alley was a steep, down-sloping ramp and at the bottom a door - to something very different.

Spike ushered Xander through with a flourish and then they were on a narrow stair with window holes in the walls, their edges smoothed with age and revealing in glimpses another bazaar below them. Old in way the bazaar aboveground wasn't.

Here, even the merchandise hadn't changed - much. Neither had some of the customers.

Xander flattened himself to the wall for a bearded demon to squeeze past in a turban and a Fu
Manchu mustache the color of the French mustard Anya used to sneak into his sandwiches that made his tongue burn and his eyes water. The demon left the scent of orange blossoms in its wake and disappeared down another narrow staircase.

"Okay - this wasn't in The Tourist's Guide To Turkey." Xander hopped down three stairs and pressed close to Spike, the peppery magic smell stronger here than it was even in Wes' shop.

"'S called Cappadocia, pet, and it's been around a lot longer than anything up there. Where we're gonna find our scroll." Spike ducked under a swaying curtain of web - S's'skik demon - and turned left onto a vast promenade. Pillars of stone - worn smooth by time and blackened by countless hands, claws, and tentacles upheld and arched and soot-stained ceiling. Gas and oil lamps - balls of magical fire and weirdly-scented herbal torches and candles lit the endless space like a golden star field.

"Now - just watch your step a little, Xan. Some of these down here don't like vamps much."
"Oh, really?" Xander muttered, eye-roll and 'duh' implicit in his tone.

Xander had discovered, since being turned, that vampire's weren't liked by many demons at all. Something that made for a lot of fights in back alleys and bars. Which was fun, but Spike still worried a bit, since Xander was new to the game and not always aware of the damage some demons could do. But he was learning. Doing damn good, really, Spike thought - leaned over and planted a fast kiss on Xander's cheek. "Don't want to take 'em all on, pet."

"Not without a good reason." Xander rested a hand on the small of Spike's back, unobtrusive contact but reassuring.

Spike snorted, leaned back into his hand for a moment then led the way down and into the throng below. "There is no good reason to take on this lot." A grunting epithet drifted up to meet them from a stall manned by demons who looked like giant pink
pigs. Spike flipped them off.

"Did you understand what he said?"

"Didn't need to."

The Lower Bazaar was crowded - fuming with all sorts of stinks and scents and magical energies and Spike felt his demon - settle. This was home in more ways than the human world ever was, and Spike let his stride lengthen - let his shoulders go back and his hands curl loosely at his sides. He felt - damn good here. Now just need to find our scroll...or maybe a drink...or a fight... There's that cafe down here - hashish and coffee and that fuckin' stuff that Dru had once - like vamp-nip. Xander'd like that, maybe... They had - all the time in the world, and showing Xander the 'real' world - was fucking fun.

~*~*~*~*~

In a good romance, the lovers should be able to bask and cuddle, have another round of lovemaking
in the morning, then a slow brunch full of stopping to kiss and touch.

In the real world, Wesley and Charles shared a quick shower, hot soapy kisses - and lost the toothpaste tube to a douse. A piece of toast, a glass of orange juice, and they were hurrying through the streets of Salem to the shop.

Because neither love nor the luxury of ownership stopped the demon delivery services from their appointed times.

And these appointed times were always bloody early.

"Sign here. Here. And here. Initial here, then sign -"

"Why am I signing all these forms?" Wesley snapped, irritated, and the squat, short demon in round glasses and a little purple fez blinked up at him. With six eyes.

"This says you were here. This says the shipment is
good. This says your initial is good as your signature and this is a sample of your initial. Then you sign to say you okayed your initial and then you initial these -" the demon ruffled through about twenty more pages. "Then we're done."

"I'm not buying bloody Thrummer stones, for heaven's sake." Wesley scribbled on the next form and the next, frowning.

"We have one page per item, all insurance and guarantees for each item need a signature or an initial. You missed one." Wesley glared and flipped a page back. "We have a kit for DNA and blood-print for Thrummer stones.

"I'll bloody well keep that in mind," Wesley growled, ignoring Charles' snigger.

He ignored Charles' snigger but not the warm, solid hand that rested on his hip through the paperwork and gave him reassuring squeezes every time the little delivery demon pointed out another signature needed.
"Thank you for doing business with us, sir. Tevlox Dispatch is always at your service."

"I will keep that in mind," Wesley answered and then added to the puff of smoke where the demon had been until a second before, "git."

"Just doin' his job, English," Gunn said - avoided the halfhearted smack Wes sent his way and snagged the man closer - kissed him. "Just like I'm just doin' mine. Got your tea all made."

"That's not - your job, Charles. But thank you - very much." Wes spoke through kisses and Gunn kissed back and then they both groaned softly as the doorbell tinkled.

"What can I do for you today, Mr. Sells?"

"He was just doing his job, Spike." Xander looked over his shoulder at the squat purple demon, six
eyes and a cabbie cap, trying to pull something that looked like a perfume spritzer out of its mouth.

"Never let a demon spray you with anything for free, pet. You never know what it'll do."

"But that was Chanel No. 5 - I recognized it from when I dated Cordelia." Spike glared and Xander shrugged - let it go. *Who knew that the demon world had spritzers, too?*

"Just not a good idea, Xan. No, I bloody well do not want to buy your sister. Or your daughter. Or your *grandfather*, you detestable little - creature!" Spike roughly shoved a skinny, long-nosed lizard-looking thing out of his way. Lizard-thing sprang right back as if on a rubber band, trailing a kite's tail of - apparently - scantily dressed family members. Xander hastily averted his eyes from *grandfather*.

"*Sod. Off.*" Spike shoved again, hard, and the lizard-thing stumbled back, flailing - fell with a clatter into a stall that apparently sold all sorts of brass things. Which rocked and swung and crashed off their
rickety shelves and hooks, escalating din that made Xander wince.

"I think we should - " Xander started.

"Have a drink," Spike finished, catching Xander's arm and disappearing into the crowd before the lizard-thing could point any claws their way.

"No m'am, that's not for sale - private collection."

"But it's a Wormers - you don't see these every day!" The woman's fingers - thin and veined and loaded with enough rings to make them seem like she was wearing knuckle-dusters - tightened down on the book. Wesley's own hands clenched a little tighter.

"Yes, exactly. That is why it's not for sale. And this area of the shop is clearly marked 'Employees Only' so if you would please - let - go!" The woman's hands scrabbled, her long, red nails scoring the
fragile old leather and Wesley's mouth thinned in displeasure.

"Well I'm sure I've never been so insulted! Imagine! My husband will be hearing about this!" The woman opened her crocodile handbag and pulled out a cell phone - snapped it open and stabbed buttons furiously as she stomped out, her heels clicking like little gun shots on the floor.

"Thank you, have a nice day," Wesley hissed after her - reshelved the book and turned to find Charles with a Cadbury's egg and a kiss. Thank god for Charles.

"Never thought I'd spend the day watchin' you fight little old ladies over books."

Wesley collapsed into the love seat, relieved when Charles sat with him and pressed a full cup of tea into his hands, warming tingles seeping through his palms and up his arms. Wesley sipped, waiting for the tingles to reach the rock-hard tension in his shoulders. "You have never gone with me to the
book bazaar beneath Portobello Road."

"There's one of those?"

Wesley took another long and fortifying drink of his tea. "Yes. And it's the old women you have to watch out for. Every time."

"Anyt'ing elssse, lovey?" the - waitress - lisped and Spike grinned up at her - let a bit of tongue flicker just behind his teeth.

"We're set, love, but if I need anything at all - I'll just whistle." The waitress cocked her crested head and made a *snickitty* sort of noise in the back of her throat.

"You know 'ow to whissstle?"

"Oh, yeah - you just put your lips together - and blow." With another flurry of clicky noises the
demon swayed away and Xander stared hard at Spike.

"What the hell was that?"

"Was a Rykkt demon. They tend to -"

"No, no, I mean - what was all the lips and the - the eyes and - you pouted at her! It!"

Spike lifted an eyebrow and Xander snatched his drink and gulped - froze - coughed so hard he was pretty sure he was going to bring up a lung.
"Jesus...Christ..."

"Gotta sip it, love. That's good stuff, that - aged one hundred years in the pickled nest of a -"

"No. Please. I'm a vampire. A demon. Love mayhem and chaos and blood." Xander pushed his glass carefully away. "But please - I don't need to know anything else about this - drink. Or about you flirting with million-year-old waitresses." The Rykkt caught his eye from across the room and winked,
crest and wrinkles and crepey jowls swaying and Xander shuddered. Spike just grinned - leaned in close, nuzzling into Xander's neck and nibbling just there. Xander groaned.

"It's the old ones you gotta watch out for, pet."

"You know what? No. Just. No." Xander straightened his spine, his shirt, his dignity - then a finger at Spike. "You. Nest. Chains. For the next century or until your sanity returns because...ew."

Xander reclaimed his drink and tossed back a mouthful and felt it burn an acid trail down to his stomach, grateful he didn't need the organ anymore for actual digestion because he was pretty sure this drink would kill it.

"Open your mind, pet. Older Rykkts grow extra - "

"Finish that sentence and I'll let her have you."

Xander took another drink. The stuff wasn't so bad. Once it burned off the superficial nerves and taste buds and sensitive stomach lining. Or maybe it'd burned a trail straight through and wasn't following
normal channels anymore. He tossed the rest back and coughed.

Then it seemed like a good idea to flag the waitress back for another.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time to splash a sip of whisky in his tea but perhaps Xander had been right that Wesley's tea-drinking was getting out of hand. He blinked blearily into the cash register - he didn't remember it being quite so difficult to make change for twenty dollars on a seventeen dollar and forty two cent purchase.

Bugger.

"No, you need to give me another quarter, not another nickel," the girl said. Black hair, black liner, black lips, for god's sake, and Wesley peered down at the change in his hand.

"But that is another - oh, no, you're right." He
laughed too-brightly - switched the coins and poured them into the girls waiting palm. "Sorry! Have a nice day!"

She shot him an odd look and walked out and Wesley slumped against the counter. "Charles? I think I need..."

"Think you need a break."

"Yes. I - yes," Wesley said vaguely around a yawn and let Charles lead him away to the couches. Yes. Yes. Perhaps he could cut back on the tea and hire an assistant...for the busy season.

Or at the very least, schedule sleep.

As pleasurable as it was, man could not live on tea and shagging alone.

Unless that man was Spike.

