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Pairing: Spike/Xander (eventually)

Rating: This chapter, R, for language. In the future, who knows?

Disclaimer: We're not Joss

Warnings: none so far

Summary: Events begin post-Chosen, midway through AtS S5.
Comics are ignored.

El Cuento del Bucanero y del Vampiro

by

[Whichclothes](#) and [Emelye](#)

Part One

“Nuh-uh. No way. Send someone else.” Xander crossed his arms over his chest and glowered.

“But Xander—” Willow began.

“No way José. I just got back from Africa and I was finally getting used to the good old US of A again. I am *not* leaving the country.”

“But it’s just Tijuana. That’s, like, practically southern California, only more with the Spanish and cheap medications.”

“Yeah. And you do remember how stellar my performance was in Señora Guerrero’s class, right? You took AP Spanish. You go.”

Giles stepped between them. “As I have already explained, this requires, well, a man’s touch.”

Xander stomped over to the window and stood with his back to the rest of them, looking out at the winter-brown lawn. Despite the crappy weather, which had been quite a shock after Sunnyhell and then Africa, he liked Iowa. People were friendly and the demons were easy pickings and there were restaurants that served enormous steaks and huge piles of sausages. So maybe he didn’t picture himself spending the rest of his life here, but was a few more months too much to ask for?

With a heavy sigh, he turned back around, back to the roomful of faces gazing expectantly at him. Who made the rule that Slayers all had to be girls anyway? Couldn’t there have been just a few Y chromosomes thrown into

the mix to get him off the hook? Well, there was Giles, of course, but he claimed to be too old, and Andrew, who was currently hiding behind a very tall Slayer whose name escaped Xander at the moment. Andrew had a panic attack if anybody even mentioned Mexico to him; something about the First having approached him there. Robin Wood would have been perfect for this particular adventure, but he and Faith were off in Italy or Greece or somewhere, where, judging from the postcards Faith sent, they were doing a lot more lolling on beaches than hunting monsters.

Dawn walked over to him and smiled up at him. "You're perfect for this, Xan, now that you're all Mr. Universe and everything."

So, yeah. He'd lost his babyfat in Africa and he'd been working out. But he still knew flattery when he heard it.

"The eye," he said, pointing at the conspicuously missing body part. "It's gonna be weird with the eye."

"Naw," said Dawn. "It'll be part of your thing. Ooh! I know! You can be El Bucanero!" She bounced a little on her toes. "You can have, like, a swirly cape and a skull and crossbones on your leotard, and," she made a

breathless little squeally sound. "...and I'm going to go design your costume right now!"

Dawn ran off, followed by several of the Slayers. The rest of them gathered around Buffy and Giles and Willow to strategize. Xander was left all alone, and there was nobody to hear his plaintive little groan. "Leotard?"

Part Two

Spike had designs on drinking until his memory of the last six months was completely obliterated—right after he found himself a willing body to get a leg over. One aborted fuck on a desk does not a satisfied, recently re-corporealized vampire make, and as he figured it, he had a lot of long, ghostly nights to make up for.

"Well if that's all, I'll be off then."

"Just a minute, Spike," the Great Pouf called after him.

Spike stopped, pivoted on his heel and sneered. “I’d just as soon leave off the heartfelt farewell, if it’s all the same to you.”

Angel tossed a file folder on the desk. Spike’s eyebrow rose incredulously.

“You owe me,” Angel told him.

“Owe you!” Spike raged. “For *what?*”

Angel smiled smugly. “Use of the facilities and resources—” he ticked off.

Spike seethed. “I didn’t bloody ask to be dropped here!”

“—Not to mention services rendered for rescuing you from Pavayne—”

“Did you a bloody *favor*, mate! Can’t tell me you actually *wanted* that git—”

“*Spike.*” Angel cut him off before he hit his stride. *Wanker.* “I can’t send anyone else. The job’s in Tijuana. You can drink and sleep your way around Mexico as easily as you could here.”

“Who says that’s what I was planning? In case you’ve forgotten, you’re not the only *champion* in these parts anymore, *Angel*. Who’s to say I wasn’t off on some heroic mission?”

Angel didn’t dignify that with a response. Spike picked up the folder. There was a picture of a Mexican wrestler and a few other unsavory looking types inside.

