

Thanks to my friends, who cheered me on, and to my husband, who suggested (when I outpaced the minimum word count) that I simply post every other word. Thanks also to my kids, who put up with me and reacted with gleeful fascination as I periodically announced the word count. I'm afraid that this story is very much like the Doctor's scarf: colorful, overly long, and frequently tripping me up. It's a PWP, in the sense that I frequently could be heard exclaiming, "Plot? Why, Plot?!!" But it's done, and I learned a lot from writing it. Thank you for reading, and, as always, Feed the Muse!

Spill

by

Miriam Heddy

Burn on, big river, burn on

Burn on, big river, burn on

Now the Lord can make you tumble

*And the Lord can make you turn
And the Lord can make you overflow
But the Lord can't make you burn
--Randy Newman, "Burn On."*

*Everything on the earth bristled, the bramble
pricked and the green thread
nibbled away, the petal fell, falling
until the only flower was the falling itself.
Water is another matter,
has no direction but its own bright grace,
runs through all imaginable colors,
takes limpid lessons
from stone,
and in those functionings plays out
the unrealized ambitions of the foam.*

--Pablo Neruda, "Water."

It started going wrong around the time they got onto I-90 East. Bob was in the bag, tucked on the floor, under the passenger seat. Well, his skull was. The rest of Bob was on the seat beside him, talking about the last time he'd been in Cleveland, a long, long, long time ago ("the merest blink of an eye in the scope of an existence spanning more years than anyone should suffer through," so sayeth the Mighty Hrothbert, emoting like he was gunning for an Emmy). There was nothing quite like being trapped in a car with a talking head and five hours of blacktop to make a man think about picking up a coffee at a rest stop and "accidentally" leaving poor Yorick in the men's room. The way Harry figured it, some trucker out there was probably dying for company--although, from the looks of the twinks hanging around the eighteen wheelers, Bob might not be quite their type.

In any case, he somehow didn't end up dumping the bag, but only because Bob's endless chatter was something he could almost tune out, and he was sort of used to it by now. It was funny how a pain in the ass could grow on you after a few decades, like one of those hairy moles that sort of take on a personality of their own.

Besides, Harry'd had too recent a taste of what it might mean to "give up the ghost," and he'd found out that, like it or not, he just couldn't do it, even if it made for a pretty satisfying fantasy while Bob chattered on.

And Bob kept at it, talking his ear off until they hit the exit for Cleveland, and then he stopped for awhile while they settled on the [details](#) of finding a place to eat. Bob kept an eye out for "potentially suitable sources of sustenance" while Harry navigated the unfamiliar streets in the downtown area, trying to get a sense of how far they were from their final destination. Even if they were [close](#), he needed some hot coffee and a meal before he could face calling up the guy who'd brought them five hours West, against his better judgment.

"There--pull over there," Bob gestured, and Harry nodded, getting out of traffic and finding a spot. He grabbed the bag and locked the car, wondering how safe it was on the street and looking around, reassured to see there were other cars here, none of them in bad shape or locked down. The diner looked clean, at least, and he and Bob took a booth by the window, noticing that the place was almost empty--just one other guy in there seated at the table nearest their booth. The guy was hunched over a newspaper and a mug of coffee, and Harry dismissed him as harmless but kept an eye on the door, just in case.

The diner was quiet, but something was off--he could taste it. And it had him on edge from the moment they walked in. He had half a mind to turn around and go back to the car and maybe find a place that didn't give him the heebie jeebies, but he was tired from driving and hungry, and if he left, he might just get back on the highway and go home.

Just why they were in Cleveland was a mystery. Harry had the letter in his pocket, a little creased around the edges, and he pulled it out and stared at

it, setting it beside the laminated menu already on the table. A man calling himself "Watcher" said it was urgent that he come, and he did only because Murphy knew a guy named Liam who lived out in L.A. and vouched for this Watcher guy, managing to convince Murph that this was on the up and up and if they said they needed a guy with Harry's "special skills" out in Cleveland, he should go. The letter was vague as hell, no mention of magic except by allusion--the kinds of hints that suggested the writer of the letter was not clued in to the fact that Harry had a sign on his door marking him "Wizard."

Harry'd figured if it was so urgent, the guy might've picked up the phone, but then again, if he had, Harry might not have answered it. He didn't like phones and they didn't like him, whereas letters... well, the postman didn't like him, either, but it wasn't a mechanical problem so much as it was a personality issue. Strangely enough, those personality issues were pretty common. There were a lot of overly sensitive people in Chicago.

"Some have argued that the river's catching fire--"
And they were back to the damned river again. "--
was the result of complex magics and not--"

"I know, Bob. And it's fascinating, really."

"Yes, well, your lack of curiosity notwithstanding, Harry, you must admit that it's an interesting proposition, manipulating the elemental magic involved on such a scale, and with none the wiser, not just once, but again and again. First in 1868, then again in 1883, 1887, 1912, 1922, 1936, 1941, 1948, 1952, and finally in 1969. Oil, a byproduct of the earth, fed by air, producing fire on the very water which should quench it."

"Very unmixy things, fire and water."

Bob frowned at the interruption of his lecture and Harry looked up from his contemplation of the diner menu and into the eyes--well, eye--of the guy sitting at the next table. "Eavesdropping's kinda rude, y'know," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." The guy with the big ears sat up a little straighter and blinked, only the blink came out

more like a wink, which maybe it was, since the guy followed it up with a wry grin that had Harry grinning back before he could stop himself.

"Well, as long as we're clear on that," Harry said, and glanced over at Bob, who had finally shut up and was watching them both with interest.

"And you would be...?" Bob asked, when the silence proved, for him at least, impossible to maintain. It figured he'd end up trapped between Big Ears and Big Mouth.

Big Ears at the other table didn't answer immediately, seeming to consider the question from all sides. Finally, he tipped his head up and scratched at the stubble on his chin. "I'm not sure who I would be, but I am the guy who knows something about unmixy things."

And there it was again--or still--the slight buzz of wrong that raised the short hairs on the back of Harry's neck and made him twitchy. He took in how relaxed the other guy was, and how empty the diner was, and found himself amping up from a little worried to a lot worried. They were in

Cleveland because, according to this Watcher guy, something was wrong, and it looked like that something was wrong right there, in the diner, so whatever it was they were there to prevent, it had already started, and Harry didn't know enough to decide if the best move was to stay and fight it or get the hell out of Dodge.

"Uh-huh. Well, that was illuminating, I'm sure."

"It is, rather," Bob muttered and looked pensive.

"Yeah, well, since the service here's a little sketchy and I'm hungry, what'd'ya say we take this show on the road and find someplace with an open kitchen?"

Bob opened his mouth, presumably to agree, but just then, the kitchen doors swung open and a guy stalked out towards their table as if he'd been summoned or heard their threat to take their money elsewhere. Harry sighed in relief, because if he was gonna face this thing, he didn't want to do it on an empty stomach.

The guy came around to their table and stopped when Harry held a hand up.

"Hey, look, I'll just have the cheeseburger special and a coffee, black. My friend here's on a diet so he-
-"

"I'll have a coffee, thank you." Bob sounded affronted as he smoothed down his waistcoat with one of those fussy little gestures that made him stand out (although the fact that he was wearing a waistcoat and a cravat sort of did that even without the body language). Harry didn't bother to point out to Bob that the "diet" thing was a reference to Bob's ghostliness and not his paunchiness, because he had a strong feeling that wouldn't go over too well. But he really hated shelling out for an extra coffee.

Big Ears snickered.

"What's so funny?" Bob asked.

"Oh, nothing's funny," Big Ears said, still laughing.

"Hey, Waiter, while you're up, I could use a chocolate shake with whipped cream." Big Ears leaned forward and batted his one eye at the waiter, and that answered the question of whether a one-eyed man could flirt. He could, and pretty

well, given the waiter's answering smile. As to why he was flirting with the waiter, Harry couldn't say. The waiter was good looking, alright, but he looked a little like the twink at the truck-stop which, Harry considered, actually made sense, since the one-eyed guy looked a little like a trucker--with dark brown, wavy hair falling to just above his collar. He had on a denim jacket over a red flannel shirt, unbuttoned over a white t-shirt--the layers over his upper body emphasizing his bulk. Below that, he had on faded jeans and work boots. He was built like a trucker--solid, broad shouldered and, pressed up against the table, Harry noticed the soft swell of a belly.

He was better looking than most truckers, though, and young--maybe early thirties, if that. It was a shame the other eye was gone. Harry wondered why the guy didn't just wear a prosthetic. The waiter, meanwhile, was short, young, pretty-faced, with sharply defined cheekbones and a scar over his left eyebrow. He had a slight, muscular build, very pale, and his light brown, curly hair was cropped

close to his head, as if he was trying to mask the curl there.

He wasn't checking the guys out--not like that, anyway--but it paid to pay attention.

"Don't think you need anymore sugar, mate," the waiter shot back, his eyebrow climbing, and Harry thought the guy looked amused. And, instead of heading back to the kitchen, he slid into the chair opposite the trucker, stretching his legs out in front of him under the table.

"Because I'm sweet enough as I am?" the trucker asked, still flirting.

The waiter who wasn't in the mood to wait sort of growled back, "That's one reading, isn't it?" He had an English accent, saying, "innit" instead of "isn't it."

And Harry was starting to get the feeling that the thin one wasn't actually a waiter after all, which begged the question.... "Is there a waiter in this place?"

"Well, there was a waiter," the trucker said, grinning a bit madly. "Spike, you didn't kill the waiter, did you?"

"Might've," the twink shrugged and tapped at the table-top with his fingers in a twitchy way that suggested he was an ex-smoker.

"And the cook? What about the cook?"

Bob looked toward the kitchen and Harry asked, "What about the cook?"

Spike--and what kind of name was that?--grinned. "Git owed me fifty quid, that's what."

Bob's eyes widened and Harry frowned, deciding that coming here had definitely been a mistake--and not just because Bob and road-trips were "unmixy things." Any place with a flaming river and a direct line to Hell was bound to be trouble. And here were two nutcases to round out the tour. It figured they'd walk right into it.

"I believe your idea of vacating this establishment is a good one, Dresden," Bob said, looking a bit alarmed.

Chuckles the Trucker over at the next table laughed again and his sociopathic companion swung his feet up onto the table, crossing them at the ankles. He had on big, clunky Doc Martins to match the black t-shirt and jeans. "Think we've made them nervous, luv. Best tell them before they 'vacate this establishment.'" The guy's imitation of Bob was, as Bob liked to say, "spot-on."

The big guy leaned forward across the table and put a hand on the smaller man's ankle--signaling a casual ownership, Harry noticed--and his face went from amused to serious. "Okay, sorry about that. Just playing with you, which isn't nice."

"Rubbing off on you, mate," Spike said, looking amused and, Harry decided, a little dangerous.

"I'm Xander Harris, and this is--"

"Spike," Harry filled in.

"Yeah."

Harry was glad to have an actual name to pin to the trucker--even if it was 'Xander.' Chuckles and Big Ears sort of suited the guy while Xander... didn't.

Though maybe, when the guy was a baby, he looked exactly like a Xander to his folks. Harry tried to picture the guy as a baby and nodded to himself. Round face, big, brown curls, large, brown eyes (since the scarring there suggested an accident and not a congenital thing). The guy looked tough, now, but he was probably a cute kid.

Still, Harry actually would've figured the trucker guy for a Spike. His little boyfriend looked more like a Xander.

Xander smiled. "And you two are Harry Dresden and Hrothbert of Bainbridge, I presume?" Xander pronounced the silent "H," which made Bob flinch a little.

"Bob," Bob corrected with a tight smile.

"Bob of Bainbridge?" Xander asked, and Harry started to think maybe he knew exactly how to pronounce Bob's name and was just messing with him.

"Simply Bob, thank you."

"Bob here predates surnames," Spike offered, apparently for Xander's benefit. And there was a touch of mockery to that observation that Harry didn't much like. He also noted that Spike seemed to know more about them than he'd initially let on.

"Uh huh," Xander said, sounding uninterested. Harry noticed that Xander was still resting his hand on Spike's ankle.

"Bainbridge--that's near Stony Raise Cairn?" Spike asked, a question obviously meant for Bob, which was good, because Harry knew fuck-all about Bob's hometown, despite being lectured, at length, about the wonders of Merry Olde--which in Bob's case was pretty damned old.

Bob nodded. "Yes, it is. Are you familiar with the area, Mister Spike?"

"Just Spike. Passed through, once or twice," Spike said.

"On holiday?"

"Might call it that, yeah. Had a girl with a yen to tour Bolton Priory, commune with the spirits. Me, I wanted to see what Wordsworth was on about."

"Ah yes," Bob said, nodding. "Till in the bosom of our rustic Cell, we by a lamentable change were taught that 'bliss with mortal Man may not abide: How nearly joy and sorry are allied!'"

"For us the stream of fiction ceased to flow." Spike swept his feet down off the table. "For us the voice of melody was mute."

Harry looked over at Xander, who looked back at him, and, nutcase though he might be, for a moment, Harry could tell they were in agreement about the strangeness of English people.

The kitchen doors swung open just then and Harry jumped in his seat as a small, dumpy man ran out of the kitchen, wiping the sweat off his brow with a white towel. "Sorry, boys. The second one's just come."

Harry caught Bob's eye and mouthed, "The second one?"

"Congratulations!" Xander said and Spike inclined his head toward the man with a, "Cheers, mate. Boy or girl?"

"Another boy. Just call me grandpa twice over. So, what can I get you boys? It's on the house today!"

"I'd like a cheeseburger and fries and a coffee," Harry said, a little annoyed to be ignored now that the guy was finally ready to take their orders.

The cook glanced over at him and nodded.

"Cheeseburger, fries, coffee. Okay. Anything else? On the house for everybody today."

"Harris here wants a chocolate shake," Spike added. "And some fries."

"With whipped cream. Please?" Xander said, turning toward Spike, again with the flirting eye.

"With extra whipped cream," Spike echoed, and Xander tipped his head to the side, revealing the tanned line of his neck and... a scabbed over wound there that looked new.

Harry stood up so fast he hit his hip on the table.

"You! You're a vampire!" And that explained at least some of the hinky feeling he'd had since coming into the diner.

"That'll be the vampire," Spike corrected, and Bob looked frantically at the dumpy cook, who just shrugged and went back into the kitchen.

"Look, sit down and calm down, Mister Dresden," Xander ordered.

Harry found himself sitting down, surprised at the sudden turn from genial idiot to authority figure the guy had taken.

"I'm sitting. I'm calm." He wasn't, because he didn't know this Spike from a hole in the wall and vampires generally weren't on his most trusted list. He let his drumstick slide down his sleeve far enough down until the cool weight balanced against the heel of his palm. Wand and stake in one, it made him feel a little better. He nodded at Bob, who nodded back.

"Good. So you got the letter, right?"

Harry looked at the letter still sitting on the table.
"Yeah, I got it. So you're saying you're 'Watcher'?"

Spike's eyebrow climbed again, and Xander shook his head. "No, I'm a Watcher. It's a title." He glanced at Spike and then back at Harry. "Sort of. Unofficially. I'm a, um, seer. But I did write the letter."

Bob's face brightened. "Ah, prognostication?"

Xander blushed. "No, um, n-not mystical. I just, um, see. Things. I--fuck, nevermind. I--it's complicated. I work for the Council."

"You work for the High Council?"

"Um... nooo. I work for the Watcher's Council. Unofficially. Freelance, you might say. It's--"

"Got buggerall to do with your Council, Dresden. Harris keeps a gimlet eye on the Slayer. He likes to watch," Spike said with a smirk that made that sound a little bit dirty.

"Yeah," Xander agreed, looking relieved. "I keep an--" Xander stopped and he cast a look over at Spike,

mouthed, "Asshole," at him. "I help out with the Slayers. Y'know?"

Harry nodded, not following, but what the hell. Chicago politics he knew. Cleveland was its own thing. And there were layers upon layers, most of which he didn't give a fuck about, as long as they didn't try to wreck his life, which was complicated enough as it was. But this was the guy who brought them to Cleveland, so this guy, he cared about. And he was a little flattered that, whatever was up, they didn't want to go to the High Council to take care of it but came to him, instead. Looking at the vampire, he got the feeling that working within the system came as easily to Spike as it did to Bianca. Speaking of which, "So how'd you know we'd be here, anyway? I thought we were supposed to meet up at..." He opened up the letter, looking for the address. "This place," he said, tapping at the address on the letter, which was some office building in the downtown area.

Xander shrugged. "A friend of ours did a spell. We've been tracking you. For your own protection,"

Xander added, as if that made it better. "And we-- make that he--got impatient."

"And he got hungry," Spike said.

"So we steered you here."

"Steered--but Bob picked this place--"

"Because it looked a little brighter than the rest, yeah?" Spike tapped the side of his nose.

Harry saw Bob nod and realized that yeah, it had looked unusually appealing, considering diners usually didn't. "So, uh, what if we didn't bite?"

Xander shrugged. "You would've gotten a flat tire between here and the next block over. Or maybe not. We might've hooked up later." Xander looked unconcerned either way, and Harry was glad for him that they hadn't pulled the flat tire trick, because he would've been angry about that.

The kitchen doors opened again and the cook came back with his arms loaded down with food. He set the burger and fries down in front of Harry and a second plate of fries in front of Spike. And then he

turned and put Xander's shake down with a flourish. The shake came in a glass with whipped cream and a cherry on top, along with a tall, silver cup for the extra, apparently. Xander started sucking it down and Spike leaned across the table and swiped the cherry off the top, popping it into his mouth.

Harry frowned as he was handed his own coffee. "Huh. Vampires here eat cherries," he said to Bob.