But Wesley wasn't going there.
He was going - "Oh, yes, Charles. Thank you." - to take a nap.

"I said we're here to pick up the Christiatos scroll," Spike said to the demon in the headlock. The demon with pupils like magic eight balls dancing around each other.

"Is this it?" It was an easy guess to make - as there was one scroll on the dirty blanket this demon called his shop. Xander wondered if it was common practice to stick yard sale type colored price dots on ancient prophetic scrolls or if this guy was as pathetic as he looked.

"Yeah." Spike dropped the demon and picked up the scroll, dropped a handful of bills on his blanket and tucked it away. "Keep the change, mate."
They came up out of Cappadocia in Sultanahmet, probably six blocks from their hotel. The sun was down - just - and the sky was veiled in saffron and terracotta and plum-red. Someone was having a party - a wedding party, it looked like - and there were cars and music and guests in bright, glittering dress, trailing perfume and spice and savory food-smells. Spike and Xander walked on the other side of the street, watching the to-ing and fro-ing, hands linked. Remote hunger was in the link but the need for some quiet was stronger. Even now, sometimes Xander felt overwhelmed by how much more he could smell and see - feel, even, as the wind brushed over their sensitive skin like a hundred ghostly fingers.

Somewhere behind them a door slammed and Xander did a little trip-catch stumble as Slayer washed over them both.

"No way," Xander breathed, craning his neck for a glimpse of golden hair in the crowd - only this Slayer didn't smell like Buffy.
Just...Slayer.

And made his gums itch and demon rise.

He was breathing by the time she appeared, dark eyes glittering beneath a neat hijab and Xander felt a flutter in his throat because he'd seen those eyes before, staring out at him from a shop stall in Cairo before he turned her life upside down. "Asima?"

She blinked - and the demon roared to go, go - kill - take advantage of that moment of weakness. But I know her - she has two sisters and three brothers and her father is a machinist and her mother is a teacher... Asima had no such doubts and her fist connected squarely, sending Xander reeling backward.

Then rolling out of the way of her stake, grappling for wrists like twigs in his hands - wrists that should have been fragile, breakable but weren't. That lifted him and threw him against a wall, made his skull connect and crack and lights flash before his eyes
and he knew which face he had forward, wading back into the fight. Fast, faster, fastest and twisting with the stake embedding itself into his shoulder, flash of pain pain pain! and Spike's arousal excitement Slayer scalding him through the link.

Spike growled - watched the Slayer whirl and kick - watch Xander connect with a hard punch that drove her back, despite his wounded arm. Mine hurt mine kill! The demon was furious and frantic, scenting Xander's blood - driven into a rage by the tingling buzz of the Slayer.

And Spike - hesitated.

 Fucking hell...can't let her... Christ, her Watcher's probably about. Stupid bastard's gonna see her die - fuck. Spike had no doubt - she was going to die. Xander was - that good. And this new crop of Slayers was still so green. He pushed angrily at a stab of memory - Buffy at the foot of the tower, Giles in stunned disbelief and himself - in an agony of scalding tears.
The Slayer punched again and Xander dodged - bent - got her around the neck and chest and yanked her backward, half-choking her. Snarling over her shoulder at Spike, fangs inches from her throat. The hijab was askew - she was panting - and *mine enemy kill* in the link - excitement and bloodlust, arousal and triumph. Exactly what Spike had felt, so many years ago.

*Hard.*

Xander had never been so hard - so *ready* in his life and he *shook*, dragging his tongue up her throat, feeling the pulse banging against his tongue like a heart right there under the skin - and there was nothing...but...

A tiny foot crashed down on Xander's instep, shattering bones and she twisted like a fish, twisted down and away in a move he'd seen Buffy make a *thousand* times.

He *knew* that move, twisted here, lunged *there* and
took her down under him.

Licked his lips.

Looked into her eyes and felt her breath across his face, fast and shallow through the skewed fabric covering her mouth.

He reached up to tug away that scrap of cloth - felt her start to struggle again and gripped his fingers in cloth and hair, slammed her head to the ground until she stopped moving. He delicately finished unwrapping her hijab and licked at a tiny trickle of pepper-fire blood at the corner of her mouth before plunging his fangs deep into her artery and drinking fast, hard, _greedily_ of blood that blew the fucking top off his skull with every gulp.

Spike was unsurprised to hear stumbling footsteps behind him and he turned, ready. Turned _away_ from Slayer and vampire locked in an embrace both profane and sacred. Turned to catch the swinging stake of a tall, thin man who looked more like a gypsy tinker than a Watcher. Caught his wrist and
twisted, up and around - crushed the sweating, struggling body to his own and pushed his chin hard into the man's neck. Growled a little.

"It's over, man. Over and done. Don't get yourself killed as well," he said - felt the pounding heartbeat racketing through the both of them and closed his eyes - licked his lips and pushed. Sent the man stumbling into the wall and watched as Xander rose, twist of his body like a lithe, dark mink - instant center and focus on the man who slumped bonelessly against the stone wall, forehead bleeding and blood tears sweat...anguish in his scent.

And hate - bubbling, boiling rage beneath the surface.

"Don't try it," Spike advised, watching Xander's sideways slink, eye trained on the Watcher.

"Hey - I've got room for an aperitif," Xander said, grinning, flying high and giddy and hey - go team!, vampires: one.
"You - you - fiend!" The Watcher choked. Words that would have made Xander laugh if they didn't come with a cross thrust at him and oily heat that made his skin crawl.

"Jesus - she attacked me! Slayer." He pointed. "Vampires." He pointed again. "Doing what comes naturally."

"There's nothing natural about either of you," the Watcher rasped - shot a desperate glance at his dead Slayer. Spike saw the idea form - saw the man clutch the cross tighter and saw him shift his weight. And then Xander was on him - hard pounce that drove the man back the half-step into the wall and drove the air from his lungs. The cross clattered to the ground and Xander kicked it away.

"It's nature at work. Consider me - Darwin's Little Helper." Xander's tongue flickered out and tasted the man's skin, flicker of red against the pale jaw. "I don't know if it's - cricket to kill the Watcher. What'd you think, Spike?"
Spike looked up from his crouch by the Slayer's body - twitched his hand away from smoothing the hijab back into place, tucking her hair out of sight right and proper. "All depends, pet, on how magnanimous you're feeling." Spike stood up slowly - lit a cigarette and went to lean on the wall beside the pair - looked into the Watcher's dark eyes. *Nothing like Wesley, this one. Nothing like...*

"I am kinda full and he smells all sour." The Watcher struggled under Xander's hold, under the cold nose pressed to his throat. His eyes rolled, white around the dark irises and fixing on Spike.

"A watcher never begs!"

Xander lifted his head. "Well, actually - " He stopped with a grunt when Spike's elbow connected with his ribs.

"Don't need to torment the man, pet. He's in mourning."
Xander looked at Spike - *looked* at him and came to an abrupt decision. He stepped back - took the Watcher by the shirtfront and spun him around - shoved him toward the body cooling on the sidewalk.

"She has family so - you'd better get going and call them or something. Better luck next time." The man stared up at them, his eyes wide and wet and his hands clenched into fists and Xander reached blindly for Spike's hand - tugged him into motion.

"Spike? What's up?" he asked, a block later and the hot tingling of the blood in his veins throbbing to the tips of his fingers. Making him want to jump and scream and *fuck*. Making him - alive. *Sorrow want rage guilt* in the link, dull and helpless. A bruise struck once too often and Xander didn't *want* Spike to feel like that. Not ever.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Spike mouth another cigarette out of his pack and light it with one shaky hand, fingers tight in Xander's grip. "Congratulations, pet. Not every vamp can take his
first Slayer."

The buzzing Slayer *high* curdled in Xander's belly like too many cheap beers. *Anger* radiated from Spike. Stiffened his spine and made their fingers creak with his grip. "Sweetheart - "

Spike dropped his cigarette and spun, caught Xander's face between his palms and pinned his body to the wall, soft where Xander was still hard and high, pushing into Spike's kisses with willful abandon. "I'm *proud* of you, love. You were *stunning*. Magnificent." *Mine*, the demon added, rising in a swirl like Chinese dragons.

"But?" Xander asked, and Spike kisses him again - slower and softer. Tasting the blood - tasting the fight.

"But. This bloody soul - telling me I should have stopped you - helped *her... Bollocks* to that!" Spike kicked the brick wall that was between Xander's boots - leaned heavily forward until his entire self was draped over Xander, hands in his hair and face
pressed into his throat. "Slayers die. By vampire or by demon, they die. And there's no way she would have stopped, seein' as how you knew her. Was she a recruit, love?"

Xander nodded wordlessly - dragged his hands down and down Spike's back, rubbing hard with the tips of his fingers to push out the tension that stiffened Spike's spine.

"Found her in Egypt," Xander muttered.

"Yeah. Nothing to be done, pet." Spike sighed softly - leaned back and looked at Xander, a small smile on his face. "You did good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Xander's lips tingled where Spike's brushed and he slid his arms around, into Spike's coat and around his waist, the scroll a heavy weight against his wrist. He could still feel the waves of resentment shimmering off Spike's skin like heat off the pavement in the summer, warping the love pride
mine and Xander crushed Spike against him and tilted his face to the moon.

"We should leave. When a Slayer's killed, the Council sends a squad to hunt down the vamp that did it these days."

"Nothing the Council can throw at us we couldn't take, love," Spike murmured - leaned into Xander's embrace and the false warmth the Slayer's blood was lending him. "Wanted to go down to Cyprus maybe, anyway - or Greece. See the sights - do a bit of a Grand Tour, yeah?" Love love love, but uncertainty in the link, too, and Spike finally pulled away - took Xander's arm and got them walking again. "Don't mean to - rain on your parade, love. I'm all right."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "Then we'll stop by London on the way home and buy you a few shiny new vocabulary words."
Xander took a moment to process that then snorted and jammed his elbow into Spike's side. "Jerk. Not all of us were poets in another life." The *spark* was coming back, the subtle sizzle through his veins and the purring happiness of his demon.

"It was good, wasn't it? Besting a Slayer."

Xander's smile split into a wide grin. "*Oh* yeah."

~*~*~*~*~

Spike *had* been all right by night. Fights and fucks. Danger and drinks. Nests in four countries and three continents in four weeks.

But *discontent* shivered through Spike's emotions like smoke and when Xander woke up in the middle of the day, squinting and trying to remember if they were in Greece or Italy, Spike was awake and watching him.