“Already filled my quota of luchadors this month. Sorry.” Spike tossed the folder back on the desk and turned to leave.

“This isn’t wet works, Spike. You’re not killing luchadors. You’re going to be one.”

Spike stopped in his tracks and turned back. “The *hell* I am! Wrestling? There is no bloody way you’re getting me to nance around in a unitard and one of those *stupid* masks—”

Angel dropped a stack of thousand dollar bills on the desk.

Spike blinked. “I want decent lodgings.”

“You can take a car. *Not,*” he hastened to add, “the viper.”

Spike narrowed his eyes and dug in his heels. “The viper and nothing less than a four star establishment or you’ll not see me again for a score.”

Angel snorted in amusement. “Is that supposed to be a threat or incentive?”

Spike glared.

“Three stars and you’ll just steal the viper anyway.”

Spike considered the counter offer. “Done. An’ I’m going to need togs. Something...flash, yeah? Gotta make an impression after all.”

Angel pressed the intercom. “Harmony, please bring in Spike’s costume.”

“*Sure thing, boss!*” came Harm’s chipper voice, and was she *laughing?*

A moment later Harmony appeared in the doorway with

an upscale dry-cleaning bag on a hanger. Spike snatched it from her hand and tore through the wrapping.

It was flash, all right. The black leotard had silver stitching. On the back, in glittery silver embroidery was written, "*El Vampiro?* You were up all night coming up with that one, weren't you?"

Angel frowned. Spike snorted and pocketed the cash.

As he peeled out of the garage into the late afternoon sun, blessing the geniuses behind necrotinting, it occurred to Spike that he'd never actually found out what the mission was before agreeing to it. Cursing to himself he opened the folder on the passenger seat and read the dossier while the car swerved wildly.

With perfect clarity he knew, in that moment, Angel was having a good laugh at his expense.

"Bollocks."

Part Three

Xander chafed. Not literally—although he was sure he'd be doing that, too, as soon as he put his costume on. No, this was a metaphorical chafe, the type a guy felt when his friends—his family, really—sent him off on a ridiculous mission. Sent him off in a rented Ford Focus to traverse hundreds of miles of monotonous frozen nothing, because airlines wouldn't let him take any weapons and the Council was too cheap to spring for any remotely sexy vehicle. He chafed and he fiddled with the radio, trying to find something to listen to that wasn't religious or country. And was he even going to be allowed to spend a day or two in Las Vegas, which was right on the way? No, of course not, because the universe conspired against him and because every minute wasted meant, apparently, more demon-luchador-instigated mayhem.

He was somewhere in the middle of Colorado when the road blurred before his eye and he nearly collided with semi. So he stopped for a burger and fries and checked into a Motel 6. He watched the free HBO for a while and then dialed Willow.

“Xan! Where are you?”

“Neither here nor there. Sitting in my boxers watching *Kill Bill.*”

“Sounds like a party. Wish I was there. When do you think you’ll make it over the border?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“And you have the directions, right?”

He sighed. “Yeah. And this hotel I’m staying at there, it’s a nice place, right? Swimming pool? Fitness center? Room service?” Gods, he loved room service.

“Sure, Xan. But this isn’t exactly a vacation, you know. You’re supposed to be—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know what I’m supposed to be. Doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy a margarita poolside, does it?”

She said some things, but Xander was distracted by Uma Thurman kicking serious ass, and tuned in again just in time to hear Willow saying, “...unusual, but you can

handle it, right?"

"Um, sure," he responded. "No problem."

"See? I told them you wouldn't freak out, 'cause you're all mature now and, and open-minded."

"Of course I can." He had no idea what she was talking about. "It's no big deal. Just leotards and masks and demons, right? No big deal."

They chatted a while after that and then hung up. He turned off the tv and shut off the lights and was fast asleep within minutes.

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It took hours to get through the border checkpoint, and he was enormously grateful none of the officials from either country took it into their heads to take a look in his duffle bag. The costume would be hard enough to explain, but his usual array of wooden stakes would be more difficult, and the paraphernalia Giles and the girls had packed him to fight these particular bad guys was...well, peculiar.