Spike reached over and stuck a finger in Xander's whipped cream, scooping up a bit and licking it off his finger.

Bob nodded and looked longingly at Harry's fries. "Evidently. And whipped cream, as well. You did mention the letter indicated the presence of a Soul."

"Think he'd get along with Bianca?" Harry asked. And Bob looked suitably appalled.

"I should think not."

Harry nodded and put ketchup on his fries, tasting one and trying not to feel guilty that Bob couldn't have any. He watched as Spike looked at the

ketchup with a moue of distaste. The way he figured it, Bianca would eat Spike up and still be hungry for desert. Actually, knowing Bianca's tastes, she'd probably have Xander for desert.

"He likes them dipped in blood," Xander said, and Harry blinked and then realized Xander meant the fries.

Spike kicked Xander under the table.

"Oi, right here," Spike pointed out. "You offering to top 'em off?"

Xander detached from the shake and licked his lips. "No. Because that would be disgusting."

Xander grinned and Spike reached out and pulled Xander's shake toward him, using the same straw and having a taste of it before getting up. "Going out for a smoke. Harris here'll fill you in on the job."

Spike walked around to stand behind Xander's chair and Xander tipped his face up and they kissed, a long, open-mouthed kiss that ended in Spike's making an "Mmm," sound.

Harry watched as Spike walked out the front door and Xander turned back to his shake as if there was nothing strange about making out with a gay vampire in a diner which, apparently, there wasn't.

Harry waited for Xander to fill them in, but, after Spike left, Xander went back to his shake, pouring the rest of it from the silver tumbler to his now empty glass and using his spoon to scrape out whatever stuck to the sides. The spoon made a loud, metallic sound in the otherwise quiet diner, and after a few minutes went by, Harry started to get impatient.

"So, um, what's the story here?"

"With Spike?"

"Yes. Do tell, and don't spare the details. We're all adults here."

Xander laughed.

"I meant the reason you brought us down here."

"I'd like to hear more about this Soul business," Bob argued. "That is most unusual."

"Yeah. It is. He is. But I think I'll let Spike tell you about that." Xander nodded.

"So the job?"

Xander nodded and licked some chocolate syrup off his spoon. "So, the reason I brought you here is... and doesn't that sound like a line from a movie? Anyway, the issue is sleepwalking."

"Uh huh. You're sleepwalking?"

"Nooo. People are. Lots of them. You might say it's an epidemic."

"Of sleepwalking?" Harry clarified.

"Yeah. That and, um, people have been doing other... things. While asleep."

"Things?"

"Yeah, it's--look, just wait until about four a.m. and you'll see."

"Okay. Show and tell later."

"Trust me, if I tell you, you'll still want to watch."
And the corner of Xander's mouth twitched with some private amusement.

"So I'm guessing your local proximity to Hell--"

"The Hellmouth, yeah. It's got something to do with it. But I don't know what's causing it, specifically, and it's starting to affect the Slayers, which makes it my problem to fix. Or, um, our problem, assuming you can help, which I hope you can, because I'm running out of options."

"Intriguing," Bob said, and it was, to a point.

"So you can't fix this and you think I can?"

"Yeah. You and your ghost. Mostly, the ghost. Bob. Our sources say he's the one we want."

"Wait--you want Bob?"

Bob preened.

Xander shrugged and ate another fry. "I'm sure we can use another Wizard, too, but mostly, yeah, we need a ghost."

"Another wizard," Harry said, annoyed, now. "You already have a Wizard?"

"Well, yeah," Xander said, with the casual tone of someone implying, "Doesn't everybody?" And Harry did sometimes wonder. "We've got a whole coven on it, but we don't have a ghost yet, and our sources say a ghost is what we need. On staff, I mean. Not that we have a staff," Xander said, clearly seeming to think about this. "We've got more of an informal network. No pay, no benefits. And that would be why I'm in construction." Xander nodded to himself and went back to his shake.

Harry saw Bob wince at the "no pay" bit, and he knew he was going to hear about that later. He really couldn't decide if Xander was an idiot or just really good at covering up the smart stuff, but he decided to shelve that question and just focus in on his burger, which was good, actually. The fries were good, too, and he noticed Xander had claimed Spike's plate of fries, though he was pouring ketchup on the corner of the plate and dipping the fries in rather than smothering the whole thing in ketchup, which was Harry's preference.

And then Spike came back inside, bringing a draft of tobacco and ozone-scented air with him, and he slid back down into his seat and reclaimed his plate of fries, spinning the plate so that the ketchup was closer to Xander's side of the table. Harry noticed that, under the table, their feet were sort of intertwined. He looked away, disturbed by that, not because of the gay thing, but because of the strange intimacy, and the fact that across from him in the booth was a guy who wasn't even really there.

"So, you give them the story?" Spike asked, and Xander nodded.

"Mostly. I figured they should see it and decide."

Spike took hold of Xander's wrist, turning it and looking at his wristwatch. "Should start in another few hours or so. Gets to be a problem just after four."

Harry knew it had been just after midnight when they'd pulled into Cleveland, so that meant they had some time to kill.

"So where are you staying?" Xander asked, and Harry shrugged.

"I figured--"

"You can stay with us. I mean, it's just you, right, and we've got a guest room." Xander turned to Bob. "I'm guessing you don't need a bed, right?"

"Think he sleeps in his skull," Spike observed, glancing down at the bag sitting on the bench next to Harry. "Could give him a pillow, I suppose."

"Thank you. I would very much appreciate that," Bob said, shooting Harry a look that suggested he was a pig for never having thought of that himself. Harry decided it wasn't worth arguing that yeah, maybe he hadn't gotten Bob his own skull-sized bed, but Bob had a whole laboratory all to himself, and all the equipment he needed to whip up doom boxes, which made Harry pretty damned generous when you thought about it.

"Yeah, he--uh--wait--how did you know he--"

"Spies, everywhere," Xander said with a grin.

"Really!" Bob looked around and, not surprisingly, didn't see anybody.

"Kidding. We only have the one, and she saw Bob do the I Dream of Jeannie act out near Sandusky. The rest is a tracking spell and a lot of luck."

"|--"

"It'll be easier if we're all working out of the same place, unless you mind, and if you do, you're welcome to stay in a hotel, although I think once you see what's up you uh, won't, um, want a hotel. So, you about finished with that?" Xander gestured at Harry's meal and Harry stuffed the last of the burger in his mouth and nodded. The sooner they started this, the sooner they finished it.

Xander sketched out the directions to his place on the back of a credit card receipt, and Harry followed him outside, holding the door for Bob, so he

wouldn't walk through it. Spike was the last out of the diner, and he and Xander stopped at the curb and shared a look that communicated... well, nothing that Harry could follow, and then Spike took off--disappearing into the night the way vampires tended to do.

Harry got in the car, pleased to see it was untouched, and waited until Xander pulled up beside him in a pickup truck and then passed him, heading East. He pulled out and followed. Bob was quiet as they drove, and he had his own things to think about, like what they needed a ghost for and how much this little trip was going to cost him and in what ways.

Half hour later, they were pulling up on a cozy little street filled with prewar apartment buildings and large, suburban houses with front porches. He parked behind Xander's truck and followed him up the drive to a two-story, brick pre-war with a plaque on it that said, "The Grand 1880." Harry noticed that the grass was neatly trimmed and the property was in good shape. The two buzzers beside the door were labeled, "Carson" and "Pratt."

Harry watched as Xander unlocked the mailbox labeled, "Pratt," and, carrying a stack of mail, jogged up the stairs. Harry followed. He noticed that Xander left the door open but didn't invite him in.

He set Bob's bag down beside the leather sofa which took up the center of the room and checked the rest of the place out while Xander disappeared into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. A quick survey showed nothing visible to indicate the guy was familiar with vampires or magic. On the fireplace mantle were a few framed photographs of a younger, thinner, two-eyed Xander with his arms around two pretty girls. Another photo was of Xander, a little older and with a slightly rounder face (still with two eyes) hugging yet another pretty girl--this one looking at Xander instead of the camera with an expression of adoration that Harry couldn't quite fathom considering he'd met the guy. He wondered where the very male vampire fit in.

Xander came back into the room just as he was checking out the bookcase. No magic books there, though there was an awful lot of poetry for a guy

who didn't seem like he was much of a reader. Stacked up horizontally were a bunch of Star Trek novels. Those, he figured on being Xander's. And that meant the poetry belonged to someone else. The vampire?

Harry surveyed the room again, taking in the cut glass lamps set on top of--were those doilies?

"Yeah, those are doilies," Xander said with a tired sigh, sitting heavily on the sofa with an open bottle of beer in his hand. Harry noticed that he'd set another one on a coaster on the coffeetable. "I am not responsible for the doilies. In fact, I argued against the doilies."

"But you lost," Harry noted.

Xander nodded. "I lost big. See also the rug."

Harry looked down. The rug had big, cabbage roses on it. "So, your vampire's kind of--"

"Gay," Xander said, and tipped his head back, taking a long pull of his beer.

"And you're...."

"More of a manly, Pottery Barn kind of guy." Xander patted the large, leather sofa for emphasis. Or maybe he wanted Harry to sit down. The sofa was big enough for five people, so Harry sat down on one end, keeping some distance between them.

Bob, being Bob, perched on the arm of the sofa beside him, putting his arm across the back behind Harry's head. He didn't like it when Bob got that close--close enough that if he just leaned back a little, his head ought to brush against Bob's arm. But it wouldn't, so he didn't.

"So, look, this sleepwalking thing. Is anybody actually being hurt by it? I mean, if you leave it alone, would--"

"In about--" Xander looked at his watch and frowned, "two hours, you can decide for yourself."

Harry didn't have much else to say, and Xander reached for the remote and turned the TV on, flipping through the channels until he found a game on. It was British football, which wasn't really his thing, but Bob perked right up. Then the phone rang

and Xander got up and went back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him again.

"So... what do you make of this?"

Bob nodded in the direction of the bedroom. "I could..." Bob made a motion in the air that left a vague glowing shape behind that quickly fizzled out, leaving a trail of black, foul-smelling smoke hanging in the air.

"Guess not."

"Strong wards," Bob observed, which was an understatement. He hadn't even noticed them on the way in, so they were both strong and subtle--well hidden.

"Sorry about that," Xander said, coming back into the room and tucking his cell phone in his back pocket. "Spike's not too fond of magic. You should also probably take off those shoes before you get anything on the rug."

"Uh huh." Figuring he had two hours to wait, Harry took off his shoes, feeling a little stupid in his socks but noticing that Xander had his shoes off, too.

"And where is the vampire?" Bob asked. "Hunting?"

Xander shrugged. "If by hunt you mean getting a present for the twins..."

"The twins?"

"The cook's grandkids. Friend of the family. Long, long story beginnng with our coming in to purge a nest of vamps and ending in bringing his place up to code after the vampire took out a wall, revealing some very, very old wiring. It was a deathtrap, as it turns out. I mean, aside from the vampires."

"Uh huh. Kinda late for shopping, isn't it?"

"Demons," Xander said, as if that explained everything.

Harry glanced at Bob, who looked amused.

"So you and he are...." Harry trailed off.

Xander didn't say anything until he suddenly yelled, "Scoooooore!" followed by, "man and man, united in blood in a state of unholy unmatrimony?"

"Um... yeah," Harry agreed, wishing he hadn't asked.

"Yeah," Xander said, looking content as he leaned back and put his feet on the coffeetable. "The table and sofa are mine, so feel free to get comfortable."

"You divided up the room?" popped out before Harry could stop himself.

"Yeah, why? What do you two do?"

"I--we're not--Bob and me aren't--"

"We've decided on a prolonged engagement," Bob offered, helpfully.

Xander laughed and wiped at his face, having dribbled beer down his chin. "Sorry. I just assumed--"

"It's alright," Harry said, and he wasn't offended. Annoyed, yes. Uncomfortable, definitely. But not offended.

"Even if your assumptions about our inclinations proved correct, the problem of my insubstantiality

would prove a significant barrier to any intimacies that might result from an attempt to express such desires."

"Where there's a will," Xander said, looking toward the front door.

Harry stared at the television, leaning forward to set the empty beer on the table and staying like that, hunched over, as far away from expressing anything as possible.

The door shut softly behind them and Harry turned around to see Spike enter the room. "It's time," he said, and Xander nodded, looking suddenly very somber.

Harry waited, but Xander just said, "Listen."

And then it started. From below, there was a bang, then another bang, and then a kind of rhythmic thumping.

Xander nodded to himself and Spike sighed, sounding and looking tired.

Xander got up and walked over to the window and waved them over. When Harry came to the window, Xander put a hand on Harry's elbow, and Harry moved his arm to pull away--just a reflex--but then he happened to glance out the window and, "What the hell?! Bob, get over here."

Bob came to the window and stared out the window, apparently not seeing anything.

"Touch him," Xander said, still gripping Harry's elbow.

"I can't," Harry pointed out.

And Xander pulled at Harry's arm so that he bumped into the space occupied by Bob and Bob gasped. "Goodness!"

"Give it another few minutes and it'll be badness," Xander observed, and just then, a skinny woman wearing a snap-up pink housecoat came out of the house next door and walked across the street and onto the front lawn of the house directly opposite them, where she stopped in front of a shirtless young guy with acne whose pajama pants were

already riding low on his hips before she gave them a good, hard tug. And then they both started to--

Harry turned away from the window and put his back to the window, having seen enough. "That's--"

"A problem worth solving just to preserve the bloody view," Spike said, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah, that kind of thing could really bring down property values."

Bob was still watching. "Dresden, on this street alone, there must be hundreds of couples coupling."

"Eight maids a-milking, seven swains a swaying, six gits a-laying, five nip-ple ri--"

Xander clapped a hand over Spike's mouth before he could finish his song. "They're all asleep. The people out there, I mean."

From behind Xander's hand, Spike mumbled, "Not gonna wake 'em."

"No, but your song's going to give me nightmares," Xander argued, but he took his hand off of Spike's mouth.

Bob was frowning. "Sexsomnia? They're acting under an enchantment, presumably, but of what sort and.... why are we unaffected?"

"You were awake when it started, which is why you aren't out there joining them. And I can see it. If I touch Harry and he touches you, everybody sees it," Xander explained.

"So if you move away, this goes away?"

"You stop seeing it. But it's still there."

Xander took his hand off of Harry's elbow and, when Harry turned back around to the window, there was nobody out there. No orgy. Nothing. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes.

"So how come you can see this and nobody else can?"

"Haven't a clue," Spike said. "Might have something to do with the other Hellmouth."

"Wait--that was the one in California that imploded, right?"

Xander nodded. "That would be the one."

"And you survived?"

"Depending on your definition of--"

"We survived."

Bob walked over from the window and stood beside the bookcase. "It's more than simply a survival mechanism. You see things." Bob nodded to himself. "You see, and the vampire also sees. Because you share his blood?"

"Yeah, could be," Xander agreed.

"We need to end this," Spike said, sounding annoyed.

Harry stared at the window that showed nothing. Unfortunately, the thump thump thumping from downstairs that he'd almost stopped hearing suddenly stopped its thumping, and in the sudden

silence, Harry belatedly realized what it was. "More of them downstairs?"

"Goosey Goosey Gander, where shall I wander. Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber. There I met an old man who wouldn't say his prayers. I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs."

"Again, Spike. The key word here is nightmares."

"Whole bloody situation's a nightmare."

"The stairs went 'crack.' He broke his back. And all the little ducks went 'quack, quack, quack,'" Bob added, after a moment.

Spike looked impressed. "Cheers, mate."

Clearly, Bob was right at home here.

"So, okay. We've got a problem of ugly, invisible orgies."

"'s not all ugly. Two blocks over there's a pair that like to play Mary Ann and Ginger with the neighborhood Professor."

"Pair?" Bob echoed, sounding interested.

Harry shook his head. "Not if it means walking past Mrs. Robinson."

"If we're not in contact, you wouldn't see any of them," Xander pointed out.

Harry shuddered. "Yeah, but then I might make contact with the invisible woman out there."

"Good point."

Spike shrugged. "Can see 'em tomorrow, if you change your mind."

"We'll be gone by tomorrow," Harry said with more confidence than he felt.

"Don't even know what's causing it, yet, Dresden. Might take awhile to fix it."

Harry really hoped Spike was wrong.

"So why don't you tell me what you know so far?" Harry asked, fighting the temptation to take another look outside.

Spike walked over to the sofa and perched on the arm of it, opposite from where Bob had been.

"Show happens every night, same time--"

"Same porn channel," Xander interrupted. "And it all lasts until everybody gets off. Well, until the guys get off."

"Isn't that always the way," Bob observed. "I assume the, ah, participants roll over and go back to sleep with a smile on their faces?"

Spike smirked. "Those the vampires haven't taken out in flagrante, yeah."

"You've got a vampire problem here?"

"We have a Hellmouth problem here," Spike shot back, and the flash of golden eyes made Harry take a step back. Sore spot, obviously.

"Spike," Xander said, holding up a hand. "Be nice."

Spike held up two fingers and waved them.

"Look, no offense intended. I just figured the Court would control them with something like this going on."

"The first rule of Hellmouth life is there are no rules," Xander said. "And vampires seem just as vulnerable to this as everybody else."

Spike walked over to Xander and Xander stood up, letting Spike wrap his arms around Xander from behind, his pale hands clasped over Xander's belly, his chin leaning in the crook of Xander's neck, right over the scar.

"The Slayers control the vampire population. Usually," Xander said, frowning.

"Usually? But not right now?"

"Right now, the Slayers we have can't see the vampires they're trying to slay, which is a bit of a problem. Also, we've got two Slayers... indisposed," Spike said.