Smoking.
Xander's tongue was still asleep so he made an inquiring noise instead of actual words.

"Watchin' you sleep the sleep of the innocent."

"Okay - again with the whole are you sure you don't need glasses? thing."

"Metaphor, love," Spike said - flicked ash and took a drag - watched Xander struggle up to one elbow and yawn - shake back the curtain of slightly curled, tangled hair and rub absently at his belly.

"Ookay... But - what's wrong, Spike? You feel -" Xander gestured with his hand, a sort of kneading motion.

"I feel squishy?"

"You feel wrong. Sad, or - I dunno. Sweetheart -" Xander scooted over in their hotel-made, jerry-rigged Nest and touched his cheek, lightly. "There's this newfangled thing called sharing all the cool kids
do."

Spike snorted. "I'm a *vampire*. We don't fucking share."

"I'll start. My name is Alexander and I'm a bloodaholic."

"Pillock. That's AA."

"You can stop me any time." Xander rolled onto his back, head in Spike's lap and an arm around his hips, stroking his ribs.

Spike...sighed and crushed out his cigarette, absently petted Xander's chest. "Fine. I just... It's this sodding soul, Xander. It's - interfering. Making me feel like..."

"Like I shouldn't have taken out that Slayer?"

"Like we should be in L.A. instead of here, fucking our way across the Continent. Like I should be *doing penance*. Or something. Not - encouraging you..."
Spike growled in frustration - raked his hand back through his hair and jabbed his cigarette out with unnecessary force. "I don't want to do that, the hero gig. Never did. People are so bloody stupid - I don't care if they die or not, Christ, this bint in L.A. - " Spike reached down and stroked his hand over and over through Xander's hair.

"I just want us, love. No powers and no champions and no bloody apocalypse. Just - us."

"Ready to go home?"

Spike fumbled another cigarette out of his pack and lit it, drawing hard and staring out the window. "Fucking hell. Yes."

Xander rolled over again onto his stomach and banged his heels together lazily three times.

Spike groaned.

"Kidding, sweetheart. Kidding. I'll call the airline - pass me the phone."
"You know, none of these cards actually say anything," Wes said, shuffling through the inch-thick stack of postcards from Istanbul, Cyprus, London and, obscurely, Tbilisi.

"Sure they do, English. Look - this one says: 'Having a wonderful time fucking our way through the rooms of the Victoria & Albert Museum. I don't know if the guards really don't see or if they're just so British they refuse to notice. Never try to clean '-' Uh, looks like three different words for 'sperm' were written and crossed off here - 'stuff off of a really old oil painting with a Handi-wipe. Who knew that Handi-wipe stuff could dissolve old paint? Miss you both - love and orgasms - S and X.'" Gunn looked over at Wes, who was shaking his head. "I think that pretty much says it all, don't you?"

The next card only said 'This one' and Wesley flipped it over with horror to find White-out splattered in the corner of a Gainsborough
landscape.

"I'm thinkin' I ought to give them a call and tell 'em not to come home." Gunn chuckled and took the card from Wesley's nerveless fingers, tucking it into the middle of the stack. He flipped over the next one and scanned Xander's scrawled handwriting. "What's Cappadocia?"

Wesley shook himself. "It's - oh. Officially, it's an underground complex of cities in Turkey, several hours from Istanbul."

"How 'bout unofficially?"

"Unofficially, it is an underground demonic city and far, far larger than any cartographer knows."

"Huh." Gunn turned over another card - studied the picture for a moment - glanced at his watch. "Guess they'll be here soon - want another beer?"

"No, I don't think so." Wes stretched hard then slumped, letting himself slide a bit lower into the
sitting room Nest. A movie playing on the TV that neither was watching - more interested in the slow kisses and glancing touches. So damn - relaxed.

*How my boy should always be,* Gunn thought with a nod of satisfaction. *So damn glad he finally hired some help.* Oh, damn. *The help.* Wonder how long it'll take the Twosome to - corrupt him. Then Gunn considered their help - a willowy young man named Michael with curling black hair and glasses - and black nail polish. And a wardrobe with more black in it than Spike's. *Then again, that might be one barn door wide open without a horse in sight.*

A douse squirmed its way up through the cushions to waggle its whiskers at Gunn and he passed it a piece of popcorn. "The boys are comin' home tonight."

Its ears popped forward.

"Bet they brought you all kinds of shiny stuff."

"Charles, don't tease the dice."
"Who's teasin'? Harris probably bought out a whole stall of shinies in Istanbul for the offering tree."

Wesley glanced over at the wizened, dead tree - some species of oak, he thought - that stood in a heavy brass planter in the corner of the sitting room. Xander had poured landscaping rocks all around the trunk to hold the six-foot, skeletal thing upright - and when he'd seen the dice burrowing he'd hidden some things in the rocks. The bare, grey limbs had tinsel, Mardi Gras beads and soda-can tabs festooned on it, along with artfully folded bits of cigarette foil, Hershey's kisses, and - Gunn's contribution - beer-bottle caps. The dice gleaned through it every day, taking this, not taking that - changeable desires that they hadn't sorted out yet.

"Yes, actually, I'm sure he did," Wesley said, handing another piece of popcorn to the douse who snatched it and held it tightly, whiskers and tail vibrating with anticipation - huge eyes fastened on the tree as if imagining it festooned in ropes of treasures. Abruptly it stuffed the kernel in its mouth
and ran, heading up. To the attic to spread the news, Wesley was sure.

"Great. We're gone for a few weeks and you stuff the dice so full of food they waddle. It was a joke, not an order!"

"Jesus fuckin' Christ, Harris!" Gunn whipped around to stare at Xander coming down the stairs. "What the fuck?"

"Forgot the house keys. Thought you were asleep - utilized the famous Xander Harris sneaking in the window skill. I could've made a fortune as a cat burglar." Xander crossed the foyer to the front door, unlocked it and let Spike in, grabbing a pair of duffel bags on the porch.

"Gonna give me a fuckin' heart attack," Gunn muttered - subsided grumpily as Wes patted his shoulder.

"The dice missed you - they took comfort in all the HoHo's," Wes said, smiling up at Xander and Spike,
who stood poised at the edge of the Nest as if contemplating a dive into an unknown and murky pool of water.

"All the HoHo's?" Xander asked - grabbed at Spike who was yanking on a boot and slowly toppling. "They don't have HoHo's in London. I was dreaming about HoHo's."

"No, but they've got Cadbury's," Wes said and then oofed as Spike launched himself and landed, half on Wes and half on Gunn, grinning like a lunatic.

"Missed you more than any damn junk food," Spike growled - pulled Wes into a hard kiss, his hand sliding down Gunn's chest to latch onto his waistband. Gunn's turn to oof as Xander flopped down as well, leg over Gunn's legs and his hand reaching for Wes.

"Well, okay, yeah - missed -" Gunn growled and grabbed - sank his fingers in Xander's hair and pulled him close.
"Shut up."

"Shutting up," Xander mumbled, kissing back into the warm and orange-iron taste of Gunn and wiggled closer family curling between him and Spike, around and through Wes and Gunn. "Now."

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley slipped his hand into the back of the wardrobe, between faux-fur coats and dipped into wintry cold, ice nipping at his fingers. He grasped the jars, one and then the other, brushing the flakes of frost from his sleeves.

The dice were creeping closer, whiskers and ears forward, tails up, following Wesley to the long bench, swarming up its legs to perch and...watch.

Glacial cracks and webs spanned the glowing jar, glittering like a Faberge egg with Xander's soul contained inside. The other sat squat and cold, cradled in Wesley's hands. Wordlessly, he handed it
Spike took the jar - walked over to the clear space away from the wardrobe and sat down cross-legged, the jar in his lap. It was cold against his anklebones - so cold in the June heat and closeness of the attic. *June when I found that church. June when I...settled down to die like a sick dog. A year - been a year. Incredible fucking year...* Wes sat down opposite him and then Spike felt Xander at his back - Gunn warm and solid on his left. Spike looked up at Xander's jar - at the soft glow and web of cracks and took a long breath - wished for a smoke.


"Yeah. I'm sure, Wes. Never been so sure."

Xander's arms slipped down his shoulder blades and around his waist and Gunn gave a last reassuring
touch - reassuring now he'd been reassured an unsouled Spike was nothing like Angelus.

With a glance to Wesley, Charles backed away, out of the circle and away from the muo-ping. Wesley wasn't sure what would happen if a human accidentally stored his soul in a muo-ping but neither was anxious to test it out.

Wesley pressed his lips to Spike and tasted the last of the whiskey Spike had been drinking all day - drinking after he made the decision - and placed his hand on his forehead, opened the spell book to the proper page, and began to chant in measured Chinese.

Wo qing qui
Wu xin zi li
Kun, zhen, xun, kan, li.
Ci wo ton ling
Ji fao muo li

Spike felt a pressure over his chest, a light press and looked down to see Xander's hand there. He
covered it with one of his own and sucked in a breath, feeling the cool tendrils of the spell winding around his soul, bundling it like a bolt of silk.

Wo hao zhao
Jue xin ze
Wan cheng
Ta de zi yuan.

And then - a tug. Painless, all-encompassing. As if his backbone were being pulled free. Spike arched, taking in a sharp breath - feeling loose free cold. Feeling love from Xander - squiggle of fear and then - Wes was cupping his cheek, and Gunn's hand was back on his knee and Xander was rubbing his hands over and over Spike's arms - over his chest. Spike looked down, and the jar - glowed.

Epilogue
The phone was ringing and four men stared at it.

Then three of them turned to Xander.

"I'd better - um - I'm gonna...take this in the other room." Xander pushed his chair back and left his plate of samosas on the table, Spike's *lovemine* trailing after him like smoke. He grabbed the phone without checking the caller ID and carried it into the sitting room.

Where he sat. Or semi-sprawled, since sitting in the Nest wasn't exactly *easy*.

Sat and took an unnecessary breath before looking at the caller ID for the first time in a week of being home. A week of no phone calls at all from Willow. Or Dawn. Or even Angel.

And yep - no phone calls was giving him that wiggy crawly feeling up his spine that meant nothing good.

The Watcher's report *had* to be in London by now -
had to be...in the Watchers' diaries.

And while he wanted to be immortalized in the diaries, this was so not the way he wanted it to happen.

Maybe Giles came through and listed him under 'hero' too - he could take a dual listing. And...all that didn't disappear every time he got into trouble - right?

He'd know in...oh...five minutes.