Willow had printed him out some pretty exacting directions and he found the Hotel Caliente without any problems. It was a beige stucco place with five floors and a perky duo at the desk. They looked enough alike to be brother and sister, and they both grinned at him happily as they checked him in. “You’re here with los luchadores, yes?” the girl asked when she handed him his plastic key.

“Uh, yeah. That’s me.”

“What name do you fight under?”

“Um, El Bucanero.”

The boy winked at him. “Bueno. Have a wonderful time, Mr. Harris, El Bucanero!”

Xander didn’t completely understand the wink, or the reason why they both giggled, but he smiled wanly back at them, shouldered his bag, and made his way to the elevator.

The room wasn’t bad. King-sized bed, which he bounced on experimentally. Big television. And, he saw when he opened the drapes, a view of the pool, which looked

inviting as it sparkled in the bright sunshine. He peered out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone pretty in a bikini, but was disappointed to discover that all of the dozen or so people lounging on deck chairs were men. Amazingly buff men, actually, all in teeny tiny Speedos. He closed the drapes quickly and went to find the mini-bar.

According to Willow, he'd be meeting his contact tonight at the hotel bar. In the meantime, Xander intended to check out the pay-per-view porn and then maybe head down to the pool for a little swim. Maybe he could even restore the African tan that had faded in Iowa.

Yeah, he decided, this was going to be easy. Hell, he'd probably even be able to spend a few days in Vegas after all as he made his triumphant way back to Iowa. He was a pro. Nothing that happened here was going to rattle him.

Part Four

The only way the Casa de Ocho Ríos came by its second and third stars had to have been a significant payoff, Spike decided as he sat on the squeaking mattress and listened to the sounds of rats between the walls. That lost its novelty fairly quickly and he opted to make his way to the hotel bar to wait for his contact.

The bar wasn't much, but a third of a bottle of tequila went a long way toward taking the edge off his disappointment. Unfortunately it didn't do anything to make the few women in the place shagable and he began to despair of ever ending his dry spell when his contact showed up.

“Señor Spike?”

Spike looked up, and up into the weather-beaten, mustachioed mug of one of the largest men he'd ever seen. “Depends on who's asking, mate.”

“I am Chichahua. Your liaison.”

Spike kicked out a chair in invitation. The large man sat and Spike passed him the bottle.

He took a long pull before speaking. “Our client runs a

stable of luchadores. Exoticos. El Vampiro is a rudo. You will fight the client's técnicos and when he attempts to poach you, let him. We do not know his identity. He may be a luchador himself."

Spike frowned. "An' then what?"

The large man smiled unpleasantly. "You will renegotiate his contract with Wolfram & Hart. The current régime has banned life versus life matches but he is allowing his luchadores to fight to the death."

"An' if he doesn't want to talk?"

"You will see that he does."

Spike took another drink and contemplated how far he could get before Angel sent for the car. Probably not far enough. "A bad, rude man..." he muttered to himself half drunk and half just appreciating the irony of his situation.

"You fight in three days," Chichahua said. Spike nodded absently and Chichahua stood to leave. "Welcome to Tijuana, Señor Spike, El Vampiro."

Spike finished the bottle and went back to his dilapidated

room. A cockroach was crawling across his pillow. He swept it onto the floor, stripped off his clothes and lay down.

He hated times like this when there wasn't anything keeping him from his thoughts, which were more apt to turn maudlin than not these days. Endless nights staring out over the city from the windows of Wolfram and Hart, wondering what everyone who'd moved on and away from him was getting up to. Wondering what Buffy was doing. Who she was with. Finding he didn't much care. Once again he was stuck with a void in his life and he was now faced with the unenviable task of finding something or someone, some *purpose*, to fill it.

Nothing immediately presented itself so he decided to have a wank and think on it later when he was sober.