"Indi--"

"Pregnant," Xander said, and was he blushing? "Not by me," he added after a moment.

"Best hope not," Spike said, giving Xander a squeeze.

"I only have eye for you," Xander shot back, and Spike frowned, but Xander didn't see it and Harry did, and for a moment, he and the vampire shared an awkward moment, and Harry got that Xander was making light of something Spike wasn't entirely comfortable with. Harry noticed that Spike's arms tightened around Xander's middle, drawing him against Spike's body.

Harry broke the weird moment by asking some more questions. "So the pregnant, um, Slayers. That's connected to this--"

Xander sighed. "Coincidence. Well, their being pregnant while this is happening is a coincidence. Their being pregnant at the same time as each other isn't."

"The idiot--"

"Margaret--"

"--said she wished that the both of them--"

"Margaret and Celeste have sort of bonded," Xander added.

"--would raise their spawn together. Demon happened to be walking by at the wrong moment and made it happen."

"He, uh, raped them both?"

Spike flinched again. "No."

"They, um, sort of asexually reproduced," Xander clarified. "At least we think they did. Will. They're seven months along and we won't know for sure until the babies are born and we couldn't exactly tell the doctor that the other girl might be the father, er, mother. Donor."

"Someone's been studying up in health class," Spike observed, once Xander had stammered out his explanation, and Xander blushed again.

"So basically you've got some demon going around cross-pollinating your Slayers so they can't fight the

vampires but that has nothing to do with this thing out here."

Xander shook his head. "Different problem. Different demon. And he only did it to two Slayers before we got him. And we don't know that this is a demon thing, necessarily."

"You don't know much," Harry observed, and Spike's eyes flashed gold again, making Harry wonder if staying here overnight was really such a good idea after all.

"Solving this has been complicated because in the morning, nobody who participated in it has any memories of it happening, and nobody who was awake sees anything. So that leaves us with--"

"--a lot of puzzled humans trying to explain away the dried cum stains on their pants."

Bob winced at Spike's blunt description.

"And the demons and vampires are--"

"Copulating like rabbits, if they're asleep, and oblivious if they're awake," Spike offered.

"But the ones who're asleep--they don't remember it, either?"

"Which is a good thing," Spike added. "Vamps get wind of this, they'd be lying in wait, hunting by scent and slaughtering 'em en masse. Instead, just a lucky few stumble across it each night. Most can't figure it out, though there's been some talk. The few who do bump into someone bumping uglies get an easy meal if a Slayer doesn't get them first, which she does or I do. Doesn't last long, and the short duration of the event makes for easy slaying and few accidental encounters."

Xander nodded. "We've been deploying the slayers where they can do the most good. Just trying to contain it. But again, we're down two Slayers, and this has been going on for two weeks now, and the Slayers can't actually see anything unless we do a chain, and we tried that and it was... awkward."

"Bloody hysterical, actually."

"You say that only because you didn't fall over Patricia and land on her--" Xander mimed breasts--and big ones.

"Think you enjoyed that just a bit too much."

"I think she enjoyed being crushed by me a lot less."

"Hmm. Some of us love being crushed by you," Spike said, sotto voce, but not sotto enough. And suddenly Harry had an all too vivid picture of the two of them going at it, which was really way more than he wanted to know.

"Wait--this invisible sleepsex thing has been going on for two weeks now?"

"Did I mention we tried a few things and nothing's worked?" Xander's mouth twitched into a tight line and Harry suddenly saw the weariness there, hidden by the humor and supported by the vampire at his back. "We also have another little problem."

"Not so little, mate," Spike muttered.

"And that would be...?"

"Those people we do show--and tell--seem to get some sort of amnesia after they go to sleep. Which they sort of have to do, eventually."

"Will we--"

"I think so, yeah. You will. Don't know about Bob. Everyone else has. When we talked to the coven, they went to sleep and by the time they woke up, they'd--"

"Forgot we had our little convo, leaving Harris here to give them a recap--"

"Which honestly is less fun than it sounds, given the number of times I've had to explain it to the Slayers, and the witches and pretty much anyone I've brought in to help. Because even witchpeople-- need to sleep." Xander shrugged. "So we've set up a system. We tell them. They don't believe us, at first, and if I can get them to come down here, I show it to them and then they stay up as long as they can, trying to help us out. Then they write down what they've been doing, as far as they've gotten, and then they sleep and--"

"It all begins anew."

"And so that's why we have a good long list of everything this isn't, and not much sense of what it is."

"Bloody annoying's what it is."

"Agreed, yeah, but then we had this breakthrough-- well, actually, Andrew had a breakthrough, which he doesn't remember having, which is good, because if he did, the gloating--"

"I'd have to kill him," Spike said, with a certain satisfaction.

"Yeah, well, you and me both. Andrew's kind of an asshole friend of ours--"

"Friend of yours, mate."

"Whatever. I was using Friend of in the Friends of the Earth sense. Anyway, he had the idea that Bob here might be able to figure this out."

"And how's Bob going to do that?"

Spike let go of Xander and wandered off to the kitchen.

"See, we have a plan."

Spike returned from the kitchen with a bottle of Jack, two shot glasses, and a beer. He offered the beer to Xander, who took it, and he poured out two shots, holding one out to Harry and quickly downing the other, only to pour out another shot for himself.

"Drink it."

"|--"

"You'll be wanting it, Dresden. Drink up."

"I'm not liking the sound of this."

"You won't," Spike said. "It's a sodding idiotic plan, having been thought up by a sodding idiot."

"Spike, how about we try a little 'the glass is half empty' thinking? Andrew's had some good plans before."

"Name one," Spike challenged, and Xander sighed.

"Looks empty to me." Spike held out his glass and Xander picked up the bottle and refilled it with another sigh.

"See, and now it's full again. See how that works? Optimism, Spike. Look, it's not that bad."

"It's not?" Harry asked, not at all convinced.

Xander frowned. "Okay, maybe it is that bad. But it's all we've got right now, so I'm taking it and we're doing it and that is that. Assuming you say it's okay, which I hope you will, because otherwise, I've got nothing."

Harry took a drink and then another. "Okay, so tell us the plan."

Xander looked at Spike, who looked at Bob, who looked back at Xander, who cleared his throat nervously. "We want you to go to sleep so that when this thing starts up and you get--"

"Horny--" Spike said.

"Bob can, um--"

"Take an inside look at what's rattling around between your ears," Spike finished. And Harry wondered if the completing sentences thing was

something they did all the time or even noticed doing.

"Hold it. You want Bob to do what?"

"Don't expect you'll be immune, yeah?"

"You'll have to sleep sometime, Harry," Bob spoke up, softly, like he didn't like the idea either. "It sounds like a reasonable proposition."

"Only because it's not your head," Harry argued.

"Do you have a better plan?" Xander said, sounding pissed off.

"A better plan is I go back to Chicago," Harry argued.

Bob glared at him. "And leave these poor souls to fornicate with strangers, night after night, with no awareness of what--not to mention whom--they've done?"

"I--" Harry stopped himself before he could say, "Hell yes!" and earn a look from Bob. He knew he was in a pretty bad place when he was taking ethics

lessons from a guy who once argued that it wasn't dark magic if you did it with the lights on. "Look, okay, I--why can't Bob here look inside of someone else's head."

Xander frowned. "We thought about that, but... it wouldn't be right, y'know?"

"No consent," Spike said, and it sounded like he agreed. "Be like rape, wouldn't it."

Thou shalt not invade the mind of another.

"I--yeah. It would. Okay." Harry didn't think it was a good idea to mention that he'd used magic before to see inside a person's head. Besides, he didn't think he could manage what Bob could. He couldn't enter a dream--not without stepping over some lines he didn't want to cross with a stranger. And then there was the problem of needing to be asleep to enter a dream, and once he was asleep, he might end up caught up in whatever was driving everyone else into some very unappetizing sexual situations. "Okay, look, why don't we see what else we can find and leave your idea as a sort of last resort. Maybe we'll figure something else out."

Bob bit his lower lip.

Harry sighed. "Look, I didn't say no."

"Actually, you--"

"I reconsidered and said maybe. So maybe we'll do this. But I want to try a few of my ideas first. And in the meantime--"

"In the meantime, it's going to be sunrise soon," Spike said with a nod toward the window, where Harry could see the sky was lightening.

Xander sighed. "Let me show you to the guest room. We've been keeping vampire hours because of this, so you might as well get used to it for now. We can talk about it more tonight. And you should probably write some of this down, just in case you don't remember it tomorrow."

"Yeah, okay," Harry agreed, wondering how he was going to explain this to himself and what he was going to think tomorrow, when he'd have forgotten about the naked orgy. Maybe if he forgot, it'd be easier to say yeah, sure, Bob, take a walk in my skull and tell me what you see.

Spike drew the curtains shut over the window, and Harry noticed they were heavy and velvet and the same dark rose color as the roses on the rug.

Pottery Barn or not, the room didn't really seem to match up with Spike's hard edges. But it didn't match up with Xander either.

The guest room Xander showed them was better. The walls were a cool blue color with blue curtains drawn over the one window, and there was just a bed, and endtable, and a dresser in there, and an empty closet. No mirror, Harry noticed, and wasn't surprised. He hadn't seen one and didn't expect to.

"I did up the bed this morning. And, um, if you want, there's..." Xander gestured toward the dresser, and Harry noticed there was a small, velvet pillow on top. "For Bob. I wasn't sure if, um, anyway. Goodnight. Um, morning. The bathroom's easy to find and there are towels and... thanks. For coming and helping with this. You didn't have to and, uh...."

Xander wasn't looking at them now and Harry suddenly felt a nice, cleansing wave of guilt. "No problem. We'll fix this."

Xander nodded and left the room without another word, and Harry looked at Bob, who was frowning at him. And then Bob disappeared inside his skull and Harry took the skull out of his bag and placed it carefully on the velvet pillow, wondering if Bob was more comfortable that way and if Spike had left out the Jack Daniels, because he was starting to think he could use a few more just to get to sleep.



He used his notebook to jot down a few notes, figuring on Xander filling in the rest later.

He woke up a few hours later to shuffling sounds in the other room, and he held still and listened until the vague sounds resolved into a moan and a sort of growling sound, and then a thud and a giggle.

Harry shut his eyes and, once again, tried not to picture them doing what they were doing, but his imagination got the better of him, and the sounds provided a soundtrack that he couldn't ignore. He reached down and took himself in hand and then decided that was probably not something he wanted to do, and not something he wanted to think about doing, under the circumstances.

Finally, Xander and Spike seemed to settle down and get quiet again, and Harry fell back asleep, wondering if Bob had been listening or if it was quiet in his skull, in which case, Harry sort of envied him the peace.



The next time he woke up it was morning, or whatever passed for morning when you'd gone to bed at sunrise. The curtains were pulled shut and the room was dark, and Harry blinked and then looked around the room and then noticed the walls.

Bob had written on them--well, above them--and Harry lay in bed a moment and followed the glowing text as it wrapped around and around, explaining what he was doing there and what he'd apparently (if Bob were to be believed) he'd seen the night before.

When he was through reading, he thought about calling for Bob, but then he decided that Bob could get up when he got up, and in the meantime, he could have a little more time to think about Xander's proposal without Bob weighing in. It was bad enough that, after briefly explaining the plan, Bob had written, "Dresden, think before you say, 'No.'"

Harry was thinking about it, and he got up and walked out into the hall that led out onto the living room. He turned around, disoriented at first, and then saw Xander, standing in front of the open refrigerator in the time honored pose of someone who is hoping something edible might magically appear.

Harry made a little intentional noise, patting the back of the sofa as he walked by it, and Xander turned around. "Oh, hey. Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Bob up?"

"Nah, he's still in his... skull."

"Oh. That must be... different. Want some coffee? I made coffee. And I have... eggs. Toast. Bread, out of which I can make toast, since toast doesn't make itself. And coffee. Did I mention coffee? And orange juice. And coffee."

"Yeah, I think I could use some coffee." Harry found himself smiling at Xander, temporarily forgetting his annoyance at the plan as he watched Xander shuffle around the small kitchen, clearly still half-asleep.

Xander was wearing pajama pants and a robe, which hung open at the front, and his hair was standing up on the side where he'd slept on it. There were still pillow creases on the side of his face, and he rubbed at it, then rubbed his good eye, looking like an overgrown, damaged kid. "Coffee,"

he said again, and went over to the cabinet, pulling out a couple of mugs.

He slid a mug full of coffee across the breakfast bar and Harry took it, warming his hands and trying to wake up. "Spike up yet?"

"Sleeping like the dead."

"Oi, not funny," Spike called out from behind the closed bedroom door.

"Yes funny," Xander whispered, then in a normal voice, "He doesn't usually get up until around five, and when I'm working, I don't usually go to sleep until around four--a.m.--so we're all a little--" Xander yawned. "A little off schedule. Sorry."

"It's okay. So you said you do construction?"

"What, uh, do you remember from last night?"

"Nothing. Well, getting here, and the diner, and then it's sort of fuzzy, and then going to bed. Bob clued me in."

"Okay. So..." Xander nodded and drank down some coffee. "Yeah. Had to take a vacation. I work for a demon right now, but I needed the time off, so I had to explain, which was... complicated, since he forgot. So I wrote him a note, and for two weeks now, he calls me up every morning after he reads the note to ask if I'm serious, followed by wondering when this is going to be over."

"Huh."

Xander frowned. "Soon, I hope. I mean, I hope it's over soon. It's not apocalyptically bad, but I could definitely do without the wacky sex hijinks on my front lawn."

"Yeah. That's... so he's holding the job for you?"

"I'm good at what I do, so yeah. But this plan--and I know you don't like the plan, but it's the best thing we've got, and--"

"Yeah, so Bob said. Just... I'm not saying no, but let me at least try a few things first, before we go down that road."

Xander nodded, and then looked towards his--their--bedroom. Harry turned around and saw that Spike was standing in the doorway, leaning against it, actually, wearing nothing at all.

"Clothes, Spike?"

"Hmm?" Spike frowned and then blinked. "Seen it before."

"I have, yes. I'm pretty sure Harry hasn't. And I'm guessing he doesn't want to. Spike?"

Spike didn't move, but he did seem to be thinking that over. "Right," he said, after a moment, and turned around, giving them the back view.

Harry watched Xander watching Spike, and he had to admit, Spike was in good shape. Very, very good shape for a dead guy.

Xander cleared his throat, and Harry realized he'd stopped watching Xander and had just been watching Spike, who'd left the bedroom door open as he bent over to pull on his jeans. Spike didn't wear underwear.

"Yeah," Xander said, and grinned. "It's a good thing he's stupid, or you'd sort of have to hate him."

"Evil, here," Spike called out. "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

Xander laughed, and Spike came back out into the living room looking smug as he pulled another black t-shirt over his head, looking exactly as he did when they met up in the diner. Harry wondered how many black t-shirts the guy owned, and suspected that, if he looked in his room, he'd find a drawer full of them. Spike seemed like that kind of guy.

And once again, Harry looked around the room and wondered about the decor, noticing that the wallpaper was new but looked very old-fashioned--covered in flowers and vines--the kind of thing his great aunt had up in her bedroom when he used to go visit her when he was a kid.

"You remember or--"

"Not," Harry said, and Spike nodded. "Bob left me a note. Let me go get him." He went back into the bedroom and tucked Bob's skull back into the bag,

bringing it out into the living room and setting it on the floor. The apartment was small enough that Bob could wander around and not get hampered by the leash effect, which pissed him off. "Hey, Bob, get out here, will you?"

Bob appeared, running his hands over the front of his suit, smoothing it down as if he'd just gotten dressed. And Harry wondered about that--about whether Bob really ever got undressed. And then he realized Bob was looking at him strangely and shrugged. "Thanks for the note, by the way."

Bob inclined his head. "I considered that, should I forget, I might find it useful to see a reminder in my own hand."

"So did you forget?" Harry asked.

"No, it appears that I am immune to that, at least. I was, however, surprised I was able to write," Bob added.

Xander looked puzzled. "Why shouldn't you be able to--"

Bob demonstrated, writing "Wards?" in the air between them.

"Oh, it's sort of, um, password protected. I gave you access," Xander said.

"Trusting," Bob wrote.

Xander just shrugged. "Well, if you spell me dead, I figure I won't have to worry about naked lawn sex anymore."

Spike made a growling sound that Harry took for a warning, even if Bob looked more amused than anything.

"Besides, I need you to do the magic sleepwalking thing, right?"

"So what now?" Harry asked.

"Now is breakfast. And a shower. And more coffee. Lots more coffee."

"Late night?" Harry asked and then remembered.

Spike's eyebrows rose and Xander blushed.

"Right, on that note, I think I'll take that shower. Unless you want one first? Spike'll get breakfast."

"The vampire cooks?" Bob asked.

"If the vampire wants to eat, he does," Xander said, heading for the bathroom.

And Harry watched as Spike walked over to the kitchen and began pulling out eggs and bread and assembling breakfast as if he did it everyday. Which, maybe he did.

"I'll, uh, just see what I can see while you..." Harry looked at Bob, who was watching Spike cook as if he'd never seen a guy make an eggs before.

"You eat food as well as blood," Bob observed, and Spike half-turned from the stove.

"Yeah?"

"And you have a Soul."

"Hmm," Spike said, pulling out the orange juice from the fridge, along with a bag of what had to be

blood, which he opened and poured into a mug before sticking it in the microwave.

"How did that come about?" Bob asked.

"Won it in a poker game," Spike said, and from the suddenly tight line of Spike's back and shoulders, Harry knew he'd overstepped.

Bob nodded and stayed quiet, and Harry watched as Spike seemed to forget about him and get back to cooking.