Or possibly five seconds.

He flipped the phone open and closed his eye, queasy. "Hi, Buff."

"Xan."

They both listened to Buffy breathe for a while.

"Awkward, huh?"
"Awkward does not even begin to describe this conversation - which we haven't had yet. And it already is. Awkward."

Xander leaned back into the pillows that smelled like him and Spike - like Wes and Gunn and popcorn and sex - and tangled his hand in his hair. Listened to Buffy breathe. "Buff -"

"Gonna tell me what happened?"

"Doesn't that go against the Slayer Handbook - getting the vampire's side? I mean - that's a Watcher thing. You're exceeding your station or something like that."

"Yeah, yeah. Slayer never to exceed her station. It's two chapters before 'do not date vampires, for it is bad for business.'"

"I love you Buff."

"Can I help it if I'm unusually appealing to the undead?" Buffy sighed - hard. "Okay, indirect isn't
really working. I read Mister Drummond's diary, Xan. Start talking. Please?"

"What did - Drummond say?" A longer sigh and then a rustling of papers. Xander opened his eye again and stared at the ceiling.

"He said - while patrolling a large outdoor wedding, two vampires were seen...blah blah...seemed to know the Slayer personally...blah blah...she was...killed and...drained... Xander, why?"

"I knew her, Buffy. I found her in Egypt."

"Yeah, it says that. So - how?"

"She attacked me. I said her name and she recognized me and she - attacked. And we fought and...I won. It's really that -"

"Don't you dare say 'simple'. It's not simple."

Xander closed his eye again. The blackness was somehow more comforting. He could hear Gunn's
heartbeat - Wes', slow and steady. And love love brave from Spike, warm and soft.

"No. Well, kind of. I've done a lot of fighting, you know? A lot. And the main goal was to win. That didn't change when I -"

"Became a vampire... Yeah." Silence again - distant city-sounds on Buffy's end and music from the sitting room, turned down to a murmur. And whispers.

"Thinking first? Not exactly the number one trait of the Xand-man." He tried to remember what Buffy's breathing sounded like when she was really upset - and when she was just thinking. "At least I didn't summon a...singing and dancing killing demon who immolated innocent citizens by the strength of their own passions."

"This time," Buffy said after a short silence.

"Uh - yeah. Never make the same mistake twice. That's me."
Which might have been the wrong thing to say - and Xander couldn't think of a good follow up line.

"What's she saying?" Gunn whispered, and Spike shook his head.

"Let me listen," Spike whispered back. Only there wasn't anything to listen to. Buffy wasn't talking, and Xander wasn't talking, and Spike was starting to think he needed to go in there and take the phone away from him when -

"Listen, Buffy -"

"Xander, I -"

They both started to talk - both stopped, and Xander laughed shortly.

"Ladies first."

"Yeah, right. Okay. Xander, I have to know - if you're going to... If this is going to be - are you gonna -?"
"Am I going to hunt down Slayers and kill them wherever I find them?"

"Well...yeah."

"That'd be a great big no." Xander sat straight up in the Nest, frowning, his fingers closing down tight on a cushion. "Still me with the only making the same mistake once - unless you include the twinkie and bologna sandwich which is not to be mentioned in - "

"Are you? Still you? Really? I mean - the Xander Harris I knew wouldn't take a life. A human life. I don't know how or why or where you hunt - but if Spike's soul is okay with it, I can trust that. But this is - "

"I did, Buffy." Xander released his fingers from the pillow, feeling his joints creak under the pressure. "Look I've - had a lot of time to think about the - the Sweet thing. And I did take a human life - I don't know how many human lives." He licked his lips.
"You guys forgave me - like it never happened - I kinda didn't."

"Xan - "

"The old Xander did that for a happy wedding, Buffy. And you do not even want to know what I did to keep myself whole in Africa. I did it to stay alive this time. I - I'm not sorry I won." He licked his lips, hearing the hitch in her breath and the heartbeats in the other room. "But I'm sorry it happened."

"So am I."

"I'm still me," Xander said again - to reassure both of them. "The Xander you knew is still in here. And he's pretty freaked. And - Jesus. She staked me - I wasn't - gonna stand there and wait for her to take a better shot." Xander curled his fingers around his shoulder, feeling the sting and ache of the stake going in again.

"You're a vampire," Buffy said quietly.
"Yeah."

"And Xander."

"Yeah."

"It's...complicated, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What did...what did Spike do?"

"Do? He - kept the Watcher from getting hurt."

"He didn't - help?" Buffy's voice sounded - not incredulous but...hopeful. As if Xander fighting with a Slayer would have brought on the old Spike and his glory days.

"No, we didn't double-team her if that's what you're thinking. And that sounded really wrong. He just watched, Buffy." My kill mine from the demon, bristling at the thought of Spike having to help - or trying to take away its rightful prey. Xander told it
to shut up.

Because he really wasn't in the mood to listen to Mr. Juvenile Delinquent Blood Lust, Esquire - not while talking to Buffy.

There was a soft laugh from the kitchen and Xander glanced toward the empty doorway and the slim line of Spike's bare foot that he could see.

"Spike wasn't going to - get involved."

"Not even to stop you."

"No, not even. I'm not gonna - do it again, Buffy. Or - I mean, I'm not going to do it *deliberately*. But I'm not going die anytime soon, either."

"Ha ha," Buffy said dryly, but there was a softening to her tone and Xander leaned back in the Nest a little, feeling the tight-coiled bands of nerves in his belly relax a little and the demon settle, grumbling in its corner.
"I don't like killing people who remind me of someone I love."

"Who do you - " Buffy cut herself off, and Xander heard her hair rustle like she was shaking her head. "No. So not going there today." She took in a quick, sharp breath - sound of a Slayer making up her mind and changing a subject. "Giles got the prophecy from Wes. Was that - "

"That's what we went to find - in Istanbul. Did it do any good?"

"Do - oh my god, Xander. There's a whole cult of monks in Ustjurt waiting for that prophecy to come true so they can drive the underworld into the outerworld if you know what I mean."

"Does it start with A and sound like 'pocalypse'?"

"Well there is a Hellmouth under Aktau but no. Mostly it starts with A and sounds like 'whole lot of demons terrorizing Southwestern Asia'. Giles sent Willow and a dozen Slayers to take out the monks
this morning."

"I have no idea where Aktau is but I hope they have fun. Maybe have time for some sun and fun on the beach?"

"Um...probably not. These are some crazy crazy monks. Xander, you know that..." Buffy stopped talking again and Xander imagined her staring into space - picking her words. "You know that if you - I mean, if -"

"You'll come after me if I - kill another Slayer? It's okay, Buff - you've threatened my life before this. Little death threat between friends - spices things up."

There was a muffled sort of noise on the other end and then Buffy was laughing softly.

"Yeah, I guess I have. And you threatened me once, too and Spike - that's a whole death-threat-o-rama there that we don't even need to get into."
"Yeah. I get it, Buffy. I really do. You don't need to worry about it - so don't need to worry about it."

"Okay, Xander. I'll - okay." Another sigh, and the slick sound of Buffy licking her lips. "Umm - Dawn says hi, by the way. She's out on a date or I'd have her talk to you."

"A date - like a human date?"

"We think so. We're pretty sure he's human. Or at least mostly. He's an acrobat with one of those weird surrealist circuses so it's kinda hard to tell." Beat. "I can hear you laughing, Xander."

"So - the boyfriend in the circus is the most normal man dated by a Summers woman since your mom met your dad?"

"Pretty much. And you so do not want to get into the who has the most normal dating history game with me, Mr. Demon Magnet."

"Is Dawnie going to run away with the circus?"
"Not until she finishes college."

"Yeah, college." Xander sighed happily, thinking of all the books and writing and *scholarly* things he wasn't doing. All the boring research that Wes liked to do himself because he was Mr. Uptight English Guy with a worse bug up his ass about the treatment of books than Giles.

Things didn't change much - in high school, he'd had Willow. Now he had another big brain to carry his lazy research guy ass.

On the other end of the line, Buffy yawned.

"I really need to go, we've been research crazy here since that scroll arrived and I need to rest. I just wanted to - make sure."

"Yeah. I get that. I'm glad you called, Buffy. I'm glad you...listened."

"You're my best friend, Xander. I'll always listen. I
might listen with Mr. Pointy sitting in - but I'll always listen."

"Me too," Xander said - murmured a soft 'goodbye' and clicked his phone off. Looked up to see Spike standing in the doorway, burned down cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other.

Out of the corner of his eye, Xander saw a medium-sized velvet pillow begin a slow journey toward the door. The dice had attempted pillow theft before - Nest envy - but they had yet to succeed. Xander figured they could use the exercise anyway.

They were getting fat.

"Done eavesdropping?"

Spike folded bonelessly into the Nest next to Xander, turned his face to examine him the way he did after battles. He nodded and kissed Xander's lips, tasting of tobacco and beer. "Yeah."

"You taste gross," Xander said and then took Spike's
cigarette, smoking it to the filter.

Spike handed him the beer.

Xander drank it down and dropped the butt into the empty bottle.

"Better?"

Xander licked his lips - and tasted tobacco and beer. "Yeah." He let out his breath on a cloud of smoke and starfished onto his back. "I don't want to have a phone call like that ever again."

"I can arrange for that," Spike said - sprawled down over Xander and sighed, long lock of Xander's hair tangling in his fingers. "It wasn't too awful. She...surprised me, really."

"Yeah, me too. I kind of thought there'd be more yelling."

Spike snorted softly, amused, and Xander grinned up at him. "Me too, pet. You're all right though,
yeah?"

"Yeah, I'm... I'm fine. I mean, she did threaten to kill me if I hunted down any more Slayers, but -" 

"Oh, nonsense. She's all talk, her. 'I'll stake you, I'll kill you, I'll make you wish you'd never come to the Hellmouth...' On and on and on and on, no follow-through."

"She kicked your ass a few times," Xander noted, and Spike shrugged.

"Nearly had her twice - my own sodding fault the second time, and Joyce's fault the first time - who expects an axe to the head from the Slayer's mother?"

"And all those other times?" Xander asked, and Spike growled softly.

"Chip, love. You try fighting with an ice-pick through the brain."

"You're so baaad," Xander said, laughing, and Spike
pounced - held his arms down and changed, grinning nastily.

"Wanna find out how bad, love?"

"No!" Gunn stood in the kitchen doorway, looking peeved. "The both of you get your asses in here and tell us what she said."