With a sigh of relief he opened his jeans and took out the half-on he'd been sporting for at least a fortnight and began a slow stroke. He thought of waking to find Drusilla perched atop his cock and riding him and taking her over the railing of the steamer in full view of the slaughtered bodies of its passenger compliment and crew as the sounds of the nocturnal cacophony of Mississippi delta swirled around them. He thought of the

ironic sweetness and mechanical precision of one of Harm's blowjobs. He thought of Buffy and began to pull his cock with punishing fervor. The revelation of sinking flesh into her warm body, time coming to a standstill as they chased their ending, him always waiting for her to change her mind and struggling to take in, to feel, to absorb everything she gave him in case it all ended and all he'd have was that last touch. The more he slowed, the more she raced, careened them toward the precipice until he could only hold on and wonder at her marvel. He stripped himself roughly. On the edge of his consciousness was that last, elusive piece of his id demanding satisfaction. Something vague and foggy and tantalizingly close but ever formless, some unnamable want he'd never quenched, that was as intimate and powerful as Drusilla, as practiced as Harm and held that sweet, sweet warmth of promised good Buffy had never allowed him to share in. His veiled glimpse of perfect completion sent him over the edge with a muffled shout.

Almost immediately he felt the irritation set in that his gratification was tied up in some poetic notion that realistically he knew was a load of bollocks. Spike resolved that what he needed was a new, more debauched set of memories and he smiled a little to think of making them. Thought of acts of depravity so

scintillating and disgusting the soul wouldn't have any room to press its pathetic agenda in the privacy of his own fantasies.

Spike cleaned the tepid spend from his hand with a scratchy, off brand tissue and ignored the feeling of that aching, suppurating wound in his chest growing larger.

Part Five

Xander scowled at the pile of clothing on the orange comforter, but his glare didn't improve the outfit in any way. With a sigh, he peeled off his jeans and t-shirt and his Simpsons boxers, and then began to dress again. First came the jockstrap, because he couldn't stand the thought of nothing at all between him and all that lycra, and besides, the jock made him feel manly.

After much consultation with the Slayers, Dawn had decided that his costume ought to be topless. "It'll show

off that buff chest, Xan,” she’d said and giggled, and all the Slayers had giggled with her, even Willow had giggled, and that was just not fair. So what he had was a pair of skin-tight, shiny spandex tights in blood red, with sort of baroque black swirly things up the sides of the legs and—and for this he would *never* forgive Dawn—a grinning skull and crossed swords on the ass. There were black boots set with red and silvery rhinestones; they laced up to the middle of his shins. There was a shiny, swirly cape, with red on the outside and a black lining, which Dawn had insisted would help him make a dashing entrance into the ring. And of course there was the snug-fitting mask, also in red with more of the black swirly things, only they were glittery, goddamnit, and there was a glittery, heart-shaped black eyepatch where the left eye-hole would normally be.

Xander didn’t much follow the world of lucha libre, but he’d thought all the sparkle and twinkle was kind of, well, not so masculine, and he’d said as much to the girls. But Buffy had looked him up and down and pronounced the look absolutely perfect for the mission.

Cursing steadily, Xander put it all on, and if he discovered that the tights actually felt kinda, uh, sexy, well, he wouldn’t admit that to himself in a million years.

Xander had been instructed to wear his outfit to meet with the contact. But there was no way he was going to just walk around the hallways like this, so he'd made a run to Walmart de México for something he could comfortably wear over the costume. The pickings had been slim, and he'd ended up with a black velour tracksuit that made him feel only marginally less ridiculous than the costume itself.

Fully ready, he was still a little early to go to his meeting. Not wanting to sit in the bar like this any longer than necessary, he instead plopped down onto an orange chair and stared at the blank television screen.

He found himself turning slightly philosophical. Here he was, just past his twenty-third birthday. He'd seen a little of the world: Cleveland. Big chunks of Africa. Iowa. He didn't really envision much of a future for himself, unless getting munched by a monster counted as a future. Every girl he'd ever slept with—and there hadn't been that many, honestly—had been at least a little demony. Stronger than him and sort of, well, in charge. And that was okay; he'd come to accept about himself a desire to be dominated a little. He liked the rush it gave him when he knew that the body against him, while smaller than

his own, could easily overcome him physically. But what he hadn't been able to find was love. It sounded sappy, maybe, but he wanted someone to be devoted to him, to *crave* him, to desire him no matter how much money he made or how much of a Zeppo he was. Somebody he could love back, without reservations. Somebody who...well, he wasn't sure. Somebody who had that indefinable something he'd been seeking for years.

None of which mattered anyway, because now it was time to go meet his contact, who would probably tell him his job was to fight eight foot tall mucus demons.