Harry went to his bag and got out what he needed to look for a signature. Not that he figured he'd find any, but it was possible the witches Xander had talked to had missed something, and it paid to be thorough. And he also took out a small hand mirror and pointed it at the front window, turning with his back to it. Concentrating, he stared at the mirror until it clouded over, and Bob came over to look, shaking his head as nothing appeared but what was out there already and visible in any ordinary mirror without magic. A lawn, some houses, and a collared, white cat doing a mediocre job hiding in the bushes. He'd have to try again when Xander was out of the

shower. If Xander had the magic touch, then maybe whatever it was would leave a trace he could see. On other other hand, they'd probably already tried that, and he knew they hadn't brought him all the way from Chicago to look in a mirror.

"See anything?" Spike asked, and Harry turned slightly and got a good look at a spatula moving around on its own inside a frying pan. Very weird. He turned around and shook his head.

"Nothing. Sorry."

Xander came back out, dressed and rubbing a towel through his hair, just as Spike was turning the flame off on the stove. He waved Harry over to the table. Harry sat down and watched as the vampire put out a plate of buttered toast while Xander laid out forks and napkins and plates full of eggs and potatoes and... huh. Mushrooms and tomatoes and beans.

"English," Xander said, handing him a plate. "It's weird, but good. You sort of get used to it."

"Says the man who eats tarts for breakfast," Spike muttered, sitting down across from Harry to his

own plate of food, over which he drizzled blood from his mug.

Harry made a point of not looking at Spike's plate, figuring this was what it was like to be a vegetarian.

They didn't talk as they ate, but Harry watched as Spike and Xander... interacted. They had that long-term couple thing happening where they seemed to have some sort of conversation without words.

Harry looked over at Bob, who was standing by the window, looking sad. Harry almost wished he'd come to the table, except then he'd be sitting there watching them eat.

"Say, Bob, you need anything?" Xander asked after a moment.

"No, thank you. My condition prevents such indulgences, I'm afraid. It looks wonderful," he added, and Spike smiled softly, seeming very human for a guy licking blood off his fork.

Wanting to redirect things a bit, Harry asked, "So how did you two, um..."

"I won him in a poker game," Spike said, seeming relaxed enough this time.

"Ha ha," Xander said, but he was smiling and kicking Spike under the table hard enough to jostle it.

"Sorry."

It was almost too relaxed--too easy to make small talk and forget that, in a few hours, people were going to be doing the beast with two backs--sometimes three backs against their wills--and he was here to fix that.

"Look, that plan of yours? I'll do it," Harry offered, suddenly feeling like an idiot for holding out and insisting they try something else. Better to get it done, see if it works, and then, if it didn't work, they could worry about alternate plans.

Xander slumped further into his seat and smiled.

"Thanks."

Spike, seeing Xander relax, seemed to relax further, finally doing more than just picking at his meal.

Harry had already cleaned his plate. For a vampire, Spike was a surprisingly good cook.

"Well, we've got a few hours to go."

"So, what--do we need to do something?"

Xander glanced at Spike, who nodded. "Spike's got some stuff to take care of, and I've got to meet with the Slayers--"

"Sounds like a band."

Spike chuckled and Xander pushed away from the table. "So why don't we plan on getting together here, tonight, at around threeish, and figure things out. And until then, here's a key to the apartment. If you want to go out, just be careful, as I'm sure you would be at home, except, well, Hellmouth means things can get a little... intense."

"Duly noted," Bob said with a nod. "We'll take care."

"Okay then. And, um, here--my cell phone number if you need it. There's a phone book over there and, um, I guess that's it." Xander nodded to himself and started gathering up the dishes, stacking them in the sink. Spike was still eating and continued to do so while Xander walked around, straightening up

and getting ready to go. Harry noticed that he went to a small chest by the door and pulled out a few sharpened stakes and shoved them into a pocket inside his coat.

Spike finished his own meal and met Xander at the door, shrugging on a black leather duster. The door shut behind them and Harry looked at Bob, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet.

"So... we're doing this."

"I believe so," Bob agreed, as Harry got up to get some more coffee.

It was only six o'clock in the evening, and they had hours to kill, but Harry honestly didn't feel like going anywhere or doing anything. He felt jittery and on edge, wondering if he was even going to be able to fall asleep when the time came. "Probably shouldn't be drinking coffee," he said, and Bob frowned.

"I imagine the effects should wear off before tonight's experiment."

"Yeah, well, I slept all day."

Bob's frown deepened and Harry knew he was snapping at Bob. He knew this wasn't Bob's fault. Bob hadn't asked for this either and probably didn't feel like walking around inside of Harry's skull anymore than Harry wanted him there.

"You may call on me, if you need me," Bob said, and disappeared into the bag, leaving Harry alone in a stranger's apartment.

He decided he might as well have a look around. But first, that shower.

The bathroom was large and comfortable--something he'd been too tired to really notice before. There were a lot of expensive haircare products for two guys--one of whom was a vampire. Not that Harry was an expert on haircare products. And the soap was expensive stuff, too. Even the towels felt expensive. The carpenter must be doing pretty well for himself. Then again, most vampires invested if they had any sense. On the other hand, most vampires didn't have souls and live with carpenters, so he really couldn't figure Spike out. The medicine cabinet was more revealing. Eye care

stuff (Xander's), enough prescription painkillers to numb an elephant (all prescribed for Xander), razors, floss, and some Ben Gay (probably not for Spike) and antidepressants for Xander Harris. They were old and expired but not thrown away, and the prescription had been filled in London.

He wondered if Xander kept them around as a reminder or if he'd just stopped noticing them there, reaching past them, day after day, to get to the dental floss and the extra razors on that shelf.

Under the sink was an unopened box of hair bleach that had a layer of dust over it, a first aid kit that looked like it belonged in a hospital emergency room, and an open box of tampons next to an open box of menstrual pads. He figured it was just like Xander to think ahead like that and prepare for every eventuality.

Harry got dressed and checked their bedroom out, next, being careful to mask himself fully first. Hey, they took the wards off, so he figured it was fair game. And they could have locked their door (and he could have picked the lock, so yeah, there was a

certain amount of rationalization there, but he could live with that).

The bedroom was... interesting.

Plaid flannel on the bed, two dressers and a closet. And, on top of one of the dressers, a large mirror. Very interesting. He opened the drawers of the one without a mirror, not at all surprised to see black y-fronts in the first one, along with a number of neatly folded black socks. Who folded their socks? The second drawer held t-shirts--mostly black but a few dark red and blue ones as well. One drawer down were jeans--all of the clothing very neatly folded, like it was done by one of the clerks at the Gap. He wondered if the fussy, square corners were the vampire's thing or if the carpenter had a little OCD problem.

Xander looked like a bit of a slob, actually (not that he thought any less of him for that), and the size medium shirts were neatly hung up on metal hangers, whereas the bigger ones weren't so neat, with upturned, curling collars and no signs he knew how to use an iron.

Magic was in the details. So was detective work.

There wasn't anything else to see--at least not without risking leaving evidence he'd been there. And he wasn't sure what he'd learned, exactly, but it helped, somehow, to know the people he was trusting with his life.

He came back out of the bedroom and went over to the TV, turning it on and flipping to the nightly news. He wasn't surprised to see no stories about wild orgies--no mentions of vampires or Slayers or ghosts or wizards--no signs of his life or their lives. They were all invisible, and he wondered idly if that was a good thing or not. Thirty minutes of news later, he hadn't seen a single gay couple on the news either, and he thought about those antidepressants.

And then he thought about calling Bob back out, but didn't.

Instead, he watched some more television and, when that got boring, he got up and went through their bookshelves again, this time hitting paydirt: a photo album. The first few pages were photos of a

large-eyed little boy that had to be Xander, surrounded by relatives in a few pictures and also with one little redheaded girl. Xander was a chubby little kid with lots of hair, and in the earliest pictures he looked like a little girl. Later pictures were of a kid who'd slimmed down a bit, with the same redheaded kid and some other boy with dark hair, the three of them laughing and playing--normal kid stuff. And then there was a gap, and the next few pages were all from junior high--or maybe high school--photos of the redhead and the dark-haired boy with Xander, and some with just the one kid or the other. No parents in these photos. Then suddenly the dark haired boy was gone and the girl from the photo on the mantel seemed to have replaced him. Harry flipped through them all quickly but stopped at a photo of Xander and the big breasted girl from the mantel picture. She was holding out her hand to the camera with what looked like an engagement ring on it, and Xander looked happy but tense. And in the photos from around then, Harry noticed that Xander had put on weight and had gone pretty suddenly from looking like your average, not bad looking kid to looking like

a man, surrounded by girls--every guy's dream, except he didn't look all that happy as far as Harry could tell.

"No photos of the vampire, I presume?"

"Bob!" Harry fumbled for the album as it slipped out of his lap and caught it. "Damn, warn a guy, would you?"

"Why, are you doing something you shouldn't be doing?"

"What? No. I was just..."

"Snooping into the private details of these men's lives."

"What--and you wouldn't?"

"I didn't say that, did I? Do turn the page."

Harry did, and finally, he found what he'd been looking for: a photo of Xander and Spike, taken with a digital camera. No mirrors--a nice loophole that made him wonder sometimes if maybe God didn't anticipate the digital world.

"A handsome couple," Bob observed, standing just over his shoulder, close enough that Harry should've been able to feel the warmth of his body pressing against his own, but there was nothing-- just an illusion, or a projection--a manifestation and not a man.

And hell, he was getting maudlin in his old age.

Harry turned the page and found another photo of the two men, and Spike looked different, with his hair bleached white and in tufts sticking straight up from his head. They were standing outside of what looked like a rooming house, with about ten young women. The women stood close to Xander, but away from Spike--as if Spike was surrounded by an invisible forcefield. And in the photo on the opposite page, clearly taken immediately after the first, Xander had his arm around Spike and was pulling him closer, into the picture and nearer to the girls. Spike had his head turned to look at Xander's hand on his shoulder and he was scowling just a little.

"I don't have any pictures of you," Harry said.

"A shame, really. I suspect that I'm quite photogenic," Bob said, and Harry looked up to see that Bob was smiling down at him, indulgently.

"Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. We all have our moments of wishful thinking."

"Probably not such a good idea on the Hellmouth."

"No, I imagine not. I do wonder which of these girls-
_"

"Them," Harry said, pointing to two girls who were closer to each other than to anyone else--and looking at each other instead of at the camera.

"Attractive, and oh so young."

"Just your type," Harry said, and Bob sighed heavily.

"I have had only one woman, and she was... irreplaceable. So I can hardly be said to have a 'type.'"

"Good point. And again, sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I don't know what's wrong with me tonight."

"You're simply scared, Harry."

"Yeah, that must be it," Harry agreed.

He shut the album, not wanting to see anymore, and put it carefully back where he'd found it, between a thick volume of Nineteenth Century Poetry by John Hayward and a broken-spined A to Z London street atlas with a postcard stuck in as a bookmark. He pulled the card out, curious and needing a distraction. The postcard had a photo of the exterior of someplace called Foyle's. It wasn't postmarked or addressed, but Xander had obviously gotten it.

"Dearest Xander,

Fucked it up, haven't I?

Won't promise not to do it again, as you won't believe such bollocks from me.

Bought you La Maison du Chocolat.

Your Will."

"Old boyfriend?"

"Old vampire," Bob said, pulling one of the poetry books off the other shelf and pointing to the inscription on the inside cover that read,

"I don't know anything about poetry, but the guy at Foyles said if you like Byron, you'll like this. You do like Byron, right?"

*Happy Anniversary, William.
Love, Xander."*

"Touching," Bob said, and he looked a little misty.
"Ah, and here's another one."

Bob pulled another postcard that had been pressed between two slim volumes of poetry. This one had a watery-looking impressionist painting labeled, "St. Paul's Cathedral from the Thames, London" and, on the back, in Spike's perfect, even script:

You won't talk to me, luv, so I can't fix this. Might not be able to regardless, but I'd like the opportunity to try.

Right under that line was another, in what was obviously Xander's messier print.

Give me time.

There were several lines of writing beneath that, going back and forth between Spike's neat hand and Xander's messier scrawl, as if they'd left the card out, trading short notes instead of talking in person, but Harry didn't have time to read the rest because the front door slammed shut and Harry quickly shut the book, sliding it back on the shelf, knowing, even as he was doing it, that he was putting it in the wrong place.

"Got nosey, Wizard?"

"|--"

"I'm afraid it was my fault, Spike. I insisted that Harry find me some reading material, and you do have an impressive collection here. I'm afraid we got caught up in a rather heated discussion of the

relative merits of modern literature versus the classics."

Harry watched Spike's face and could see he wasn't buying it, but Spike also relaxed his stance and was apparently willing to let it go. "Find anything to your taste, Robert?"

Bob smiled a little tightly and inclined his head in a stiff bow. "Perhaps when this unfortunate crisis is at an end, we can sit and discuss the great masters of verse, William. For now, I believe I ought to focus my attention on refining this clever plan of yours so as to accomplish it with minimal damage to Harry's psyche."

"Damage?"

"Don't worry yourself, Harry. I'm certain-- reasonably certain--my venture into your dreams should have no lasting effects. On either of us."

Harry would've pressed him further, but Bob choose that moment to disappear, leaving Harry to face off with Spike--aka William--who looked a little miffed and a lot dangerous in that black coat of his. And

Harry realized that at some point, he'd stopped carrying around his wand.

"Look, Spike--"

"Leave off with the apologies. Can't say I wouldn't turn over your place given the chance."

"Oh, well thanks, I guess. So where's your p--"

"Not his bloody keeper, am I?" Spike said, looking pissed off again, or still. Harry wasn't sure if it was at him or at Xander, so he kept his mouth shut and looked back at the shelf, hoping there was at least one reasonably safe book he could read, preferably with no more love notes inside. He took down a Terry Pratchett novel and opened it, relieved to see it had no inscription and no bookmarks.

He carried it over to the sofa and sat down.

Peripherally, he saw Spike hang up his duster and go to the kitchen. Spike came back with two beers and handed one to Harry, not asking if he wanted it. Harry took a drink, just to be polite, and then took another one because Spike was still looking a little

hot under the collar--watching him with very coolly assessing eyes.

Harry tried to read the book but couldn't get past the first page, because Spike kept staring at him. Finally, he looked up and met Spike's stare with one of his own. Spike didn't look away. In fact, as Harry watched, his face shifted, the smooth planes turning ugly in the space of a few seconds, his eyes flashing gold as he bared his teeth and growled.

Harry took another sip of his beer and set it down on the coffee table along with the book.

"Didn't flinch," Spike said, his voice a little different--distorted by the fangs.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Spike shook his head and his face shifted back, becoming human again. Harry wondered which face was the mask. He'd never asked a vampire before, and didn't think Spike was in the mood to be interviewed. There was a lot he still didn't know about. Vampire society was pretty closed to his

kind, and the Court was suspicious of Wizards, and of him, in particular.

A cellphone rang, and Spike got up and went over to his jacket, pulling the phone out of one of his pockets with a curt, "Yeah?" and listening for a moment before sighing and shaking his head.

"Bloody hell, Harris," he said, sounding annoyed, and then, "To them as well. No. Yes, I--right. Didn't say that, did I? Yeah, yeah. Careful on the way back. There's something brewing near the park--no, bloody unlikely it's--Blothropes, morelike. Yeah, well, not in the mood now am I? And whose fault would that be? Bugger that. Take care of 'em after we do this. Right, do, but pick up some--the other--yeah. Best get two." Then a longer silence and, "Mutual, pet."

Spike hung up with a small smile on his face and Harry looked away, back at the TV, which was still on, though he had no idea what he was watching except that it was in black and white.

"Harris is bringing lunch around. Best get cleaned up."

Harry wondered if Spike was talking to him or about himself. But then Spike disappeared into the bathroom and Harry heard the shower start up, so he settled down to try to read the book, eventually getting lost in it and being startled, again, when the door opened and Xander came in with a large paper bag that smelled like Chinese food. He watched as Xander unpacked it, unloading cartons onto the table.

"I bought lunch," Xander said, looking and sounding strangely subdued.

"Trouble?" Harry asked.

Xander sighed and sat down heavily in one of the dining room chairs. "The usual. Don't worry about it. Not that you would, since you don't know what it is." And then, when Harry was about to take him at his word, Xander continued, "Margaret had a fight with Celeste and now they're talking about not living together after the babies are born, and Celeste is threatening to move out now, which is stupid, because I'm sure as hell not going to take her--them--in, and she was definitely all over with

the hints about the guest room. Even if I said yes, just for a few weeks--months--which I won't, Spike and diapers are--"

"Unmixy things?" Harry suggested and Xander laughed--a bitter, pissed-off kind of laugh that made Harry remember that engagement ring on that pretty girl's hand.

"Yeah. Hell yes." Xander shook his head and seemed to cheer up a little. "So, how about you? Are you okay with this?"

"Tonight? Yeah. I'm good," Harry said, lying through his teeth. But what was he going to say--that he hated the idea? Then, wanting to change the subject, he said, "I, uh, was looking at your bookshelf, while you were out, and, um, I found some notes. Postcards. Purely by accident. Some things fell out of some of the books."

Xander looked puzzled and then got a lightbulb-going-off look. "Uh huh. I should probably clean those out, but the girls don't really touch the bookshelf because Spike has this thing about the books being in a certain order and... that's

completely not the point. So I'm guessing you read the notes."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, because he figured if he didn't say something, Spike probably would, and it was better if things were out in the open.

Xander nodded to himself, seeming to think about that. He ran a hand through his hair. "So, not being a mind-reader, I guess you have something you want to say about what you read? Or were you just telling me you went through our things so I'd know what put Spike in the kind of mood where he's taking an hour-long shower instead of killing you dead, which I'd prefer he not do until after we solve our little sexsomnia problem?"