Xander groaned - heaved at Spike who allowed himself to be pushed off. They both climbed to their feet and Spike rescued the pillow from four determined dice and tossed it into the center of the Nest. The dice glared and he growled back - pointed at the offering tree. They seemed to huddle, whiskers quivering, then scampered away. "Little bastards are getting too forward," Spike muttered - followed Xander into the kitchen and settled into a chair. Gunn was already nose-deep in his order of chicken biryani while Wes was doing something fussy with his and assorted bottles from the cupboard.

"She's on a plane right now, coming to dust me and
Spike so we can't be a future danger to Slayerkind." Xander pulled open the refrigerator door with hands that shook with something a lot like relief. Because way down at the bottom of 'Xander's big list of things to do before I die for good' was fighting Buffy. And Willow. And - "What happened to the orange juice?"

A warm hand tugged Xander up and around to face Wesley, who pointed at douse-sized orange juice footprints leading into the pantry.

Xander wrote *oranges for the offering tree* on the shopping list and pulled out a beer.

"Well?" Gunn gave Xander the impatient hairy eyeball and toyed with his fork. "You get a free pass from the Slayer?"

"I - actually, I got a warning."

"What sort of - warning?" Wesley asked, worry making his voice a little sharp and Charles' hand found his thigh under the table - squeezed gently.
"The usual kind," Spike said - stuffed a forkful of curry into his mouth and reached for his beer. Wesley glared. Spike swallowed hastily. "You know, Slayer stuff - I'll have your guts for garters, all that rot. Nothing to be worried about."

"You call that a warning?" Wesley asked, shocked, and Xander stopped his own loaded fork halfway to his mouth.

"Well - yeah. It's not the first time makin' with the death threats, so - it's cool. It's how we did things back in the Sunnydale old school."

"Man, between Slayers and vampires I dunno which ones're crazier," Charles muttered, and Wesley shook his head.

"Nor do I. But - I suppose - will there be an alert sent out? Will the Council try some kind of retaliatory attack?"

"Like to see 'em try," Spike snorted, unfazed, and
Wesley glared again.

"This really isn't a joke, Spike!"

"Seems like - uh, I'll shut up now." Xander ducked his head and ate like a starving man and Wesley stabbed at this plate for a moment.

"Are you a wanted man or not?" Wesley asked and jabbed his fork at Xander in a way that was a lot scarier than Buffy's threat. "No jokes."

"No." Xander broke a samosa in half and smothered it in yogurt dip. "Because I didn't go hunting for a Slayer, okay? She found me. She attacked me. And if Buffy believed for one second I would've said 'Hey! stake me! no hard feelings!' she wouldn't be the Slayer. Because the first rule of being a Slayer is not to let the other guy win." Xander shoved the samosa into his mouth and chewed, watching Wes' expression go from measuring to thoughtful. He swallowed. "Mostly - she called to find out if I was gonna make it a habit."
Wesley nodded absently and stirred his curry, not saying anything.

But Gunn spoke - leaned back in his chair with his hands folded across his lap. "Are you?"

"He already said -" Spike started - muscles going tight in an effort not to growl and Xander's hand found the back of Spike's neck - rubbed.

"It's okay, Spike. No, I'm not. I - it's not my thing."

Gunn's look was still - skeptical - and Xander frowned. "What?"

"Nothin' man." Gunn snorted softly - resumed eating, ignoring the glares Spike was sending his way.

"Is there gonna be a whole - trust thing between us now?"

Gunn stopped eating again - looked up at him. Wesley was watching them both and Spike - anger hurt mine mine.
"You're a *vampire*, Xander. Should I trust you? Wes says I should - then you go and kill a Slayer. Kinda - ambiguous." Gunn didn't raise his voice - didn't even look angry. Just - disappointed and a little sad and Xander felt his stomach knot up.

"Really not looking forward to doing that again." Xander rubbed at a spot on the table - one in the shape of a douse footprint.

"Rather he was dust, Charlie-boy?"

Xander flicked a glance at Spike at the silky smooth tone of his voice - completely at odds with the *hurtanger* sifting between them and making the dice give Spike wide berth on their way to the pantry.

Gunn leaned back in his chair, nodded slowly but not - completely convinced. "And you decided to have a little snack after you won the fight or what?"

"She wouldn't have stopped until he was dead,"
Wesley cleared his throat, reluctant. "Reggie wouldn't have either."

"Reggie?"

Wesley fiddled with his cup. "Reginald Drummond. Her Watcher."

"Shit - tell me he wasn't...an old school buddy - chum? Do you use the word 'chum' these days?" Xander chased a loose pea across his plate with a samosa crust, felt Spike take his hand under the table, emotions muffled - loudly.

"I didn't have chums. We - we had a few classes together. That's all. He was a good man - not as hidebound as most." Xander nodded and Wes did and Gunn sighed and tipped his head back, looking at the ceiling.

"I... Aw, fuck it. Xander, I love you. You know I do. Not like I love Wes and nothing like you love Blondie-bear, but you're family, man." Gunn leaned forward, his look one of total candor - and utterly
serious. "And I just - I wanna believe that... I wanna know that you're different, okay? 'Cause I'm putting my life in your hands, man. Mine and Wes'."

"My demon isn't - it - okay - it was ecstatic feeling the Slay - Asima's heart stop and tasting her blood."

"Not reassuring me."

"Gunn - look at me."

"I'm lookin'."

"Do I look ecstatic?"

Gunn sat back in his chair and tilted his head. "You look like it's the Trig final and you haven't been to class all semester."

"And I feel like it's report card day after that final and I know I'm gonna have to repeat the grade. I'm - more than my demon. I'll fight to the death to stay alive but who in this room wouldn't?"
"Yeah, but - that's not -"

"Or hasn't?" Xander added and felt a surge of mine from Spike.

"Charles," Wesley said softly, and Charles stopped - shook his head, obviously unhappy at not being able to say what he meant. "There's something - quite alien, inside Xander. Something...new. But he is still in there, as well. My own - demonic self..." Wesley paused - lifted his chin and changed, ripple over his skin as the scents and sounds - the very air - informed him. "It has wants. Needs. But I can - temper those needs. And Xander can." Charles nodded slowly - glanced over at Xander, who was looking hopeful, and Spike who still looked - mutinous.

"When faced with a life-or-death situation - we all choose life. If Xander had run, she would have pursued. If Xander had tried to talk his way out of it - she would have attacked, because every Slayer is told... There's nothing there. When someone you - know - is turned -"
"It's just a demon. Nothing left but the shell," Xander said softly, and Spike gave a harsh, barking laugh.

"That's so much bollocks -"

"Yes, you know that, but it's - the way it is. And to be honest, you know as well as I that most humans, once they're turned...lose their inhibitions. She did what she had been trained to do. And Xander...did also."

"How about you? What're you trained to do? Do you even have a soul?"

Wesley shivered back to his human face and stared at Gunn. "What?"

"You've got a demon, just like them. You died, just like them. You get it." Gunn fidgeted with his fork. "You got a soul in there, English?"

Spike was watching Wesley with interest - as was
Xander. And Wesley gave the only answer he had. "I really don't know. Does it matter to you?" Wesley asked and held his breath.

"Not a damn bit."

"Then get off Xander's arse, Charlie-boy," Spike snapped and Gunn drew in a breath to say something. And stopped. Looked over at Xander who was wearing his best 'kicked puppy' face and slowly shook his head.

"I am out of my fucking mind. Xander, you gonna - go all Angelus-crazy on me and try to drain me in my sleep?"

"Uh - no."

"Yeah. Okay -" Gunn smiled suddenly - loaded up his fork. "I heard enough stories from Connor - who got 'em from Dawn - about all the white-hat shit you did -" and he pointed his fork at Spike, who recoiled. "So I don't have to worry about you. You're just a little blond teddy-bear under those fangs."
"I - you - am not - what stories? Lying brat -" Spike sputtered and Gunn laughed out loud - pointed his fork at Xander, tumbling some rice off.

"And I figure you - are the same as him. I figure if you wanted us dead we'd be dead. And I guess...I really do trust you, Xander. I was just - surprised, you know? Postcard, postcard - lovely weather. Wish you were here. Fascinating nightlife. You killed a what? Kinda - took me by surprise."

"Yeah. Fuck. Me too, Gunn." They both ignored Spike who was cursing steadily and eating, muttering about revenge.

~*~*~*~*~

"Well?"

Buffy twitched and nearly dropped the phone - turned around and scowled at Dawn. "Don't sneak up on me like that! And aren't you supposed to be
out with - with Spiderman or something?"

"He's a gentleman." Dawn made a face. "With a four a.m. rehearsal and a curfew. And anyway, you're the Slayer - I'm not supposed to be able to sneak!"

"Yeah, well - you're right! I am the Slayer and - and you could get hurt! I could stake you!"

"You can't fit a stake in those pants. You almost don't fit in those pants." Dawn flopped gracelessly on the couch and Buffy ran her hands over her abdomen.

"I look fat -? All right - what do you want, Dawn?"

"Me? Want?"

"You. Want. Spill."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "I want the 411 on Xander and Spike and the whole Slayer slaying thing - what d'you think? What'd he say? Was he sorry? Why'd
he do it?"

Buffy held up a hand - let it drop as she dropped onto the couch, too - rubbed tiredly at her forehead. "Yeah, okay. I get it. Lemme - think."

"Gonna be here all night," Dawn muttered, but grinned at Buffy's glare. "Sorry. Go on." She made encouraging motions with her hands. "Think. Unless - y'know - it's too hard for you or something." Dawn looked serious and concerned - her I am listening face.

Buffy snorted and pitched a pillow at her head.

"And you don't have to censor it for me. I mean - I was listening to all the gory details from Spike long before - um." Dawn quailed at Buffy's intent look. "Shutting up now."

"Better not be all the gory Slayer details," Buffy muttered under her breath. Memory of a Slayer fight - that ended with a different kind of staking - flashed across her mind.
"Ew. No. I do not need to know about the vampire-Slayer sexcapades. I didn't ask." Dawn held up her hands and waved Buffy on. "Xander. Slayer. Now."

Buffy stuffed *those* memories of a harder time back where they belonged and focused on Xander - and the easiest interpretation of something that was...not so easy for a Slayer. "Self defense."

Dawn blinked. "That's...it? Self defense? But - he's a *vampire* now, he can - fight really good, can't he? And - and he could have just - run away or something, couldn't he?"