There were a dozen people in the hotel bar when he arrived. All men. A dozen pairs of eyes focused on him as soon as he entered and they looked him up and down appraisingly. Or maybe they were just surprised at the stupid mask. A few of them smiled in a predatory way that reminded him of sharks, and Xander wondered if they were luchadores, and if they were imagining fighting him.

One of the men, though, somehow managed to have a tweedy look to him despite the fact that he wore a blue guayabera with white embroidery and a pair of khaki pants. His thinning hair was arranged in a bad combover

and there was a pair of wire-framed glasses perched on his nose. He waved Xander over, and Xander sat down opposite him. There were two bottles of Dos Equis opened on the little round table.

“El Bucanero, yes? I’ve already ordered you a drink.” The man gestured at the beer, and Xander took a long, grateful swig. “My name is Orozco.”

“Hi.”

“Let me see the costume, por favor.”

Xander looked around nervously. “Uh, sure. Maybe there’s a bathroom we could go to, or—“

“Don’t be ridiculous. We are all men here. Let me see.”

Feeling absurdly like a stripper—and there was a memory that he’d been successfully repressing until now, thank you very much—Xander unzipped the jacket and shrugged it off. Then, blushing furiously, he shoved the track pants down past his ankles and over his feet. He stood and shook out his cape, which had got bunched up beneath the jacket. Someone in the room wolf-whistled at him, but he couldn’t tell who. He glared at all the

smirking faces. Smirking, *leering* faces. And then he turned back towards Orozco.

“Ah, perfecto. Very nice.”

Xander sat down again and leaned in a little towards the man. “Really? You don’t think it’s a little, um, gay?” he whispered.

Orozco lifted an eyebrow. “How much have you been told about your mission, Señor Harris?”

“Oh, I’ve been told...stuff. There’s, uh, wrestlers and bad guys and, er, demons.”

Orozco sighed exactly like Giles. Did they teach that at Watcher school? “Señor Harris, you will be joining a group of luchadores. Exóticos, no?” When Xander looked at him blankly he sighed again. “These are gay luchadores. Muy, how do you say...ah. Flamboyant.”

“Oh.” Suddenly several things made a lot more sense. And Xander wished he’d paid a little more attention to Willow.

“But still good fighters. The man who runs this group is

very mysterious. Nobody knows who he is. Some say he is even one of the luchadores himself. But we know he is forcing some of his men to fight to the death. It is said that he threatens their families if they do not. And we believe also that some of his fighters are not human, that he is hiding demons beneath those masks. You must find out who he is.”

“And then?”

“The Council will take appropriate action.”

“He’s human, right? I mean, you can’t just waste the guy.”

Orozco’s dark eyes were as hard as iron. “We will take appropriate action.”

In the silence that followed, Xander drank most of his beer. Then Orozco took a delicate sip of his own. “Your first match is in three days,” he announced. “You will be un técnico.”

Again, Xander just blinked at him.

“Do you know anything of the rules of lucha libre, Señor

Harris?”

“Um...not so much.”

Orozco shook his head sadly, then removed his glasses and rubbed at his forehead for a moment before putting them back on. “Bueno. You have three days to learn.”

Great. Three days with his nose stuck in rulebooks, no doubt. “Okay. Just hand over the manual.”

To his surprise, Orozco laughed so heartily he nearly choked. “No, no, señor. You do not understand. You will learn by doing.” He waved his arm, and a man who’d been sitting a few tables away stood and came over. The man was short and very handsome, with thick, glossy hair and full, red lips. He was smiling broadly, and he stuck his hand out for Xander to shake. Orozco grinned, too. “El Bucanero, please meet your trainer: Manuel.”

Part Six

The demony parts of Tijuana weren't all that different from the human parts when you got down to brass tacks. Dirt-poor locals, drunken co-eds on spring break one roofie away from an unconscious fuck with a frat boy named Chet, churros. Spike dunked his in the little cup of blood the vendor gave him and bit. It was human. Spike paused with the chewy, sweet, bloody morsel in his mouth for a moment and considered the moral implications of his snack. It wasn't like he'd killed whomever was drizzled over his pastry. It could have been consensually donated, though most likely not, he conceded. Spike shrugged, dunked, chewed.