"So you think I pissed him off? I figured you pissed him off."

"I wasn't here and I wasn't with him, so no, I'd say this time is probably all on you."

"This time... So you two fight a lot?"

Xander frowned and went to the kitchen, pulling down plates and glasses. "That's a pretty intrusive

question coming from a guy I just met. Boundary issues much? Or are you moonlighting as a marriage counselor. Not that we're married."

Harry shrugged. "Call it a background check, since I'm going to risk life and libido in a few hours and I'm trusting you to keep me from ending up like everybody else on the block."

Xander seemed to consider that. "You need us, we need you, and it's good to know we can trust each other. I'll bite. Okay, so yes, we fight. A lot? Depends on what you think is normal. Very little about this is normal, in case you haven't noticed."

"Normal's kinda overrated," Harry offered, and Xander grinned.

"Normal's so far from possible at this point I'm not sure I'd recognize it, unless it answered to the name Abby. But yeah, to answer your question, yes, we fight. We also make up. Sometimes there's sex involved. Tonight I'm thinking is not one of those nights. So thanks again for that."

And then there was an awkward silence as Harry tried very hard not to think about makeup sex.

Xander suddenly laughed, pointing at the bathroom door. "Hear that? That is the sound of the bathtub filling, which I think means you're safe for at least another hour. But man, you must have seriously fucked up."

"He was in a bad mood when he got here, way before he--"

"Caught you red-handed?"

"It was an accident. Ask Bob."

"Uh huh. And I'm guessing you accidentally went through our bedroom earlier. You checked under the bed, right? Because that's where we keep the good stuff."

"I--"

"You underestimated me, which I get, really, because hey--what's to estimate. Underestimating Spike, though--that's just stupid. Suicidal, even."

Lucky for you--and for me--not being Spike, I'm unlikely to kill you for checking out my collection."

"Unlikely? Wait--collection of what?"

Xander shrugged. "I'm assuming you didn't actually steal anything or test out the sex toys, so no harm, no foul as far as I'm concerned."

"So we're good?" And where the hell were the sex toys?

Xander grinned and picked up a remote control and turned on the stereo. Patsy Cline came on, singing, "I go out walkin', after midnight."

Harry really couldn't figure Xander out, and he wasn't sure why. The guy looked simple and talked simple, but he was hard to get a read on, and Harry still wasn't sure how much of the nice guy thing was an act.

"I'm looking at lukewarm lo mein, here, which is never a good thing, while my vampire buddy's letting Calgon take him away. So whattaya say we dig in and try to restore some order to my topsy-turvey universe?"

"Spike won't mind if we start without him?"

"Spike doesn't actually need to eat, whereas I really do. And there's a line I'm missing here about liking my Chinese hot and my vampires cold."

Xander started serving himself and Harry came over to the table, then, and sat down, bringing his beer with him. When Xander stretched across the table for one of the cartons, Harry got another look at his neck.

Xander saw him looking. "What?"

"Nothing. He's bitten you. And you're not--"

"A fabulous dancer? Look, no offense, but I'd avoid this whole topic of conversation around Spike."

"Source of tension?"

From the tense set of Xander's mouth, Harry figured the answer to that was a big, "Hell yes."

"Let's just say that Spike and I both agree that preserving my immortal Soul is a good and necessary thing and leave it at that."

"Even if you're going to die? I mean, not now--"

"I hope not. I've got laundry to do. But eventually, yeah." Xander nodded. "Yeah. Everybody dies, though. Even vampires."

"Not for a long time. Spike's been around, what--a hundred years?"

"You're fishing."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah?"

"Let's just say Spike's robbing the cradle, big time. No, actually, let's not say that, since that's kind of disgusting."

"Hey, I'm not judging."

Xander laughed. "Oh, you are so totally judging."

"Okay, maybe I'm judging. So, before Spike... You were engaged?"

Xander put down his fork but didn't say anything.

"And I guess that didn't work out," Harry offered, starting to think maybe he'd pushed this thing too far.

Xander looked over at the mantle, then back at Harry. "She's dead. So no, it didn't work out." His voice was sad but not angry, and Harry got the sense that it was old news, but not easier because of that.

"I--sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Look, you want to ask me something, go ahead, shoot." Fair was fair.

Xander frowned. "You want me to ask you something personal, which sort of assumes I give a damn about your life which maybe I don't."

Xander looked back over at the mantle again, then in the direction of the bathroom door.

"Your dime. Ask, don't ask."

They ate in silence for a few more minutes, but it was okay--not too strained, all things considered. And the Kung Pao chicken was excellent.

"Okay... my dime. How about you tell me why you don't want the ghost in your head."

"I--"

"He can't hear us, right? When he's in there and not out here?"

"Right. And I don't want him in my head because it's my head, and there's barely enough room in here for me."

"You're lying." Xander shrugged. "But that's okay. Like I said--I don't really care."

"You said maybe you don't give a damn, but you do care, and I'm telling the truth, here," Harry countered.

"Mr. Perceptive can tell when I'm lying? Funny how that empathy comes and goes with you."

"Ouch. Score one for the carpenter."

Xander grinned and then the smile faded. "I once let my friends inside my head. I mean, three of them, tiny space, although Spike would point out that, with brains like mine, there was room to spare."

"Yeah? So how'd that turn out?"

"We had to--well, it's a long story, but it turned out to be a good thing, and not just because we saved the world."

Harry wondered if Xander was bragging or just stating that as fact.

"And that brings us back to why you don't want Bob in there."

"See, you do care," Harry pointed out.

"So do you. And there's your problem," Xander said, and sat back with a smug smile on his face.

"I--"

"Oi, Wizard. Hands off the dumplings."

"Spike likes to di--"

"Please don't finish that sentence," Harry begged.

Spike was wearing a black shiny robe and a pair of matching boxers and his skin was still damp from the bath. He was toweling his hair dry and came over to stand behind Xander, putting his hands on Xander's shoulders and squeezing before going around to the kitchen. The microwave came on and Harry knew he was heating up blood.

"You only drink the bagged stuff?"

Spike slid into his chair, setting the damp towel over the back of the unoccupied chair. He opened the beer Xander'd put out for him and took a long drink of it. "What--you writing a book? Interview with the Vampire's been done."

"Spike."

"Tosser sticks his nose in, he can expect someone to cut it off."

"Look, there's no need for rhinoplasty talk since this will all be over in an hour and--" Xander looked at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes. And then we can

get back to what passes for normal around here with all body parts intact."

"What happened to your eye?"

Spike set his beer down on the table, hard, and stood up, his pretty face going back into that ugly snarl. "Sod off."

Xander didn't move to stop him, and Harry wondered if Xander would stop him if Spike decided to take him out. Not that he could. Harry'd slipped his drumstick back in his sleeve. But then Spike just left the table, going to their bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him hard enough to rattle the frame and knock a picture down off the wall in the living room. Xander glanced at the pile of broken glass and sighed. But he didn't answer.

He did finish his plate of lo mein and then, when he was done, started putting away the food, glancing back over at the bedroom door as he put Spike's dumplings back into the container. And then he went into the bedroom after Spike, leaving Harry to finish his lunch alone.

"Bob."

Bob appeared. "Dresden, I believe I... is something the matter?"

"No. What've you got?"

"You seem to have an unerring instinct for alienating the two men we are engaged in assisting tonight. I assume you plan to apologize?"

"I didn't--"

"Of course you didn't. Now, on to what I have accomplished. After some meditation on the problem, I believe I have come up with a method by which we can gain some insight into this phenomena."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. My first thought was that I would initiate a simple mindwalk, but then I considered the possibility that, from within, I would be limited to seeing what you see without being able to easily compare that to the truth. However, after

considering the problem from all sides, I concluded that the answer lay in Blake."

"Who?"

"William Blake. The poet. The eye altering, alters all."

"Okay, so what's--"

"Mister Harris has the ability to see what we cannot. His touch allows others to see. And thus, if I were inside of you while he was simultaneously in contact with you, I should be able to see both views at once, and thus have a fuller picture of the problem."

"How do you know that his touching me's not going to keep me from hooking into the thing going on?"

"I am counting on the fact that, as you will be asleep, any additional insight Xander's vision can provide will be merely integrated into the existing spell without breaking through it."

"You're counting on a lot. Why not just let me go in without Xander's magic touch and see what we see, and then, if we need him, we bring him in."

Bob sighed. "That would mean another night with you here, and I suspect William the Bloody will object to your continued presence."

"Yeah, okay. Point taken. So you think we go in now with everything we've got--"

"Not everything," Bob said, sounding huffy. "I do have a few alternate theories we might test should this fail. However, should tonight's attempt be less than successful, I suggest we get a hotel room and that you hereafter refrain from speaking to either of them for the duration of this crisis."

"Yeah, okay. Fine. So we didn't exactly hit it off."

"Yes, for some reason, they have utterly failed to be swayed by your considerable charm and tact."

"Hey--I have charm."

"Note the absence of a claim of tact. Such honesty becomes you, Dresden."

"You want honesty, I'll give you--"

"I should think we have more pressing matters, Harry. It is time for us to begin."

"We might have a problem. I don't think I'm all that tired."

"The valerian root should take effect momentarily, and some gentle hypnosis should help you relax further. And if it fails, I'm certain Spike will be more than happy to knock you unconscious."

Harry looked over to where Spike was standing against the door, barring the way out. "Give us the word, mate."

Harry was laid out on the bed in the guestroom, wearing nothing but boxers, and he shivered. "Let's just try the hypnosis first. Uh, can't I get into the bed, at least?"

"You won't notice a chill once you're asleep, and I suspect you'll be out of bed shortly."

"Wait--you're not letting me go out there to--"

"The door's locked and I believe Spike is ready to prevent you from exiting in search of suitable or unsuitable companionship. I simply meant that you will likely move about in your sleep. You have always been a restless sleeper. Even as a child, your bedclothing frequently ended up at the foot of the bed."

Harry felt his face heat up and suddenly thought of something. "Wait. Look, this enchantment's driving people out into the street to get laid, and you're not going to let me do that, so what happens to me if I don't, um, finish this with a bang?"

"Dresden, perhaps I should have had this talk with you when you were still a child, but I can assure you that, despite the tall tales told by young men everywhere, men can and do survive without their willies falling off for lack of stimulation, and blue balls are simply a myth propagated to break down the better judgment of--"

"Bob, you're missing the point here. If orgasm's the cue to wake up, and I don't come, what's to say I wake up anyway?" And he could have lived a looong time without saying the word orgasm to Bob.

Bob blinked as if he hadn't thought of that. Spike's eyebrow climbed. And Xander looked like that hadn't occurred to him, either.

"Look, guys, I get that this is the only plan we've got, but maybe we should all be clear on an exit strategy before I go to la la land."

Bob crossed his arm over his chest and tapped his chin and then brightened. "You'll simply have to be sure to come."

"Uh... I'm not sure that's how it works. I mean, with this spell or whatever it is happening here."

"I'll do it." Xander's face flushed red and Spike tensed.

"The hell you will."

"Look, if it's a choice between coma-Wizard spending the rest of his life in our guest bedroom

while half of Cleveland's getting it on every night and a free hand job courtesy of yours truly, I think I can manage--"

Spike growled, drowning Xander out.

"Gentleman, please. If necessary, we could allow Dresden outdoors and find him someone unobjectionable with whom to--"

"Look, could we please not make me sound like a pet in heat here? How about we agree we--you--do whatever's necessary. I'm lucky, maybe this amnesia thing works to my advantage."

Xander looked at Spike, who looked at Bob, who looked back at Harry. None of them looked thrilled.

"Agreed," Bob said, and Harry nodded. Spike looked like he was still contemplating letting Harry die a slow death, but Harry trusted that Xander wouldn't let that happen.

"Okay. So let's do this. Put me out."

"Alright, Harry. Just relax. I promise, you won't feel a thing. Keep your eyes on this watch..."

Harry watched Bob pull out his watch and begin to let it move in an even arc. He knew that Spike and Xander were still in the room, but he tried to ignore them. The valerian root and the beer were making him sleepy even though he'd had enough sleep, and the watch was bright and gold in the dark room, flashing and--

The door opened. Spike was on his hands and knees, on the plaid comforter, and Xander was behind him, kneeling and pushing inside of him, his body draped over Spike's back. Xander's broad back was shiny with sweat, and he grunted as Spike rocked back on his hands and knees, the muscles in his legs flexing, visible beneath his pale skin. Neither of them saw or heard him, or if they did, they didn't care. The room was quiet except for Xander's panting breaths and the slap of flesh against flesh. Spike moaned out, "Harder" and Xander brushed damp hair from his forehead and kissed Spike's back, thrusting harder, in and out, in and out.

"I'm dreaming," Harry said, and wondered that he was absolutely sure of it, even though everything felt real.

He took his eyes off the two men and looked around the room, noticing that the mirror was wrong. It was in the wrong place. In the room--the real room--it was on Xander's dresser, but here it was on top of Spike's dresser, and Harry took a step closer to the bed--closer to Spike and Xander, who were still ignoring him. He looked in the mirror and saw-- "Bob?"

Bob was reflected back at him, where his own image should be. He reached out to touch the mirror and Bob's hand came out, pressing against the other side of the cold glass.

"The eye altering, alters all, Harry."

Harry shut his eyes and moved his hand, blocking out the image in the mirror and the men on the bed.

When he opened his eyes again, it was different. He was in the guest bedroom, and Bob was sitting on the bed beside him, his hand resting on Harry's chest. Xander was sitting on the other side of the bed, with his hand resting on top of Bob's hand--no, inside of Bob's hand. The heavy pressure wasn't

Bob. It was Xander's hand, and Xander was drawing his hand down Harry's chest, over his belly, and it tickled. "I'm going to touch you now, Harry."

It was Bob's voice, but it was Xander touching him, tugging at Harry's boxers, his fingers slipping inside of them, a teasing, light touch against the hair on his belly.

"Hang on," he said to him/them, and lifted his hips, and then his boxers were down around his thighs, and Bob's/Xander's hand was on him--right on him--clutching his erection in a sweaty palm that felt...

"Please, please, just--wait--I haven't figured it out yet. I didn't see--"

"Let go, Harry. It's okay. I've got you."

"Bob, I don't-- don't, you can't."

It wasn't real. It was another dream, because Bob couldn't and didn't and wouldn't do this to him.

"Let go, Harry. Please. Let go."

Harry shut his eyes and willed it to go away, telling himself to just wake up. But the tugging, sweet pressure of a hand on him kept at it, rough squeezes and calloused fingers pressing along the slit, almost too hard--too much pressure and no finesse, but when he tried to bring his own hands up to help, he couldn't. He couldn't move, and so he let go, let it happen, feeling the shiver along his back, tightening the muscles in his legs and belly. And then he let go--gasping as the orgasm washed over him in waves that--

"Holy fuck!"

He opened his eyes and the room was empty. And then it wasn't. Bob stepped out of the shadows in the corner of the room, looking wide-eyed and panicked.

"Bob--What--I'm still--am I still asleep?"

"No, Harry. You are awake. It's over."

"What the hell happened?"

Harry drew his hands into fists at his sides and then opened them, pushing himself up to sitting on the

bed--still the guest bed--and he looked down at his boxers, which were on, undisturbed, no tell-tale wet spot there or on him or on the bed. If he'd had sex, with anybody, there'd be some sign of it, but there wasn't.

"I don't--I don't remember. Dammit. For all I know I'm still asleep, right?"

Bob took a deep breath and shook his head. "You're awake now. You don't remember anything?"

"No." Harry frowned, feeling groggy and disoriented. He saw that the bedroom door was open, and wondered what would happen if he walked out. Would he end up on the lawn, doing the wild thing with Mrs. Robison across the street? "If I'm awake, prove it."

Bob bit his lower lip and smoothed one hand over his waistcoat. "If you are waiting for me to pinch you, I must remind you that I cannot, so my word will have to suffice."

Harry pinched his own arm, hard, and winced. "Yeah, okay, so I'm awake and it didn't work."

"No, it... it worked."

"It did? It worked? So I just--woke up?"

"Spike and Xander are in the next room, considering our next steps."

Harry sat up and swung his legs off the bed, looking for his jeans. Bob took a step back and looked away. "So what happened?" Harry got his jeans on and his shirt. "You know what did this?"

"The culprit behind this phenomena appears to be a variety of demon native to the Lake Erie basin."

"Native to the Lake Erie basin," Harry repeated, shaking his head and looking for his socks. The hardwood floors were cold and--"Wait. Tell me this has nothing to do with the fires."

A flicker of a smile passed over Bob's face and then was gone. "This has nothing to do with the fires, Harry. At least, not directly."

"Not directly. Right. So indirectly, you're telling me that you were right about everything and we have--what--damn, I need coffee. What do we have?"

"Xander and Spike will likely be able to explain further. My own knowledge is limited to what they were able to find immediately after our experiment, but they have been researching for--"

"Immediately... how long was I out?" Harry stretched, realizing that he felt hung over, like he did when he'd gotten too much sleep rather than just enough.

"Two and a half hours. The lingering effects of the valerian, combined with the heavy food you consumed at lunch seem to have produced a rather more intense soporific effect than we had planned."

"Great. Okay. So do they need us still or can we go home now?"

"Again, I do think we should consult with--"

Harry walked past Bob and out into the living room. Xander and Spike were huddled over a large magic book and, when they looked up, Xander blushed bright red and Spike made a low, growling sound.

"What's the--" Harry wobbled and put his arm on the back of the sofa, and when his hand brushed

Xander's back, he saw--felt-- "I didn't wake up," he said finally, and backed up into Bob, who stepped aside too late to avoid having Harry step through him. Harry shuddered, even though he couldn't actually really feel him.