"The running away thing? Not so effective once you've got a Slayer's attention." Buffy slouched down on the couch, rolling her neck against the cushions. "Or her Watcher's."

"But couldn't he have done *anything* else?"

Buffy thought about it - thought about Xander's tense, miserable voice. Thought about how much
easier this would be if it hadn't happened. "I don't know. I kinda think he wishes he had."

"Well he should! He's - he's Xander."

"To a Slayer, he's just another demon, Dawnie. A demon who killed the guy she met in Egypt."

"So - just like that you're letting it go?"

"Well - no." Buffy fiddled with the corner of a magazine. She thought about doing her Slayer duty - and pictured Xander's face crumbling to dust and blowing away. And it hurt. She chewed on a hangnail and squinted at Dawn. "Kinda? I mean - he is Xander. Our Xander and... If I learned anything from being a Slayer it's that not everything is black and white, Dawn. So - I'm letting it go. And he's - not going to do it again. At least while I'm alive."

Dawn squished the pillow Buffy had thrown at her - pushed her hair back behind her ear and leaned over, head on Buffy's shoulder. "Yeah. Okay. I'm - glad. For both of you. You're still friends, right?"
"Yeah, we're still friends."

"It's not gonna be all - weird and side-takey like it was when mom and dad got divorced?" Dawn's voice was - smaller than it should have been and Buffy freed an arm, wrapping it around Dawn's shoulders and pressing her cheek to her hair.

She shook her head. "No. I mean - there's the whole Willow and Xander thing which is still a little weird but - I think it's gonna work out." She combed her fingers through Dawn's hair - and wondered if the soul would have made a difference. Or if that way was the one way ticket to madness. "We got through scary veiny Willow. We got through Faith. We got through Xander summoning Sweet and Spike going all grr guy with a trigger. We got through Demon Anya."

Dawn curled herself tight and burrowed into Buffy's side.

Buffy petted Dawn's hair. "We'll get through this."
"Okay - you guys are taking 'traveling light' to whole new levels. This is it?" Gunn limped in to pick up their luggage - a single leather satchel. He lifted it by its strap.

Xander fished a douse out of its side pocket by the tail, grinning at him. "Luggage trolleys? Not so useful in Africa." He took the bag and set it back in the Nest, fished through its pockets for his keys. He cleared his throat and held out a hand.

Tim peeked out at him from behind a bedpost and shuffled across the Nest to him, dragging Xander's key ring with both paws. He looked up with big, moony eyes, whiskers drooping, and held onto the keys when Xander lifted the ring.

"Looks like that one doesn't wanna let you go."

"Hey..." Xander gently took the keys from the douse
- lifted him on his palm and held him up, so they were more or less eye to eye. "You know we'll come back. And we'll have all kinds of goodies for the tree. Promise." Tim rubbed his paws back over his face once - twice - then stood wringing them for a moment before doing what Gunn could have sworn was a sad little nod. Xander grinned.

"Okay then. Go and find something of Gunn's to take." Tim flared his whiskers out and then gave Gunn a sort of - assessing look before leaping lightly down onto the Nest and hopping away out of the room.

"You did not just send him to ransack my room, man."

"Well, ransack, that's kinda harsh -"

"Damnit! Last time, mates - out!" Spike stomped in from the bathroom with their toiletries kit, several dice hanging from the edges. They had a sheen of something - oily - on them.
"Oh, Jesus. Don't tell me."

"I told you. Already. I think they can read. It's the damn honey-whatever shampoo again."

Xander plucked them one by one from the edges of the kit and dropped them onto the hardwood where they flailed their slick and soapy way toward the door, paws splaying every which way. "They can read - but do they learn?"

"Haven't taken bites out of a bath bomb since the first time." Spike opened the satchel and tucked the toiletries bag in with the rest and patted his coat for smokes and his lighter, pulling them out with a feeling of deep satisfaction. "That sodding well served the little bastards right."

"Come on, Spike. They're only this bold because they like us."

"Man, how can you tell?" Gunn glanced at the douse currently on clock-watch. He was starting to suspect they had some kinda secret seconds-
counting project.

"Because they're not eating us."

"Gotta stop reminding me about that."

"Just keep the offering tree stocked while we're gone," Xander said, giving Gunn a heartening, manly shoulder-hug. "The supplies are in -"

"Pet -" Spike's finger stopped Xander's lips and Xander looked, wide-eyed, at the suddenly focused dice that had popped up from - nearly everywhere. "Wes knows where they are."

"Mm-hmm." Xander nodded and Spike grinned - tapped Xander's nose once and slung his arm around Gunn from the other side. "You'll be fine. Just don't let 'em see you getting the stuff."

Gunn snorted. "Yeah - and when're you guys comin' back again?"

"Mid-August." Xander did one last check for dice
and buckled their bag quickly. "We're visiting Russ and Sol in Seattle then driving down the coast until we hit Sunnydale."

"Hottest demon vacation spot on the West Coast."

Spike snorted and muttered something about demons not knowing what was good for them.

"Because you never made repeat visits to the Hellmouth." Xander faced down Spike's glare with a grin. "Let's see. Once with Drusilla. Once to bash me over the head in the school chemistry lab to get Drusilla back. Once for the Gem of Amara - "

"All right! Bloody hell. This is the last time." Spike patted his duster for smokes and lighter.

"Until the next last time."

"Fuck no." Spike pulled out a cigarette, lit it with impatient motions. "Angel's got this...repellent field, see? Anywhere he is, I can't be. Not for more than a few days, anyway."
"Y'wanna explain L.A., then Blondie Bear? Wolfram and Hart ringing any bells?"

"Was a ghost, Charlie-boy. Then I was - " lonely lost wanting - deluded. "Then I was sick," Spike finished, tucking his lighter away.

"Good. Because watching you and Angel duke it out for the next fifty years on the Hellmouth? Not such a romantic vacation."

Spike snorted - quietly. "The Hellmouth is for disaster, pet. Not romance. Time to go?"

"Yeah, time to go - taxi'll be here - or maybe is here." Xander glanced around the room one more time and then the three of them maneuvered out the door and down the hall - down the stairs - Gunn's arms holding them both close.

Gunn stopped them at the door and pried Xander's hand off the doorknob and gave them each a serious look. "Don't go getting yourselves into
Slayer trouble this time, okay? I do not wanna be the one to give that message to Wes."

"If I see a Slayer, I'll scream and run like a girly man," Xander promised, one hand over his heart. "I used to be good at that."

Spike snorted. "Won't be any running away, pet. More than two ways to deal with a Slayer."

"Choose the ways that don't get y'all dusted." Gunn ducked his head, quick and easy kisses - first Xander then Spike and then he had the door open and stepped back. "And bring me back something shiny and sharp."

"Thought you were retired, mate."

"Man's gotta have a hobby."

The sun was just down - the sky was dull purple and plum and the dark, sullen red of a dying ember. The summer air was thick and heavy - humid and still warm, tangy with salt and the smells of ripening
tomatoes and peppers and cucumbers from various surrounding gardens. The taxi was just pulling up and Spike and Xander went down the walk to it - slung in their bag and climbed in.

"Hope Sol and Russ are glad to see us."

"You kidding me, pet? Your bloke Russ is like a bloody great Saint Bernard. Sodding thrilled when his people come to visit him. He'll be slobbering over you in no time."

Xander snickered. "Okay - first? That's really gross. And second? I'm telling him you said that."

Gunn stood in the door and watched them drive off - lifted his hand in a short farewell and then stepped back inside. Looked contemplatively at Tiny Tim, who was perched on top of the coat-rack, looking...

"You look as mournful as a sick cat." Tim clutched the tip of his tail and wrung it, huge eyes turning up beseeingly to Gunn. "Oh, all right. C'mon - let's go have some ice cream. With chocolate syrup." Gunn
held out his hand and Tim hopped on - clutched Gunn's thumb for balance and snuffled. "Yeah, I'm gonna miss 'em, too," Gunn said, and walked away into the kitchen.

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Russ shut the door - leaned on it, his eye glued to the peep-hole. He watched Spike and Xander cross the street - climb into that fucking Euro richboy rental - what the hell was it again? - and start up - roar away with smoking tires and Spike behind the wheel.

"They iss gone?" Sol asked, slipping up silently behind him and Russ jumped and then turned, closing his eyes.

"Gone, yeah. I fucking love those guys but - Jesus."

"Oh, yeah baby, no argument there." Russ pulled Sol close and ran his fingers over the sensitive spots behind Sol's ears - under his chin. Rubbed there while Sol closed his eyes and leaned into the caress. "Just - fuck. Loud. Or - just too damn lively. They never get tired."

"Never shutssss up." Sol smirked, tail lashing and wrapping around Russ' leg, fur prickling around his human's rubbing fingers. "Vampires. Sso annoying."

"Yeah, yeah. And what was Alex's excuse before then?"

Sol cocked his head, tail and one arm wrapped around Russ and tugging him to their back patio to enjoy the sudden deafening return of quiet, distant roar of a jet plane overhead from the air force base. Splash and lap of the Sound against the shore, and the rustling of the trees. Of peace. Then he answered. "He'ssss fucking nutsss."

"He was such a nice boy when I met him." Russ put a theatrical hand over his heart. "Don't know how
Wesley and Charles stand living in the same house with - "

Sol snorted and whipped his tail up and across Russ' mouth, grinning. "You talk too much too. They isss bad influence on you." Russ nipped at the tail-tip - grinned Spike's 'wanna get laid?' grin. Sol's eyes went wide and then he laughed softly, tail tip dancing over Russ' cheek and stroking behind his ear.

"You know they are, baby."

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The water right there at the edge was thick with river-plants. Reeds or sedge or - who fuckin' knew? Gunn didn't know, but they put off a clean, green sort of scent in the late-afternoon air. Sunlight slanted honey-warm through the trees and a dragon-fly hovered just there. Drone of its wings a whisper on the air, tinsel sparkle and gone. Like magic. Gunn turned onto his back and floated,
looking straight up into a sky of robin's egg blue and curdled cream - lopsided moon waning slowly to darkness. Swished his arms lazily, kicking slowly through the tea-dark water. It felt good. Every joint was relaxed - every muscle at ease. The water whispered over his bare skin and he could almost fall asleep.

Almost.

There was a ripple in the water and Gunn started humming the theme from Jaws. "Come on, English. I know you're down there."