What happened in Tijuana, he decided, would stay in Tijuana.

The ring wasn't hard to find from the crude map Chicahua drew him. Even if he hadn't known which building, he would have once the crowds of spectators began pouring out, filling the night air with the scents of sweat, adrenaline and excitement. Kiddies in masks waving cheap glow sticks and sparklers ran ahead of their fathers, bets were settled. On the edges of the crowd, the demonic patrons skulked off into the shadows to pick off the stragglers, settle their bets or simply head off to their homes with souvenirs for their children.

He cut through the crowd with the ease borne of many years navigating great swaths of humanity, aided by his size and speed. Inside the arena, the cleaning crews were sweeping out the seating areas. Workers were taking down the banners and light displays that had added to the overall spectacle of that night's entertainment while others were setting out training mats over the concrete floor surrounding the ring.

As he watched, the luchadores began pairing off and sparring in training matches as several trainers paced up the rows of mats and corrected holds or offered criticism. Spike leapt up and swung himself onto a balcony overlooking the arena and watched, taking note of this or that move he liked and gaining an overall impression of the rules of the fight.

There was a small commotion below as a wrestler stumbled out onto the floor. The other men catcalled and whistled as the new luchador was escorted to a training mat and positioned with a hearty smack on his arse. A chorus of laughter rang out from the luchadores. Spike frowned. Didn't seem like the bloke much wanted to be there and he began to pay closer attention. He knew the mark he was looking for was signing his

fighters' lives away, but there wasn't anything in the brief about folks being brought in to fight against their will.

With little warning the trainer grabbed the bloke by his shiny red cape and pulled him into range for a truly spectacular takedown. It was then Spike noticed that the man's mask had only one eyehole. He had thought the opening had only been darkened by the surrounding mask, but the man was, in fact, fighting with only one eye. That had to be a bitch, trying to fight hand to hand with no depth perception.

Whoever the one-eyed luchador was, he evidently engendered quite a lot of interest. Most of the other luchadores had stopped fighting to watch him train. He wasn't alone on the balcony anymore, either. Others had coveted Spike's vantage point and were beginning to crowd around.

The man rolled over onto his back, breaking the hold and throwing the trainer off him. Spike silently cheered, not sure why he'd be pulling for such an obvious underdog, but the mocking laughter at his back may have played a small part.

A kid in a luchador getup climbed onto the railing in front of him and was partially blocking his view. The bloke on the mats had been pinned again and there were exclamations of laughter at the stupid *maricon*. Spike glowered. "Come on, Sparky, up you get..." he muttered.

As if bolstered by Spike's whispered encouragement, the man got to his feet again and this time, managed to clothesline the trainer and get him on the mats for a count of two before their positions were reversed. He was a quick learner; Spike had to give him that.

He couldn't give it much more consideration, however, because the press of the crowd had placed him directly behind the sprog and there was no budging for a better view.

"Oi, one side there, tiny," Spike grouched, pulling the kid down off the rail. The little bugger turned and cock punched him. The crowd around them silenced and Spike, doubled over in pain, saw the glowing red eyes of a Klthunall demon behind the mask.

"Why you little..." Spike reached out and grabbed the diminutive demon by the throat, lifting him from the floor as he struggled to right himself. The demon bit his

hand. Spike screamed and shook him like a rag doll. The demon released his hand. Spike lifted him over his head, dropped and punted him over the railing. There was a shriek and a splatty kind of thud. Then, faintly, the sound of feet scampering away.

Spike noticed the entire arena was dead silent. He couldn't see around the crowd to the floor any longer. Spike looked around at the shocked, angry faces of the mob and swallowed.

"Oh, well done, Spike." The crowd surged.

Spike ran for the door.

Part Seven

Xander had learned many things over the previous three days. If Miss Grobner hadn't been eaten by a mayor-turned-giant-snake at graduation, Xander could have written her an essay that would have earned him a retroactive A in sophomore English.

As soon as his training had begun, he'd learned that there were more embarrassing things to wear in public than the Sunnydale swim team regulation Speedos. Although his costume covered somewhat more skin than

his bathing suit had, it was no less revealing, plus there was the sheer twinkliness of it. Not that the other luchadores were wearing anything less ridiculous. One guy looked like some sort of acid-trip version of Betty Boop, one was apparently the love child of Mae West and a chicken, and another guy—El Legarto—was some sort of pink iguana. But Xander's get-up was bad enough, and it seemed to serve as an open invitation for the rest of the fighters to constantly palm, slap, and pinch his ass.