"Fuck." He turned around and Bob shook his head.

"The amnesia effect would appear to be limited in your case."

"My fault," Xander said, and Harry glanced at him and looked away.

Harry remembered Xander's hand on him, and turned to look at Bob. "You were there. And you-- and I sound like Dorothy."

"More like Toto," Spike said, eyes flashing gold.

"I experienced what you did, through your eyes, Harry. What you felt was the combined effect of Xander's manipulation and the imagery provided by your subconscious."

Manipulation? Bob sounded cold, clinical, and Harry wondered if that was for his benefit or Xander's, or

maybe just that Bob was disgusted at what he'd felt--what Harry could now remember, even if parts of it were a little fuzzy, like a dream, or something that had happened to someone else.

"So I was right and I wasn't going to wake up if you hadn't...."

"We tried, Harry, through several more conventional means. But your condition persisted for several hours after the others outside had... settled down and we were--I was--concerned."

"Well, thanks. I mean, for not leaving me there."

"Don't mention it," Xander said, and his sideways glance at Spike suggested that was more of a warning. And that was fine. Harry had no plans to bring it up, ever again.

Harry shook himself and went over to the kitchen to see if there was any coffee in the pot. There was, and he helped himself to a mug of it, feeling like he might as well make himself at home at this point, seeing as how he'd had his host give him a handjob. He drank down half the mug of coffee and poured

out some more, realizing that, from the state of the bed and his clothing, someone--probably Xander--had cleaned him up afterwards.

He walked back out into the living room and forced himself to stand in front of the table and look them in the face. "So Bob says this worked. How come I didn't see this demon we're after?"

"This demon *we're* after," Spike said, not looking up from his book. He turned to Xander, completely ignoring Harry. "The Wizard goes back where he came from, yeah?"

Xander sighed. "Spike, we talked about this. We need him to--"

"Bollocks. Know what's doing this. Now we kill it. You and me."

"It's not that simple, Spike. We can't even be sure that--"

"Hey--look, you want me out, I'm gone." Harry turned toward the door and Bob stood in his way.

"Dresden."

"Bob. Get in the bag."

Bob shook his head and put his hands on his hips.

"Be reasonable. We must remain to assemble the necessary spells to defeat this demon."

"What demon? I didn't even see it. The vampire's got a coven of witches, right?"

Bob stood his ground, and Harry sighed. They both knew that he hadn't really made it an order, and at this point, he wouldn't.

"Harris saw it," Spike said, and Harry turned back around to look at him, expecting to see his ugly face, but instead he looked like he was back in control. "The bloody thing comes out to play while the sleepers are rutting. It's got a hideaway over in Lakeview."

"How do you--"

"We scryed for it while you were out. Harris here's been learning from the witches, and it appears the ghost's a conduit, amps up the power."

Bob turned to him and frowned. "We used some of your... emission as trace, assuming that the demon's presence would have a magnified presence, having driven you to, er--"

"Yeah, good thinking. So that, um, worked and you know where this thing is? You know what it is and how to kill it?"

"Yeah. Done with the exposition, Wizard. Let's move on to the killing." Spike clapped his hands together and Xander leaned over the book, rubbing at his ruined eye. He looked tired. Even Spike looked a little frayed around the edges, although he also looked like if someone didn't give him an appropriate target soon, he was ready and willing to start with Harry himself.

They'd taken the Jeep to the cemetery, driving past what looked like a bachannalian orgy that was several miles long. The bodies in motion were

oblivious to their presence, which made it even more disturbing somehow, being a voyeur when the voyees had no idea they were being watched, or even that they were out of their homes, fucking in the street. More than once, Spike had to drive around a tangled bunch of bodies in the middle of the road doing things he'd only ever seen pictured in some of Bob's more disturbing woodcuts about sex magic.

"It's been getting worse," Xander observed.

Spike nodded. "Started out with just a few here and there. Built up to this. Someone's getting greedy."

"So what is it?"

Spike just said, "Trouble," and refused to answer any more questions, saying only that Bob had a fix on it. And Bob would say only that they had several theories, one of which would be confirmed when they got a first-hand look at the creature responsible.

They reached a gated fence, and Spike stopped the Jeep and got out, doing something to the gate that

caused it to swing wide open without a key. And then they were driving inside the cemetery's roads. Spike seemed to know where he was going, and after a few minutes, he slowed down. "We get out here, take the rest on foot."

"Do they patrol here?" he asked, as Spike pulled the Jeep off the road and onto the grass, hiding it under a large, overhanging tree. It was dark enough that it wasn't obvious, but anybody actively looking for trespassers would probably spot it before long.

"Yeah, it's a risk that they find the wheels, but this place is too big to just walk where we're going, and we don't want to drive all the way up to the dam."

They apparently couldn't get a precise fix on the demon's location with their initial scry, so Xander said they should just "patrol" until they found something, which seemed like a familiar *modus operandi* to the home team, even though it didn't seem like much of a plan to Harry. Bob looked skeptical, but he kept his mouth shut and so Harry followed along.

Spike's mood had improved a bit with the certainty that they were going to find this thing and kill it, and he didn't even seem to mind that Harry had to hold Xander's hand to make this work. According to Spike, the same thing that made the sexsomniacs invisible to the naked eye also made the demon invisible--except to Xander.

Bob had suggested that they just link up arms, but Spike had pointed out, "Arm in arm only works if you're skipping like Dorothy and her friends, and poof or not, I ain't skipping with Mr. Wizard."

So Spike was on one end, Xander was in the middle, and Harry was on the other end. Bob was supposed to hold Harry's hand, except his hands slipped into--rather than around--Harry's own, sometimes slipping all the way into Harry's body as they quickly covered as much ground as they could. Harry'd argued that it'd be easier to just carry Bob in the bag, but Xander said they needed Bob out with them, saying something about some tree saying it was important.

Once Xander had started filling him in on the specifics of Hellmouth life, Harry had realized that Xander wasn't kidding about Hellmouth rules. It was like landing in a foreign country, and Wizard or not, it didn't all translate. According to Xander, the contact between Harry and Bob was happening at a subatomic level, which Spike said was "just so much sci fi bollocks," but Bob agreed that that was a quite reasonable description of the facts of the magic, if framed in a unique way. Harry honestly wasn't sure which of them was right. He was better at practice than theory and went on gut feel, and his gut said to go along with it, even if it meant Bob's hand sometimes disappeared past his and ended up somewhere in his pelvis.

He wasn't sure if it was weirder holding hands with Bob or with Xander, but he tried not to think about any of it, which was easy enough, at least at first, because he didn't know where they were going or what they were looking for.

"No worries, Wizard. Harris here's a demon magnet. We don't find it, it'll find him."

"Really?" Bob asked, looking intrigued.

"No," Xander said, at the same time Spike said, "Yeah," adding, "Use him as bait sometimes."

Xander pushed into Spike, pulling on Harry's hand as he did so, and Harry pulled back, annoyed, and dropped his hand.

"Sorry," Xander said, looking unrepentant, but he held his hand out again, and Harry took it, because when they came up on this thing, Harry wanted to see it.

They kept an eye out, but there was nothing, and Spike started to get impatient, picking up speed until Harry found himself having to jog to keep up.

And then Spike started moving even faster, fast enough that, after ten minutes or so at a near dead run, Xander very suddenly stopped, breaking the chain and throwing Spike and Harry forward on either side of him.

Spike managed to come to a graceful halt a half-step ahead of Xander, but Harry was thrown to his knees.

"Oi, what the hell was that?"

"That was me saying slow the fuck down, okay?"
Xander had bent over at the waist, his hands on his thighs, and he was red-faced and panting. Harry was breathing hard, too, being in decent shape, but not a vampire or a sprinter.

"Want to kill this thing, not take a sodding stroll through the park."

"Yeah, well I want to get there in one piece, ideally without falling on my ass."

"Padded well enough, ain't it?" Spike shot back, and then blinked as if he belatedly heard himself.

But it was too late to apologize, because Xander had already pulled himself upright and, giving Spike a wide berth, started walking on, moving deeper into the cemetery in the direction they'd been headed.

Spike waited until Xander was almost out of sight before starting after him, muttering to himself and kicking at the closely cropped grass with his heavy boots.

Harry shrugged and followed, keeping back and watching his feet. Xander was right; there were tree roots and he couldn't see much even going slowly, and, without the certainty of Spike's night vision, Harry felt more than a little wary.

Up ahead, Xander finally stopped walking and leaned up against a crypt, waiting there as Spike came up alongside him.

Harry watched as they talked, but the conversation was clearly not going well, and Harry shook his head, deciding they were both idiots and he was a bigger fool for following them.

The sun had risen that morning just an hour after Harry had woken up from their little experiment, and Xander had been on the phone when he got out of the shower, making plans and doing whatever it was he needed to do about his job. Harry'd watched as Spike watch Xander with lust in his eyes while Xander talked to his boss about state of "the site," assuring the guy that yes, he'd be back soon--maybe even later in the week.

When Xander had finally set the phone down, Spike moved into his arms, wrapping himself around Xander and putting his hands on Xander's ass, until Xander seemed to remember they weren't alone and knocked Spike's hands away. Spike hadn't seemed to care, or maybe he just wanted to prove something, because he looked over at Harry and then put his hands right back, sliding them into Xander's back pockets and leaning in to whisper something in Xander's ear, drawing Xander close enough to him that their pelvises ground together. When they pulled away from one another, Harry could see they were both hard, and he'd looked away, but not before Spike caught him looking.

They'd both disappeared into the bedroom for a good hour after that and, when they came back out again, they were both in a better mood.

Spike had kept a smug expression on his face as he'd continued to research the demon while Xander just looked content as he made breakfast, or dinner, or whatever meal it was at seven a.m. on vampire time.

Watching them joke over their breakfast, with Spike drizzling blood on his eggs while Xander put ketchup on his, Harry couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have that, since he'd been pretty much batting zero in the long-term relationship department for awhile now.

But the envy hadn't lasted long, since their post-coital mood started fading later that afternoon, when they got into an argument about whether Xander could go out with Harry and kill their demon during the day, getting a jump on it and preventing it from initiating another round of what Xander called, "the neighborhood cluster-fuck." Spike said absolutely not, not without him there making sure Xander didn't get his head bashed in, and Xander continued to plead his case, getting more and more pissed off as Spike wouldn't budge.

And so they'd ended their second meal of the day with a heated argument that was ostensibly about Xander's idea, although Harry decided about halfway through that it was really about something else and the idea was just an excuse or something.

Xander left the table in a huff and got back on the phone, making a series of calls that ended in a long conversation with some guy named Giles in London. That call lasted over an hour, with Spike getting more and more restless as Xander had to fill in the blanks about what had been going on since their last conversation, which this Giles guy apparently didn't remember but had recorded somewhere. Xander kept stopping every few words to answer the guy's questions until finally Spike grabbed the phone out of Xander's hand and said, "Rupert, shut up and listen," and filled him in on where they were in blunt terms that suggested familiarity, but without the deference Xander had showed to the guy.

After that, Xander and Spike had seemed to come to some sort of agreement again and Xander left the apartment to run errands, while Spike took a few books and holed up in their bedroom to sleep until sundown.

Harry'd gone outside for a short walk around the neighborhood, ending up at a coffee shop, where he watched people going about their day, oblivious

to what had been going on each night. He wondered how many of the women had been impregnated by their neighbors, and how many of them were going to come back from the doctor in the next few months with even worse news-- disease and death coming from their anonymous, unprotected nocturnal sex romps.

By the time he'd come back to the apartment, he was depressed and caffeinated. He tried to get back into the Pratchett novel, since Spike refused to let him in on the research and had again hidden the books he'd been consulting. Harry thought about looking for them, since he figured the vampire slept pretty deeply, but then he remembered Spike insisting that Harry had done his part and knew all he needed to know, and how, if Harry didn't shut up about it, Spike'd send him back to Chicago by small parcel post.

Xander had thankfully returned a few hours later with more food--pizza, this time. After they ate, Xander joined Spike in the bedroom for that nap, and Harry decided to follow their lead. Even though his sleep schedule was way off and he'd had coffee,

he was a little tired, and passed out quick enough. Bob had gone into his skull to think, so he had nobody to talk to anyhow, and all thoughts of calling up Murphy ended when he realized he had no idea where to begin, and she'd just get pissed off because she'd know he was keeping secrets again.

Harry'd woken up to the sound of Spike and Xander going at it again--their bedframe making a rhythmic squeak and dull thump as it hit the wall.

And somehow, that all had led them here, to the--what--third fight of the day?

Spike suddenly tipped his head back and roared at the sky like some sort of wild animal, and Harry noticed that Xander stood his ground and just shouted back at him. Harry wondered if they even cared about scaring off their prey, or if they'd just forgotten all about that, too caught up in their fight to think about those other people who had gone to go to sleep tonight innocent and were going to wake up tomorrow with no memory of being raped.

Harry frowned as the image from his dream came back to him--nothing too clear, but the gist of it was clear enough.

"They really are quite the pair, aren't they?"

"Pair of what's my question." Harry climbed to his feet, brushing the cut grass from the front of his jeans and wiping his hands on his jacket. His knees were wet and, now that they'd stopped and he'd gotten a good look around, he felt a bit chilled. Lakeview looked like a park, with trees and grass, but they were in a cemetery populated, according to Spike, with over fifty different demon clans and an assortment of hungry vampires. And he was standing alongside a ghost while a vampire and a carpenter had a pissing contest.

The whole scenario had a surreal feel about it that made him wonder if maybe he was dreaming and would wake up and discover he had a nice, normal life somewhere, with two point five kids and a house in the suburbs. He nodded to himself, liking that image, but then realized that he couldn't even begin to fit Bob into that picture, and, to be honest,

he had a hard time fitting himself in that picture either.

Harry moved in a little closer to where Xander and Spike were still arguing, and Bob followed, not having much choice.

Rather than calming Xander down or making up with him, Spike's body language clearly said, "Fight," and Xander seemed to be picking up on Spike's tension and was flinging it right back at him, magnifying it until Harry could see Spike shiver as he danced on the balls of his feet, circling around Xander like he was looking for a way in--a weakness he could exploit. It was almost funny--the slight figure shouting at the larger one, taunting Xander with insults that sounded rehearsed and empty of any actual malice. Xander seemed to give as good as he got, and Harry could only half-follow the argument as it ranged over what sounded like the entire history of their relationship, with both of them mentioning the names of several girls in passing.

It was like watching one of those nature specials, actually, where the males butted heads or snapped at each other with oversized claws while a calm, British voice talked about mating displays.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

"Huh?"

"You seem distracted," Bob observed.

Harry pointed at Spike and Xander.

The broad gestures of Xander's arms punctuating his words were pretty clear, and when Xander's finger jabbed at Spike's chest, Spike just stepped back and then his arms started pointing and jabbing, and Harry was pretty sure that soon, somebody was going to take a swing at somebody, and he wondered if it was worth reminding them that they still had a demon to kill.

"They're going to kill each other. And we've got a demon to catch."

"I believe we ought to let this run its course," Bob said, adding, "If only because it's entertaining. And I

suspect that they'll be of no use until after they've purged this nonsense from their system."

"Maybe."

"Dresden, they wouldn't thank you for intervening."

"I just don't get it. What's this about?"

"Male aggression, weeks worth of unresolved tension brought about by a puzzle neither of them can solve alone. I suspect very little of it has to do with you, if that's your worry."

"No, I mean, yeah. I don't think I did them any favors last night. But I know this isn't about me. Do they even like each other? I just don't get why they're still together."

"Sexual compatibility, perhaps? Desperation for another warm body with whom to share the long hours between sunset and sunrise--or the reverse in Spike's case. I imagine it takes a very unusual character to stay with a vampire, even one with a soul. Long term relationships of any kind are often fraught with difficulty. It's a wonder anyone freely

stays with anyone for long, even as we can't help but be drawn to the romantic image of forever."

"Yeah. I guess sometimes, even if you can walk away, you can't."

"Hmm. And perhaps even if you can, you ought not to."

Harry leaned back against a tree and watched as, all of a sudden, the swing he'd been expecting finally came. It was Xander who threw the first punch, though it didn't connect, since Spike caught his arm easily and forced it down and around Xander's back, pushing up against him as he walked Xander back into the crypt.

Xander's back hit the wall, his arm trapped behind him, and Harry watched as Xander went still, no longer struggling, and tipped his head to the side, baring his throat.

"Will you look at that."

"Submission behavior, allowing the vampire to reassert his dominance." And there was his British narrator.

Harry didn't argue, but he wasn't really sure Bob was right. Yeah, sure, Spike was doing the biting and Xander was being bitten, but it looked to him like Xander had Spike right where he wanted him, and it seemed like it was Xander who was always walking away, making Spike follow and beg for forgiveness.

But hey--whatever worked.

From a distance, it might've been a kiss, but Xander's body tensed and his unpinned arm came around Spike's body to Spike's neck, holding Spike's head in place against him as Spike drank him down. Spike didn't seem to need any encouragement, and the embrace lasted long enough that Harry wondered if Spike was going to lose it and drain him, and if maybe Bob was wrong about not intervening.

But finally, Spike pulled away from Xander's neck and moved in to kiss him on the mouth, and that kiss lasted a long while--long enough that Harry wondered if they were going to end up fucking right there. But it finally wound down and, when they broke apart, Xander said something softly to Spike

that had Spike nodding, head bent and eyes cast toward the ground.

Spike pulled out a cigarette and lit up, hanging back where he was, still in the shadows under a large, spreading tree, and Xander retraced his steps and came over to where Harry and Bob were waiting.

"You okay?" Harry asked, even though he could see Xander was fine.