"Really?" Wes popped up behind him and Gunn went down with a yelp and a mouthful of water, sputtering it out of his lungs when slick, warm long-fingered hands fished him out of the reeds and held him on the surface.

"Jesus - fuckin' Christ, English!" Gunn coughed, spitting water that tasted more like mud than green things and dropping his torso onto Wes' hands - floating just below his back like the instructors at
the Y teaching kids to swim.

And Wes only grinned back at him, tiny, sharp, pointy teeth in a sharp and pointy face - that was still Wes - and his spines clattering together in the breeze. "I'm sorry, Charles."

"Yeah - you look like it."

"No, I assure you -" Something went splish and Wes' head turned, sharp and focused, spines rising up and fanning out. And then he was gone, ripple of slick black and phosphorus, no splash and almost no wake. Gunn righted himself and treaded water, watching. A moment later Wes surfaced about ten feet away, the wriggling fin of something slipping between his lips. Fanged grin, quick crunch and Wes dove, arrowing through the water with the tips of his spines just cutting the surface - straight for Gunn.

A warm, sinuous body wound around Gunn and Wes rose to the surface, tongue trailing lazily up Gunn's chest and neck to his jaw.
"Aw, man! You got fish-breath." Gunn gave him a playful shove until Wes yanked him back. "And anyway this is supposed to be a wildlife preserve - not a damn buffet."

"I'm wildlife," Wes insisted, cupping the back of Gunn's neck and sliding a slick, wet hand up the back of his skull. "I believe I'm an endangered species, actually."

They bobbed in the current, weeds twining their legs and and things bumping up against his feet from beneath that Gunn wasn't gonna think about too hard when he could think about the sun heating his skin from above and the slippery slide of wet (Wes) demon all along his body. "You're not the guy gonna be explaining taking his pet demon for a swim to the forest rangers."

"Don't worry - I can hear if anyone is coming." Wesley twined his arms around Charles' neck and kissed him, drowning in the warm cinnamon-bread flavor of Charles' mouth as surely as he was
drowning in the flood of sensations that were coming to him through every inch of skin. The front of him was pressed, warm and wet, to Charles but his back was cooled by the lapping water and his spines...

Like a thousand tiny touches, every ripple and current brushed across them and up through his nerves, telling him that the flow was here and a backwash there and there the current curled around a submerged log and there around a hole in the bottom made by a turtle or fish. Every flick of fin or wiggle of limb in twenty yards sent tiny ripples of information through the water and Wesley could see with his eyes closed.

Kissing Charles was wonderful, but after a few moments he pulled away, smiling, and dove again - shock of coolness and then the touch. Tingles and tickles and tiny, muted noises and he opened his eyes to a world murky-green and very clear behind the nictitating membranes of his eyes. Saw a flicker-flash of silver and went after another snack.
Wriggle crunch and the living flavors burst over his tongue, swirled and mingled with the water of the estuary and above him, Charles' silhouette dark against the occluded sun, arms spread in a posture of utter relaxation.

Absolute trust.

Wesley mirrored his position, lungs feeling pleasantly heavy but not yet in need of air as he lay on the estuary bed, fish swimming between him and Charles and the sun. As he watched, Charles kicked out against the current with his left leg - painlessly - and drifted.

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"It was big, Giles. Really big. And mucky and yucky and other -ucky things that mean gross." Willow mumbled, blanket wrapped around her shoulders - wiggled a hand free to take the cup of tea from Giles.
"But you defeated it." There was a smile in Giles' voice, in his words. The kind of pride that always gave Willow a thrill. A charge.

Though she'd kinda settle for a nap and felt her eyelids drooping. "The Slayers held it down. I just hit it with a big stick until it stopped moving."

"Willow, you beat it to death with a tree."

"Really big stick?" It sounded like *real' y big stig* though because her nose was still bleeding off and on from the blowback of power. Her fingers were still tingling from it like being struck by lightning but it was nice there in Giles' office. With his hand pushing her hair out of her face and nudging the cup toward her lips.

"Drink your tea, Willow."

Only Giles could sound *that* exasperated and fond at the same time and the tea he made was always just right. Practice *did* make perfect and Willow figured Giles had seen more tea than Boston
Harbor.

"A letter arrived for you while you were away."

Willow knew the handwriting she'd see before she took it. She knew it would be cramped and uneven with jagged down strokes and out of control swoops. Xander's handwriting - but foreknowledge didn't keep her from getting a sick feeling in her stomach when she saw it.

"I'll be - taking a call," Giles said even though the phone didn't ring.

"You don't have to."

"I'm afraid I must. It's a very important call."

That Giles took in the outer office with the door closed between them. Not very smooth - but it did kinda help.

Because her heart hurt for Xander - for when he got his soul because he was Xander and some day, he'd
want it back. Some day, he'd fight for it like Spike did and he'd remember killing a Slayer, remember drinking human blood and he'd never be able to forgive himself.

Willow traced the sealed flap of the envelope with a finger.

Being evil when you killed somebody didn't make it hurt less when you became good again.

She opened the envelope and settled in to read with her cooling cup of tea.

There was nothing in the letter about Slayers or souls or spells.

But there was everything else.

And Xander.

And Willow would be there for him when the guilt came because he was - well he was Xander and she was Willow and that was how the world was
supposed to be.

He left a care-of address in Sunnydale at the bottom in case she wanted to write back while he was on vacation.

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The halls of Angel Investigations Headquarters beneath the brand new Sunnydale Oceanside Mall were cool - shuttered - almost silent. Traffic noise and the sounds of a half-dozen Slayers filtered through the dense, still air but it was all - remote. Andrew swore it would stay remote after the mall's grand opening.

If it didn't, the mall would be greeting visitors with Andrew's head on a pike.

Angel turned over a page of the L.A. Times, scanning the headlines for anything - odd. After a moment he reached over and picked up his mug - took a sip of the coffee there. It was cold. He grimaced - stood
up and carried out of the office and down the hall to the kitchenette. Hot coffee steamed faintly in a half-empty pot and he dumped the old back into the pot and poured fresh.

"That's disgusting - remind me to never drink the coffee again." Angel jumped slightly and then turned around, grinning at Kennedy.

Angel. Grinning.

Known to frighten small children and new Slayers.

It was a good look for him so Kennedy grinned back.

Angel sipped at his coffee. "What - you're afraid of vampire cooties?"

"No. But if you do it, Andrew does it. And I am afraid of Andrew cooties." Kennedy followed Angel back down the hall - sprawled down onto the chair opposite his desk. Angel sat down and folded the paper up, pushing it aside.
"I thought Andrew was all about the mocha-latte-half-skinny...thing?"

"That was a month ago. He's all 'I take my coffee like I take my men' now." They both blinked at each other. "Anyway - here's the mail." Kennedy tossed a rubber-banded bundle to the desk and Angel turned to it gratefully, pushing aside images of Andrew, coffee, and...men.

"Letter to Xander from Willow, care of you," Kennedy said and snatched up an old rubber band, stretching it between her fingers and propping her feet on Angel's desk.

Angel glanced at the bundle. "You know, there are laws about going through someone else's mail."

Kennedy shrugged and took aim with the rubber band at an adventurous fly crawling across the ceiling above Angel's head. "There are laws against ramming pointy wooden things into human-shaped creatures. I got over it." She let fly and fly and rubber band dropped neatly into Angel's waste
basket. "So when's the in-law coming?"

"Xander is not my in-law."

There was a staring contest.

Kennedy won.

This time.

"Two days," Angel conceded and tucked the letter for Xander into his desk drawer. "They called from Sacramento."

"So - what's the plan for when they get here? Do we - welcome them with open arms or what?"
Kennedy's foot was tapping restlessly and Angel glanced at it - shuffled through the mail, tossing most of it toward the recycling bin Andrew had installed.

Why do we get so much junk? We've only been here four months. You'd think they wouldn't have found us yet. "Oh, 'open arms' would probably be a bit
much. Buffy said they're okay and I have to take her word for it, but...

"But we'll be on alert, just in case," Kennedy finished with satisfaction, and Angel sighed.

"Discrete alert. I don't want to mess up our mission here. The last thing we need is Spike and Xander Harris on a tear."

"You are such a hypocrite. You're never discreet about those guys." Kennedy's boots thumped against the thin office carpeting and Angel scribbled another note to himself to replace it - with something that said Old World Executive louder than it said middle management.

"You're kind of a pain in the ass, yourself. Don't you have a new Slayer to...orient?"

"You know, I could take that orientation line and have some fun with it but I'll let you off the hook this time. Tell me what to tell the girls and I'll do it. You want to give them free passage? Fine, but you
tell them to stay out of our way on patrol because I don't want any mistakes." Kennedy stood and stretched, shrugging out the kinks in her shoulders. "Word on the grapevine is that Harris cried self defense. That's cool. I get self defense. And every one of my Slayers is trained in it."

"Just keep it calm, Kennedy. Official word is - stay out of their way, and I'll make sure they stay out of yours, okay? They're not coming to cause any trouble." He hoped.

Not that Spike ever needed to plan to cause trouble. It just happened around him.

"Yeah, okay." Kennedy gave a little shrug and a little smile and sashayed out of the office and Angel sighed and leaned back in his chair - steepled his fingers and stared up at the ceiling. It was going to be a long visit.

He took a sip of his cooling coffee and pulled the envelope out of his desk drawer and held it up to the light, squinting. He made out a Love and a Berlin
before hearing footsteps in the hall and shoving the envelope innocently away in his desk drawer.

~*~*~*~*~

Seb arched his back hard, stretching. The last tattoo of the day had been a lower back thing and a twitchy customer and he'd spent much too much time hunched over, tattooing an intricate design that had given him a headache. The printer clicked and whirred softly, extruding a color print of the collar of leaves Seb had done on Spike's boy. It looked better now than before, on skin that was nearly as pale as Spike's and Seb had had to have another set of photos for his portfolio. And another of the face, and the arm. Good, clear shots that would look very nice once he'd mounted them properly.

Seb laid them aside - looked at the handful of others that he'd taken while they were waiting. Spike and Xander leaning on the counter, looking at a book - Spike pointing to something and Xander
looking up at him, *listening*. So focused. Another of the two of them on the couch. Relaxed, happy - hands entwined but nothing else touching. *As-nuk*, as his people would say. Harmony. It was in every line of their bodies. It was...relaxing. Spiritually. Sort of. Seb hissed softly to himself in amusement. It was the *only* relaxing thing about the vampires.

Always in motion.