"I'm good. It's good. We just..." Xander shrugged, and Harry noticed he was flushed rather than pale, and he had a smear of blood on his lower lip that he didn't seem to notice.

Harry nodded, not really getting it but hoping that it was over for now and they could get down to business. "So do we have any idea of where this thing is? I mean, how big is the cemetery, anyway?"

"Two hundred and eight-five acres." Xander brought his hand up to his mouth and touched his lower lip and then shrugged, licking the blood off of it.

"What--and you figured we'd just cover that territory on foot and--what--hope we bumped into it?"

"Bloody hell, should've thought of that," Spike said, coming up on them and tossing his cigarette butt to the ground. "Knew we should've let the Wizard plan this."

"Spike's being sarcastic, in case you can't tell."

"Plan is, Harris here'll draw it out and then we kill it. Dam's this way." Spike gestured vaguely and Harry sighed.

"How far that way?" Harry asked. "In human terms."

"Not far," Xander said, not sounding too sure of that.

Harry braced himself and nodded, and when Xander offered his hand again, Harry took it, but not before checking to see if Spike was going to cause trouble. Spike's eyebrow raised, but he didn't say anything, so Harry figured they'd come to some sort of truce.

After five minutes of walking that way--at a nice, steady, human-friendly pace--Harry said, "Look, it sounds like we're going in this blind--"

"Half-blind," Xander said, and squeezed his hand--not hard, but with a warning.

"Sorry. Look, I just mean maybe we should--"

"Scry, scry again?" Xander asked in a sing-song voice, and Spike chuckled.

"Yeah, maybe. I mean, if we want to catch this thing before sunrise...."

"If we need to, we will," Xander said. "But--and not to put too much stock in Spike's demon magnet theory--I don't think we'll need to. I've got a feeling about this."

Harry nodded and kept walking. Xander was a strange guy, but somewhere along the way, Harry'd decided that he trusted Xander's gut the way he trusted his own.

"Hear that?" Spike said.

"Uh..."

Xander laughed. "It's a flood control dam. No flood means not much water, but it can hold back 80 million gallons."

They kept on walking until they got to the point where they could actually get on the dam, which was lit with floodlights--appropriate, under the circumstances.

Spike busted through the gate that was designed to keep them out, and he led the way forward onto the walkway at the top of the damn. Harry looked down, fighting a sudden wave of vertigo.

"Five hundred feet across, sixty feet above grade, thirty below," Xander said, not looking a bit uncomfortable as they walked towards the middle of it.

"You build these things?" Harry asked, trying not to think about it. Looking straight out, they had a good view of Lake Erie.

Xander shook his head. "Just interested. I read a book about it after we moved here. The dam was probably overkill, disrupting the natural ecosystem."

Harry gave to Greenpeace, but he didn't know much about ecosystems beyond thinking that disruptions to anything natural just opened the way to chaos, and that was never a good thing. He let himself look down again, wondering how the hell they were going to find one small demon in such a large landscape, but then Bob pointed, and Harry followed the line of his finger to a spot most of the way down the wall, to where there was a darker area in the otherwise monochromatic grey of concrete. Harry watched the spot, trying to see what Bob had, and all of a sudden Xander squeezed his hand again and Harry saw it--a glowing, flickering light down there, set into the wall.

Xander leaned in and whispered something in Spike's ear, and Spike nodded and made a series of gestures that suggested that he and Xander had something of a code. Xander nodded and kissed Spike, and then turned to Harry.

"We go down the steps here. Spike's going to grab it, then the rest'll be up to you and Bob."

Spike led the way, breaking into the door in the tower structure and then, once they were inside, breaking the lock that opened out into the access stairs. They went down the first flight and stepped off onto the landing that led to the second flight of metal stairs and looked down. The glowing, flickering light was still there, and they started down the second flight. It was hard to be quiet, and he wondered when the demon was just going to make a break for it, and what they were going to do when it did, but Xander and Spike seemed unconcerned and just kept moving down.

Spike stopped on the bottom stair and held still, holding a hand up, signalling, "Wait."

And then Xander shouted, "Now!" and dropped Harry's hand just as Spike darted forward with Xander in tow. Spike pulled back, just as suddenly, and he was holding onto... nothing.

But the nothing seemed pretty big, considering that Spike was being shaken by it and was shaking it right back with a wild smile on his face, his eyes flashing golden as his face changed, showing off the demon. Xander was still clutching tightly to Spike's hand.

"What the hell is it? Where is it?" All Harry could see was a light hanging in the air, and even that was somehow blurry.

Xander brushed against him and Harry blinked, as the nothing suddenly turned into something-- something that was large and grey and somewhat shapeless. At its center, where a stomach should've been if it were human, it glowed and pulsed and somehow, the glow made it uglier, defining its lack of shape. It was almost like it was melting, faceless and lumpy, but it was solid and heavy, if Spike's struggle with it was any indication, and Harry knew

he wasn't alone in feeling repulsed by it if the look on Xander's face was anything to go on. Spike, on the other hand, looked pleased, like a fisherman who'd caught an unusually big one and was already thinking of hanging it above his fireplace.

"How do we kill it?" he asked as Spike struggled to hold it, dangling it over the railing of the fence and threatening to drop it. The grey thing went from quietly pulsing and struggling to letting out a piercing wail as Spike shook it, hard, and the sound drowned out Xander's answer, although Harry could see Xander mouth, "Bob."

Bob bit his lip and looked at the creature and then at the air in front of him and then began to write on the air in front of him, the letters and symbols hanging there and glowing strangely, set against the night sky. Harry recognized some of it immediately, at least in theory. It was a simple incantation--a "be gone" sort of thing, specific to whatever it was in Spike's grasp. Harry let his wand drop down into his hand and held it out towards the creature, noticing that Bob was holding onto his wand hand--or trying to--mingling their bodies at that subatomic level.

"Now, Dresden," Bob said. "In four-four time, if you please."

"In four-four... right." Harry took a deep breath and braced himself for the expected wash of energy that the words would invoke, wondering if Bob was kidding about the time signature and then figuring he might as well assume Bob was serious. He started chanting, focusing on the words and the beat and the grey thing that was thrashing around shrieking, while hoping like hell that Bob had got it right.

"Erie quench incendia quod exsisto effectus inermis.
Erie somniculouse incendia quod exsisto effectus
inermis. Shabriri briri iri ri"

The thing in Spike's hand howled, and Xander nodded and said, "Again."

"Erie quench incendia quod exsisto effectus inermis.
Erie somniculouse incendia quod exsisto effectus
inermis. Shabriri briri iri ri."

Spike edged forward and Xander nodded once more, and Harry chanted louder, "Erie quench

incendia quod exsisto effectus inermis. Erie somniculouse incendia quod exsisto effectus inermis. Shabriri briri iri ri." At the last, "ri," following his gut, he thrust the glowing drumstick into the glowing middle of the creature, ignoring the way his hand felt sliding into the thing--like putting his hand in warm mud that clung and sucked at his fingers as he pulled his hand back out again. The drumstick wanted to stay embedded, but he pulled hard at it, glad that Spike had hold of the creature's neck--or what passed for a neck--as it thrashed and undulated and suddenly grew brighter--so bright that Harry shut had to shut his eyes as the thing screamed out another high-pitched sound that ended in a gurgle, like running water rushing over rocks.

Harry opened his eyes as he felt Xander squeezing his hand again, hard, but--

"I can't see," he shouted over a new sound--like roaring water. He didn't know where the sound was coming from and gripped Xander's hand tightly in his own while shoving his wand into the front of his pants so he could grab hold of what turned out to

be Xander's jacket with his other hand. Bob was still in the bag hung over his shoulder, and he was reassured by the weight of it against his side.

"It's temporary. We got it," Xander shouted back, wafting warm breath against his cheek as he leaned in so Harry could hear him over the noise of the water. "Spike said this might happen. Hold on. I'm going to turn around and then we're going up. Watch your step and hang on."

Harry nodded and felt Xander start to turn. Harry kept hold of Xander's jacket and then basically flattened himself against Xander's back as Xander started back up the metal stairs with slow, unsteady steps. Harry assumed Xander was following Spike, even though Harry couldn't see or hear him.

A cracking sound loud just above them made Harry stumble and miss a step, falling forward onto Xander's back. Xander stopped and steadied him, and then there was the sudden, sharp smell of ozone in the air, and he jumped again as the sound repeated, this time with a rolling rumble that he hoped like hell wasn't thunder. The sounds were

too close together, and he was too aware that they were standing on metal stairs.

He tipped his head up, trying to see something, but he was still blind, and he had to turn his face back down when a heavy rain began to fall, hard waves of it slapping against his cheeks and soaking through his jacket. The stairs, already difficult to walk up blind, turned slick and dangerous, and he struggled to keep hold of the ice cold railing under his hand.

"Not where I want to die, not in Cleveland," he said to himself, wondering if Bob was still there, even though he could feel the bag slung over his shoulder and knew Bob was safe inside--well, as safe as a doomed spirit trapped inside of a skull could be. Actually, of the two of them, Bob was probably better equipped to take a dive off the side of a sixty foot dam. "I have laundry, too," he added after a moment, and ahead of him, he heard Xander laugh.

"This isn't funny," he muttered, annoyed at his own panic. The rushing, roaring sound of a moment ago had faded back as the rain began to fall, but the

now constant sound of rain falling against concrete and metal was a loud rushing sound in his ears, making the blindness worse, especially when he again heard and smelled the sharp scent of lightning striking nearby, somehow missing them.

"We're not going to die," Xander shouted back to him, and Harry nodded and kept climbing, wondering how far they still had to go.

And then he was bumping into Xander's back and realized that they must have gotten to the top, since Xander had stopped moving.

"Can Spike see anything?" he asked.

"Yes," Xander said, and Harry felt almost giddy with relief at that. He'd figured Spike could see, since Xander was following him up the stairs, but he also knew that Spike had better senses and better balance, and probably could've walked up even if he was blind, too. But at least, with Spike still having his eyes, there was a good chance they'd get out of this alive and in one piece.

They had stepped onto reassuringly flat ground in a single-file line, and though he could have let go of Xander's back and just taken his hand now that they weren't on the laddered stairs, he didn't really want to let go while the rain was still coming down in the solid blackness.

Anxiety made him keep his arms around Xander's waist, and his fingers brushed against Spike's body as they moved. Xander was pressed just as tightly to Spike, clinging to his back, and that made him feel a little better, enough so that, after a few minutes of walking, he backed up a little and gave Xander a little space, which made walking that much easier, with fewer awkward stumbles. They started to walk faster, getting into a rhythm, with Spike turning them occasionally and Xander echoing Spike's directional commands, "Left, now right, few more feet," until the terrain changed and they were stepping off of hard concrete and onto much softer grass, made softer, still, with rain.

And they slowed back down again, as their footing became more labored and Harry struggled to stay

on his feet, tripping over things even though Xander was calmly moving forward.

Harry shut his eyes as he felt the brush of wet leaves on his face. He thought about landslides and mudslides and bodies found weeks later, bloated and decomposing and shivered.

"We're okay, Harry. Just keep calm. Spike's just going to lead us to the road and bring the car around to pick us up," Xander offered, and his voice sounded sure and steady, confident, like nothing at all was wrong.

"Why--" Harry started, but a laugh hiccuped out of him and he had to swallow before continuing, "Why the hell aren't you panicking?"

"Oh, trust me, I'm panicking. I am so very much with the panic. I just have the whole process refined to an art form, courtesy of Sunnydale High, where the curriculum includes Stop, Drop, and Roll, How to Stake a Vampire in Five Easy Lessons, and Apocalyptic Studies 101, which really should be a two-semester course, because it takes a few before you get the hang of it. Also, once you've done the

whole, 'I'm blind!' routine, people just start to roll their eyes and say, whatever, whiny pirate man, just get a fucking grip, and they have a point, because if you're not dead, what the hell are you complaining about? So yeah, not dead, but I'm definitely panicking on the inside, where it's dry and toasty and there are marshmallows. Come and join me in my panic. I have Smores!"

Xander suddenly stopped walking and Harry heard Spike ask, "Okay, love?" and then there was a sound like kissing, and then, "Going to get the car. Stay here and I'll be right back."

And then he heard Spike moving away, and Xander turned around in Harry's arms so that they were sort of hugging. Harry moved to pull back, but he couldn't bring himself to let go. His fingers were sort of stiff and even the thought of being alone made him twist his hands into Xander's jacket harder. But must have felt the same way, because he hung onto him and held him close. "Look, it's almost over. Spike's going for the car now. We've just got to stay here while he gets it, okay? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I'm good," Harry lied. Xander's body was solid and warm, though his clothing was wet and cold. Xander was shorter than he was and broader and, standing close, Xander was tucked up under Harry's chin, a comfortable, solid presence grounding him as the rain continued to fall.

"Some weather we're having, huh?" he asked after a minute.

Xander chuckled and Harry felt Xander's hand come up along his back and pat him. He let his own hands rest on Xander's broad back, leaning in and resting a little, trusting Xander to hold him up, since he wasn't sure his legs were up to the task. His limbs were trembling from the adrenalin rush, and he felt like he might just pass out.

"We're fine, Harry. We killed it, and this is just a storm."

"I can't see," he said, not that that was news. He just needed to say it, somehow, as if maybe that might change things.

Xander nodded, his cheek rough against Harry's chin. "Spike's pretty sure the blindness should wear off in about an hour. Don't worry," he said again, and Harry wondered if maybe Xander was talking to himself.

"Pretty sure, but not certain," Harry asked.

"Very sure," Xander said, not sounding very sure.

"Don't worry. We'll be okay."

"If you say so. I don't even know what the hell I killed back there. I did kill it, right? It's dead?"

"It's dead. As for what it is, Spike says it was an--um, well, I don't know that it has a name, actually, but it was whatever happens when a Shabriri and an Incubus do the wild thing and spawn on the Hellmouth."

"A hybrid?"

Xander laughed, and his laugh was a rumble against Harry's body, reassuring. "Yeah, I think the P.C. term is bispecies. Not that it matters, since you gutted it, and speaking of that, is that a drumstick in your pants, or are you happy to see me?"

Harry started to pull back and Xander kept his arms in place, not letting him.

"Calm down. Kidding. Anyway, I figure killing the demon's not P.C., although the argument could be made that sending out waves of demonic lust and forcing innocent people to have random sex acts with strangers in public isn't all that P.C. either, so six of one, half a dozen of the other, and it's entirely possible that these particular demons have their own regional code, in which case it might actually be rude not to gang rape humans and give them amnesia with a side of hysterical blindness."

"Wait--you're saying this blindness is psychosomatic?"

Xander shook his head. "I'm both hysterical and blind, so yes and no. Spike actually thinks it's a side-effect of the Shabriri side of the family. They're known for blinding people who drink water at night, which makes no sense in my book, because sometimes, you wake up in the middle of the night and you need a glass of water, and there isn't always a handy sink around, but then again, this

isn't my book, and I should probably just shut up now before I say something stupid."

Xander's words were tumbling out fast, and Harry thought maybe he could finally hear the panic setting in, so he hugged Xander a little tighter and, oddly enough, a little more in control knowing that Xander wasn't as in control as he seemed to be. "So this Shabriri hybrid--"

"Shabrincubus. That's Shabriri and Incubus, and since it doesn't have an official name, and we just killed it, I think we're owed naming rights. Or we could call it Incubriri, which is harder to say, so I'm going to go with Shabrincubus."

"Shabrincubus, fine, right. So that one thing--"

"Shabby," Xander said with a nod. "For short."

Harry sighed, because Xander was apparently calming down. "So you think Shabby--"

"Or we could call it Inky. Let's see what Spike says before we make it official."

Harry suspected he knew what Spike was going to say, but he let it go, since Xander seemed to be using the words to calm back down again, and Harry noticed it was working. The tense set of Xander's shoulders was relaxing as he talked, and Harry felt some of his own tension leaving, even though they were still standing in a cemetery in the rain, soaked to the skin and still very blind.

"So you think Shabby was single-handedly responsible for all of it? There isn't like a clan of them we've got to kill?"

"The books suggested that Shabririr and Incubi work alone, and even if it turns out Shabbies don't, we're in no shape to take on the rest of them, so I say we call this a win for now."

Harry heard the sound of a car engine, and then Xander was pulling away from him and turning in the direction of the sound. Harry forced himself to let go, reassured by the fact that Xander was still holding onto his hand.

"Alright?" he heard Spike ask, softly, and then another kissing sound and then Xander was urging him forward, presumably led on by Spike again.

They came to a stop and Harry held out his free hand and felt the Jeep, reassured by the hard metal under his hands. He felt Xander step up in front of him and then he gripped the frame and got in himself. This, at least, was easy. He could get into the back with his eyes closed, since he'd slept in it often enough. He leaned forward and held onto the passenger seat from behind, feeling stupid but wanting to know that Xander was still there. Spike turned the car on and drove them out of there, and Harry was glad it was a Jeep and not something else because the rain had made the ground wet enough that the tires sunk in until they got back on the road.

Harry let himself relax a little and then he flinched when he felt a cold hand touch his. "Just me, Wizard. We're home." Spike's voice was soft and Harry realized the car had stopped.

"Must've fallen asleep."

"Come on, step down one step, then forward."

Spike had taken his hand and Harry let Spike help him out of the Jeep. He felt around for the bag and realized that it was still on his arm, never having left his side.

"Where's Xander?" he asked, even though he could hear him--a third set of steps near him, off to his... right?

"I'm here, Harry. I've got Spike's other hand. We're good."

"Oh, okay. Good."

"Step up, and then another two steps here."

Harry followed Spike's lead, and then they were all inside, hearing the front door shut, and he felt Xander's body brush up against his and sighed, bumping arms with him.

"Up the stairs, now. Hand on the rail. Got it?"

"Yeah." A dry apartment staircase in the dark, he could handle, even though he had another moment of panic when Spike let go of his hand and he was

suddenly surrounded by darkness and alone. He felt a hand on his back and stiffened, but the hand rubbed up and down, and he knew it was just Xander. He gripped the bag slung over his shoulder, holding Bob close as he went slowly up the stairs, and Xander kept his hand there, on the small of Harry's back, as he climbed up behind him.

"Now in the door, careful, a little more, now stop."

Harry stopped, a little annoyed that he was having to take orders from Spike, and more than a little freaked when he felt Spike's cold hands pulling at his bag. He held on, and Spike sighed.

"You're wet--the both of you. You need these clothes off, get warmed up. C'mon, no need for false modesty, Wizard. I've seen the goods and you've got nothing I want."

"Hey!" he protested, but next to him, he heard Xander laugh and when Spike tugged at the bag again, Harry let him take it. He heard Spike setting it down somewhere nearby and then come back over to him, and he held his hands out at his sides as Spike helped him get his jacket off and then his

shirt. It took two of them to work the wet fabric down his arms and Spike pulled hard when it stubbornly clung to his body.

"Now the pants, Dresden. Off with them. I'll not have you dripping on the rugs."

And that was strange. Spike sounded more like Bob than himself, although from the voice, it was clearly Spike talking. Next to him, he heard Xander whisper, "Mustn't dampen the rugs."

"Oi. Sod off."

"Look, I can manage."

Spike moved away and Harry got his jeans off and stepped out of his shoes, stripping off his soaked through socks and leaving them somewhere near the rest of his clothing, on the floor. He left his boxers on and stood there, shivering, hearing Xander laugh as Spike apparently started helping him undress. The process was clearly less efficient, as they were at it for a few minutes as Harry stood there dripping.

There was still more laughter and the wet slap of clothing hitting the hardwood floor, and then the wet sound of kissing.

And then Harry cleared his throat.

"Sorry. Forgot these." And Harry startled as he felt warm hands fumbling at his waist.

"Hey!"

"They're wet. Come on. I'm blind, right? Spike's making tea."

Harry sighed and lifted his hands away, letting Xander pull his boxers down because he couldn't really fight him, not being able to see him, and he figured what the hell. Xander had not only already seen everything, but he'd done what he'd done, and at this point, it'd be stupid to act like it was a big deal. It was more about being helpless than being naked anyway, and in that, they were pretty much equals.

"Hey, Bob, get out here," he said quietly once Xander moved away.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Just checking you were still okay."

"I'm fine, Dresden. Dry as a bone, in fact."

Harry heard the amusement in Bob's voice and smiled. "Very funny."

"I thought so. I'm afraid that your carryall is a bit on the soggy side, and liberally coated in mud. But William has been kind enough to offer me more comfortable accommodations for the trip back to Chicago."

"Good. That's good. So, uh, Xander and Spike--"

"I believe that Spike is getting you both some towels while Xander finds some suitable clothing for you both to wear."

"Oh. Good. I'm freezing here."

"Yes, you are liberally covered in goosebumps."

Harry shivered and rubbed at his arms. "At least we killed it, right?"

"We did indeed."

"Thanks for the spell, by the way. It might've been nice to have a little advance notice on what I was doing," he pointed out.

He could imagine Bob frowning. "Yes, well, I had several spells in mind and I might have shared them all with you, but there was little point until I saw what we were facing. Until then, I could only guess what might be an appropriate countermeasure."

"Well, quick thinking there. And speaking of seeing..."

"As I'm sure Xander informed you, the blindness is temporary--a form of defense mechanism from the creature you so manfully killed, much as a bee stings just before its final death."

"Nice trick."

Harry startled as something was dropped over his head, fabric falling onto his face. "Towel," Spike muttered, close by, and then, "Head down, Wizard."

Harry tipped his head down, as ordered, and let Spike rub the towel over Harry's head, drying his hair before moving down and toweling off Harry's body with quick, efficient motions. There were a pair of radiators just beside the door, and he'd already mostly air dried, but he appreciated the rub-down, not quite trusting himself to have done it without falling over.

"Thanks. Hey, I--" Harry blinked and then blinked again, seeing something other than complete darkness--light? "I think I can see something."

Bob spoke up, "William has gone to heat up some tea and it appears your vision should be restored soon. It would be a very bad thing to kill a demon only to be felled by something as uninspired as the common cold. I believe Xander is bringing you your clothing now."

Harry felt Xander's hand on his elbow and he let Xander lead him to the sofa. "One good thing about being at home is I know where all the furniture is, even in the dark."

"Thanks." Harry sat down. The leather sofa was cool against his bare skin. "Hey, maybe we should put on some clothes?"

Harry felt fabric hitting his lap. "Put these on."

"Thanks, Spike."

Harry put on the shirt and then the sweatpants. No underwear, but he could deal with that.

"Better. Thanks."

"Here. Drink this." Spike took his hand and closed it around a mug, holding on until he was sure Harry had it.

"What is it?" he asked, but he could smell it--a warm, sweet smell.

"Brandy. Warm you up a bit. Harris, drink up."

Harry held the mug steady in two hands and carefully brought it to his mouth, taking a sip. It went down warm and it was as sweet as it smelled.

"Thanks."

"Welcome. Sun's up in a few."

"Yeah?"

"We'll have our tea and turn in."

"Yes, Spike. Thank you Spike."

"Shut it, Harris."

Around the time he finished his tea, the hint of light had resolved into vague shapes, dark against light. And by the time he'd very carefully and awkwardly taken a piss and brushed his teeth, he could see the outlines of people and objects, hazy and dark and backlit with halos of light.

"Visions coming back online," he told Bob, feeling sleepy from the two glasses of brandy he'd had while Spike and Xander had their tea. Spike had put out cookies, too, and they'd had finished those off in lieu of a meal.

"I'm glad, Harry. I suggest you get some sleep."

"Yeah, I think I will. Goodnight, Bob."

"Goodnight, Harry."

Harry shut his eyes.

He opened his eyes and frowned, seeing Bob sitting at the edge of the bed.

"What?"

"Dresden, I wish to ask you something."

"Yeah?" Harry looked over at the dresser and saw Bob's skull on the pillow. And then Bob took his hand, and he pulled away. "What the--"

"You're asleep, Dresden. I've entered your mind, as before."

"I didn't say you could do that."

"No, you didn't, but I felt it was important to speak to you."

"Why? You couldn't talk while I was awake? What-- is this about the demon?"

"No, Harry." Bob shook his head and his hand plucked at the blanket, a strange sight, since Harry was used to Bob not touching anything.

"What is it?"

"Harry, we are each of us alone, trapped in our respective heads. And, more and more, I find that to be repugnant. Untenable."

"Bob, I--"

"No, Harry, please." Bob rested his hand over Harry's mouth, and Harry felt that--the soft, warm pressure of his fingers. "Please, Harry, let me say this, and then you're welcome to report me to the Council or give me away or whatever course you choose after you've heard what I have to say--after you've heard my offer."

"Wh--" Harry sat up a little and leaned back against the headboard. "Okay, so what's this offer?"

"Me," Bob said, softly. "I have very little else to offer, and even that is... inadequate."

"I'm still asleep, right? I mean, I'm asleep and dreaming this--you--this whole conversation." Harry drew his hand through his hair and across his face, feeling the roughness of stubble on his jaw. The dream--if it was a dream--was vivid. Bob's weight was dipping the bed slightly beside him, and he could feel Bob's hip pressing into his leg--real and solid and warm, like Bob was a living, breathing person instead of a ghost--vivid but insubstantial.

Bob tipped his head to the side and frowned. "Yes to the first and no to the second. You are asleep and dreaming, but I am very much here with you, and this conversation--and my offer--is entirely real."

"And you're what--offering yourself? What does that mean, exactly?"

Bob nodded. "Yes. As to the parameters of this offer, I can only say that what it means is entirely up to you."

"Up to me."

"Dresden, Harry... last night, I held you in my hand and you spilled your seed upon my fingers, and it was--I felt--I have no words, Harry. But it sparked something in me which I cannot and will not let pass without sharing with you."

"Bob, I don't get this--this sharing thing. I don't--"

"Harry, please do not pretend to ignorance. You are not that naive, nor am I that subtle, and I believe we know each other well enough to be honest."

"Bob, hang on a minute. I'm not being ignorant or naive or dishonest here. But last night--last night was... that was Xander's hand. I mean, that was Xander's hand, right? And that wasn't--it didn't mean anything, right? It wasn't personal. That wasn't about me and him, or about you and me. It was about catching a demon and saving those people out there, and I don't think I can--"

"Well, then you've made your decision--a decision I can and will respect." Bob turned away and Harry knew he'd fucked this up--had managed to say the wrong thing.

"Look, wait--I didn't say that. I didn't make any decision. That's what I'm saying here. Last night I was asleep, okay?"

"You are asleep now, Harry," Bob countered.

"Yeah, well last night was different."

"Harry, you are right, of course. Last night the enchantment required contact with another living being to lift you from sleep. Tonight, I am offering something else--something you clearly have no interest in pursuing, which is just as well."

"Bob, shut up, okay? Just let me think here a minute. You spring this on me and I'm supposed to have some idea of what to say, and I just don't. Give me... give me some time, okay?"

Bob's frown deepened, and Harry saw the hurt in his eyes, but there wasn't anything he could do about that right now.

He took several deep breaths and tried for calm before speaking again, and when he was ready, he reached out and grabbed hold of Bob's hand, half expecting his own to go right through, but instead,

he felt the warm, dry skin against his own, Bob's fingers curling around his palm and holding tight.

Harry sucked in a breath and just held on, shutting his eyes and concentrating, trying to pick out the words to not fuck this up. "So you're offering... something."

"Anything, Harry," Bob whispered, and Harry kept his eyes shut and felt Bob lift his hand and then bring it to rest on Harry's body, low on his belly.

"Okay..." he said, nodding. He let go of Bob's hand, and Bob left his hand there, unmoving, resting flat on Harry's belly. "Okay."

"Harry, so long as you are asleep, I can do this. I can touch you, should you want that. I can do more, or less."

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Bob, letting Bob's hand stay there. "What's with the more or less? Define the terms for me, so I know what I'm getting into here."

Bob bit his lower lip and started to take his hand away, but Harry reached out and stopped him, covering Bob's hand with his own again.

"I didn't say no."

Bob nodded. "All right, Harry. Less would be nothing at all, or simply companionship, a body with whom you might share a bed, at night, at your discretion, on those nights when you are otherwise unoccupied with your many female companions."

Harry didn't hear any resentment there, or disdain, and he nodded, seeing the sacrifice Bob was making.

"Okay, and the more?"

"More would be something more sexual in nature."

Harry looked down at their hands, at their fingers laced together so low on his belly that Harry knew Bob could feel him responding to the pressure there, and the soft sound of Bob's voice. Like it or not, his body was speaking for him.

"Okay, so what if we do this thing, more or less, and it doesn't work out," Harry asked.

"We do as we have always done, I suppose. We evolve, adapt, learn new ways of being."

"And you think that'll work? I mean, you saw them, going at it."

Bob snorted and looked put out. "Harry, I don't ask you to decide now. In fact, I don't think now is a good time for you to decide anything. I merely wished to put forward the proposition here and now. Yesterday, you opened yourself up to me and you remain open now. By tomorrow or the next night--by the time we're back home--you will be back to yourself again, as will I, and the opportunity--as well as what is left of my finite store of courage--will have been lost. I simply wanted to make my appeal now, while I could demonstrate."

And with that, Bob's hand moved slightly down--not enough to actually do anything, but enough to suggest what Bob might want to do.

Harry looked at Bob carefully, taking in the velvet and satin and silk--the clothing that Harry had only ever touched once, and then only for long enough to realize that he didn't want to live with Bob dead--really dead. And he knew that if he did have to decide now, he'd say yes, which might be a mistake, and he didn't want to make a mistake--not about this.

"Okay, look, I'll--like you said, I'll think about it. And I'll get back to you. Is that--is that okay? Can we do that?"

Bob nodded. "I can ask for nothing more. Please close your eyes, Harry."

Harry shut his eyes, and felt the softest press of lips against his own, and then they were gone, and he opened his eyes, and he was in the guest room, exactly as he'd left it.

He looked over at the dresser, where Bob's skull was still on that pillow, with Bob tucked away inside, hiding, although he knew Bob would argue that he was only allowing Harry to rest.

"I'm thinking about it," he said softly, knowing Bob wouldn't answer, but knowing he was listening.

"So you've got everything?" Xander asked, looking around the living room and back to Harry's small pile of bags.

Harry nodded. "Bags, Bob, and souvenirs. That's everything."

They'd woken up at sunset, and Harry had just finished packing up when Xander knocked and then came into the guest room. Bob was still in his skull, and Harry was still thinking.

"You ready to leave?" Xander asked, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah. Just about."

"Okay, well, if you're not in a hurry, Spike wanted to take you guys out."

"Out?"

"Yeah, y'know, see the sights, now that we can see the sights. If that's okay."

"He wants to take us out?"

"Yeah, you and Bob, me and Spike. On a little tour of Cleveland."

"Right. Me and Bob, you and Spike."

"Look, if you've got to leave--"

"No, that sounds... Hey, Bob, get out here. You wanna see the town?"

Bob appeared and turned to Xander, who told him about Spike's plan to squeeze in a little sightseeing while the night was young.

Bob's answer was, "I really should let Dresden decide," and he looked at Harry with a soft expression that made it clear that Bob might have said it was all up to him and he could have plenty of time to think about it, but he had no intention of

letting Harry forget that he was waiting--the question still stood between them.

"Yeah, well, I say we should go for it," Harry said, then realized what he'd said and added, "The tour, I mean."

"Of course, Harry," Bob said, and he was smiling, just a little, as was Xander.

A few hours later, they'd seen a few of Spike's favorite demon haunts, all of which Bob took in stride, even though he'd clearly never seen anything like it. The Hellmouth was strange--like some sort of Wild West for demons--unregulated and a little scary, but also exciting--thrumming with a kind of magic that Harry could see made Bob's mouth water.

And he tried very hard not to think about Bob's mouth.

They ended the tour just outside of the art museum.

"It's closed, Spike," Harry pointed out, and Spike just rolled his eyes and pulled out a set of keys,

dangling them in his hand while Xander looked on, apparently used to Spike's breaking and entering. Spike used the keys to open up the employee entrance, and Xander handed out flashlights.

They toured the facility, and Spike didn't even bother to whisper as he offered a running commentary on the art, pronouncing most of the stuff produced after his death, "bollocks" and "shite."

Xander just laughed and made assorted digs about punk posers, but the whole time, they didn't get into a single argument.

"So how are we not being arrested?" Harry asked at one point, standing in front of the Monet, which Bob really liked.

Xander laughed. "The Hellmouth, basically. Demons have a hand in just about everything here. It's possibly the only perk to living with the constant threat of the next big apocalypse hanging over our head. Well, that and the winters, which are just fabulous, if you like knee-deep snow drifts and black ice."

By the time they got to the gift shop, Spike was feeling expansive and he started to fill his arms with things--postcards and posters and, at one point, a shiny necklace which he said was perfect for that tree, which Harry still didn't get.

Xander stopped him when Spike started to unlock a cabinet that contained some really pricey reproductions and then insisted that Spike leave cash for the things he took. Spike argued--but it wasn't like any of their real arguments, and, back at the car, Spike handed him a tote bag--for Bob--and a t-shirt--also for Bob, who Xander said could do with a wardrobe change once in awhile. Harry didn't bother to point out that Bob's body was buried somewhere in England and his clothing was part of the whole ghost thing, because he was pretty sure Xander was joking.

And when they got back to Xander's place, Bob said, "Please shut your eyes, gentlemen," and they did. "Now open."

And Bob had somehow put on the t-shirt, wearing it under his velvet smoking jacket in place of his usual button-down shirt.

Spike laughed and Harry realized that they'd gotten through the whole tour without a single fight, and Bob kept looking at him as if he was noticing that, too, and he could read Bob well enough to know that he was storing that up as an argument he was prepared to make if Harry said something other than, "More."

Harry started up the Jeep, with Bob sitting in the seat beside him, the bag tucked under it again.

"Okay, so we're going to head out, now. If you need us again...." Harry left that blank, because, fun as it had been, he wasn't all that sure he ever wanted to come back.

But then Spike nodded and turned to walk back to the house, standing by the door and lighting up a cigarette. Xander kept standing by the Jeep as if he wanted to say something, and Harry waited. And then Xander leaned into the Jeep and pulled him

into a sudden, awkward hug, whispering, "Say yes" in his ear before clapping Harry on the back.

And then Xander was walking up the path to the door and saying something to Spike, who nodded and looked back at them before throwing his cigarette in the bushes and going inside.

Harry looked over at Bob to see if he'd heard, but Bob had gone back into his skull without a word, and Harry sighed and patted the bag beside him before pulling away from the curb.

It was a long ride home, and as he pulled the car onto I-90, he looked over at the empty seat beside him and frowned.

"Hey, Bob, get out here. We've got to talk."

Bob reappeared, looking at him for a moment before saying, "The connection between human intervention in the natural landscape and the resulting resettling of an entire demon population from the lake to the cemetery is intriguing, is it not?"

Bob didn't check to see if Harry was listening before continuing to expound at length on the implications of cross-species breeding, eventually broadening to incorporate a history of magical migration which lasted almost all the way to Chicago.

And for once, Harry didn't mind the lecture, since it left him with plenty of time to think, and by the time Bob stopped to draw a breath, Harry was ready for more.

The End