Always talking.

Always touching.

Always *teasing*.

Seb laid aside a picture of their PAs, flesh pale and side by side, cut and un.

*Vampires*. The magpies of the demon world.

But it was a good shot. It went into the adult portfolio and Seb lifted the last picture from the printer tray, the knotted strands at the back of
Xander's neck, tattooed ties trailing down between his shoulder blades. Paler, thinner hands than Xander's holding thick hair up and away from the tattoo.

It was good work.

Seb laid the pictures out carefully so they would dry, contemplating the colors he would use for matting. He twitched in annoyance when the phone rang but habit made him pick up. "Seven Steps."

"Hello. Is Seb there? Or - who do I talk to to make an appointment?"

"This is Seb, and you make it with me."

"Oh, okay, Cool. Um. I was in there a couple of weeks ago - we talked about that Janus tattoo?"

"Yess...I remember." Seb got up and walked up the hall to the front desk - flipped open the appointments book. "When did you want to do it? I remember you had a bit of trouble, getting away?"
"Yeah, I - A little. Anyway - if you have time tomorrow? I could get away tomorrow, pretty much any time."

"Ahhh, tomorrow..." Seb ran a finger down the page, gaze flicking over other appointments of his own and the other artists. He had time after three. "So, four o'clock? I will need you for about - three hours."

"Yeah, cool - four o'clock, I can do that. Great. Okay - thanks!"

"Yes, thank you. And remember - cash only."

"Right. Cash. Great. Bye!" The caller hung up and Seb smirked to himself - found a pen. This one, he remembered. It would be as-nuk. He carefully wrote 'Connor - Janus' and shut the book.

~~*~*~*~*~
Angel stared in bewilderment at the chaos in the room Xander had cheerfully named the Hellmouth War Room.

At that moment, it looked more like the Hellmouth Rummage Sale.

On one end of the table was a wood and silver case holding a pen and ink drawing set of a kind he hadn't seen since before Romania. He'd owned something similar as Angelus.

Spike had laid it out without comment, slipping it into the magpie jumble of Hellmouth-warming gifts they'd unpacked - an hour before disappearing into the Southern California twilight bound for LAX.

Gifts.

He didn't know what to expect from Spike and Xander.

But he was pretty sure it wasn't *gifts*. Some of them
were even thoughtful.

And some of them were just strange.

So Spike and Xander had come bearing gifts and alcohol and pheromones and *gone* and Angel was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"What am I supposed to *do* with all of this?"

"Have a yard sale?"

Angel turned to glare at Connor, who was lounging in the doorway. "Okay - and *where* were you when Spike and Xander were playing Santa Claus with me half an hour ago?" Angel stopped - sniffed the air, blood and ink and greasy ointment. "Actually, where have you been the last two days?"

"Wreaking havoc and inviting chaos into my bed?" At Angel's stunned look, Connor laughed - pushed off the doorjamb and sauntered forward to look over the gifts. "Man, you are *so* easy. That's what Wes said, anyway. I was just - getting a tattoo."
"Oh. What? A tattoo? You can get blood poisoning from those!" Angel stomped around the table toward Connor, who was examining a hat with holders on the top and a curl of clear tubing dangling down. Angel had no idea what it was for but it had made Xander giggle.

"Hello - 21st century here! Nobody gets blood poisoning from a tattoo anymore. Besides, Seb's -"


"Yeah, demon. Spike and Xander said -"

"Oh." Angel listened to the sound of the other shoe dropping and almost relaxed. "I should have known. That's - okay. That. I can handle that." Angel squared his shoulders and put on his hip, modern dad face. "What and where?"

"Sionn's name over my heart," Connor said and
picked up a wickedly curved dagger that looked like it might be older than Angel. "With a big red heart under it and - "

Angel hauled Connor's shirt up under his armpits, nearly lifting him up off the ground and stared at Connor's smooth chest.

"Okay - okay. It's on my back." Connor wriggled free and turned, rucking his shirt up in back to reveal the fresh tattoo.

Angel stared for a long moment at the graphic black and white - well, black and flesh-toned - image. At the smoky red behind it that was like a curl of bloody mist. "That's - Janus."

"Yeah." Connor tugged his shirt straight - turned around, a strange look in his eyes. "Because...there's two of me, isn't there? I began and I ended, I went through doorways..." Connor stopped, a self-conscious blush flushing his face and Angel had a flashback of memory to his baby sister - an image of her own blushing face so clear and
painfully bright that he winced. "Dad - you okay?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I'm... You know, I like it. It's... Spike and Xander got me that set of pens and things, maybe -" Angel strode around the table again - ran a fingertip over the pens - over the sleek wood of the case. "Maybe I could draw it sometime - draw...you?" Connor's unsettled expression cleared and he grinned, eyes so bright. Just like Kate but...not so painful, this time. *Doorways*. Angel thought. *Endings. And beginnings.*

"Yeah. That'd be great. That's be really - great, Dad."

~*~*~*~*~

"You told Angel we were late for our flight." Xander accused and wrapped his arms around Spike from behind, letting his chin rest on Spike's shoulder.

"And you're - what? - shocked and disappointed I lied?" Spike didn't twist but Xander could see him
smirk. Could feel it.

"Uh - let me think about that... No." Xander snorted and wormed a hand under Spike's shirt, left it resting there while they stood on the new-laid sod of the Sunnydale Memorial Gardens, watching the moon set behind the combination empty marble tomb and Hellmouth cork. The ground hummed under their feet and energy prickled along Xander's skin and fingertips. "They've done a lot with the place in a year," he said.

Big boxy department and grocery stores were still being erected overnight like mushrooms and the blinking sign of Bucky's Fondue Hut soared now above the subterranean church.

Revello Drive wasn't even a street anymore since the city grid had been remapped for the twenty first century.

Spike sighed softly and leaned back into Xander's body - closed his eyes for a moment. The energy of the place swirled through them both, irritating as
gnats - as impossible to ignore. Energy - memories - a moment of pure misery as he remembered he and Dru here - loving and fighting, dancing and laughing. So fucking happy until time and circumstance had brought their castle in the air crashing down. He turned his head and rubbed his nose and cheek against Xander's cheek, wordless apology for what he knew was pushing through the link.

"Just wanted a little time, is all. Just a - moment."

"Yeah. I know." Xander closed his eye and hugged Spike a little tighter. He pushed Spike's emotions gently aside - sifted through his own memories of unhappy home and happy times with friends - of loves lost and friends gone and a life irrevocably changed by one small, blonde whirlwind. *Or two blonde whirlwinds, really,* he thought. That made him laugh and he opened his eye again - stood a little straighter.

Xander tipped his temple against Spike's, bumping him out of his fog of memory. "It's all gone now. Guess it's time we were too."
"It is at that, love," Spike replied softly.

~*~*~*~*~

"Thy friends all gone, then?" Sionn asked, and Connor straightened up from the front desk and smiled up at him - reached and tucked a pink-sheened dread behind Sionn's ear.

"Yeah - left a while ago. They wanted to - say goodbye." Sionn followed Connor's gesture - out and up, encompassing the Hellmouth and he nodded.

"Tha's a'reet, then. An' nae dustings, an' nae fights?"

"Seems like it was a pretty peaceful meeting all the way around. But you should see the pile of - stuff they left for Dad." Connor chuckled and Sionn grinned at him - reached out slipped his arm around Connor's waist.
"C'mon ta my flat, then - show me thy new ink, a'reet?" Sionn said - long fingers slipping up under Connor's shirt and stroking his back.

"Is that like come and see my etchings?"

"Summat like tha'," Sionn said, grinning, and Connor had to grin back.

~*~*~*~*~

He ran, ran ran, fur still sticking to him from the static pop sweet barrier that separated here from there. Down and down, through the dark spaces. Under water over hot hum sharp, through the dead wood that defined the spaces of this place.

Familiar scent - missed scent - in the currents of here. Burning and iron, lemon and magic. Sweet and the thick, good scent of blood. Want want feeling rippling along his bones, itching under his skin - nownowlove. He was back. They were. The
givers - the good hands - the *ones*.

He leaped from a hole to the strip of soft wool that quieted the tunnel and darted in - climbed - and *yes*.

Him - both - curled together, nestmates in the best Nest of all. He slithered downward over *slippery stickery soft* - landed on a slick-covered foot and climbed. Had to know - had to see. Had to feel. And he felt *happy home mine happy tired family want*.

Since the *magic* smell had doubled, they had sometimes come back to the nest with too much blood-scent, all *fight* and prickly *hiss*. But not this time. He patted over hair and hairless skin with his paws - pushed with his nose to get into the crevices. Making sure.

"Stop it, Tim. Sleeping." Rumble of *his* voice - coil of fuzzy warm affection *protective* - and he squeaked in pleasure - sat up expectantly, tail between paws as *he* lifted his head and opened his eye. "We're fine,
we're home - there's sparkly stuff over there."

*Want want want* but also *want* - and he didn't know which way to go - swayed in indecision and then shivered in voluptuous pleasure as a rough finger stroked over and over his back.

"Missed you too. Go on, now."

He hesitated longer and the other lifted his head - made that deep grumble that was pleasure or pain or anger. Pleasure, he was sure, since the scent was *warm iron musk*. And the feel was *home family sleepy love*.

"Sod off, Tim. Go get your pressies and leave us be a bit - sun's up, time for all good creatures of the night t'be sleepin'." But *stroke stroke stroke* by fingers that smelled of smoke and leather and he pushed up. *Rurrred* in pleasure and finally hopped away as they rolled together, snuffling and muttering. And *he* - got first sniff.

First sniff, first sparkles, dancing lights filling his
eyes and making him shiver from ears to tail.

Clickity shiny, hanging things on the branches of the tree and he ran straight to the top - froze there, whiskers quivering with indecision and shiny shiny shiny.

"That is not sleeping, Spike."

"Get sleepy after, don't you, pet?"

"That's not the point. The point is - oh god."

"Not sleepy now are you?"

"Fuck - Spike."

"Aw Jesus, they're back."

"Admit it, Charles. You've missed them."

"I didn't miss the not sleeping part."

"It's almost time to get up anyway and you heard
Spike - they'll sleep - "

"Or fuck like goddamn rabbits all - "

Wet sounds, muffled sounds.

Home good sounds. Love family family home warm as sunlight rippling through him.

He wrapped a strand of shiny around him and darted up, scattering rainbows onto the stairs through the shiny sparkly as he ran.

The End