Fortunately, he'd also learned that over seven years of demon slayage came in pretty handy in the fighting ring. Yeah, he was handicapped by his lack of peripheral vision on the left and his shitty depth perception, and getting the hang of the specific lucha moves took a little time. But he caught on quickly. Quickly enough, actually, that the other men's hoots and catcalls soon turned to more affectionate bantering. The second night they even insisted he join them at some dive for after-practice revelry.

And that's when he learned his third lesson, which was that carnitas and tequila were a dangerous combination. Shortly followed by his fourth lesson, which was how to say, "Leave me alone, I'm never coming out of the bathroom," in Spanish.

He'd also learned that Manuel was a demon of some kind. Well, he didn't actually know that for sure, but he strongly suspected it. Nothing human could have kept his hair so preternaturally perfect, every shining strand precisely in place even after two hours of throw-downs and mid-air [flights](#). Besides, it became clear very soon that Manuel was interested in doing more with Xander than practicing wrestling moves. Or maybe he just hoped to practice them naked. In Xander's experience, whenever anyone was that interested in jumping Xander's bones, it was pretty safe to assume that that someone was at least slightly demonic. Truthfully, Xander had become reconciled to that fact, and now merely hoped that the demon in question wasn't the sort who tended to eat its [mate](#).

And that was another thing. Surrounded by so much scantily clad masculinity—hell, having to *grapple* with so much scantily clad masculinity—Xander had learned that the concept didn't squick him as much as he'd thought it might. Sure, he'd admired guys before—Riley Finn and his whole GI Joe thing, Spike with the compact muscles and eternal cool, Oz with his perfect irony and mellowness—but he'd pretty much chalked that up to jealousy or a little bromance. Now he thought, well,

maybe not so much. Or maybe the exoticos were just kind of rubbing off on him—in a metaphorical way, of course.

But that was a thought to ponder later, when he had more time to freak out. Right now, as he stood in the shower, using up all the hot water in Tijuana, he was thinking about the last lesson he'd learned. It was, apparently, possible to feel bruised and sore in parts of his body he hadn't even known existed. Manuel had promised him a good massage before tonight's match. Xander was both looking forward to and dreading that, and he was at least grateful that the butterflies in his stomach were going to keep Xander too busy for the trainer's extremely agile fingers to have any visible effect while Xander was wearing an outfit that left no chance for secrets.

Xander had to come out of the shower eventually. He dried and shaved and combed his hair and then put on his outfit. He looked at himself in the full-length mirror that hung on the bathroom door. His muscular torso did look pretty good, and if he stood just so and held the cape just right, and then tilted his head a bit like that, he thought he looked almost dashing. Sort of a one-eyed Errol Flynn. Only sparkly, of course.

He quickly pulled on the track suit.

The ring was a couple miles away, and the luchadores travelled there in a filthy bus, in which the sounds of raucous swearing and laughter echoed loudly. Manuel had advised him to stay clear of the neighborhood when Xander was on his own, and now, in the waning twilight, Xander saw why. Despite the early hour, people here looked drunker, the farmacias dirtier, the street vendors dodgier than elsewhere in the city. There were signs promoting sex shows of a type he couldn't translate, and he was profoundly thankful for that. There were entire blocks full of grimy shacks that almost gave the carpenter in him a case of the hives. And there were people wandering around who were definitely not, by any stretch of the word, human.

The bus came to a belching halt at the back entrance to the building where they fought. Xander already knew his way around the place, but he was one of the last people off the bus. In between the practicing and the barfing and the questioning his sexuality, he'd been trying to figure out who the boss was. He hadn't had much headway. The other luchadores all claimed to have been hired by one of his agents. They called him El Jefe and

they were scared shitless of him. They had lots of stories about atrocities he'd supposedly committed, but no actual information about who he was or where he hung out. So tonight, because Xander's bout was one of the night's last, he'd decided to see if he could poke around a little, maybe find something out.

He trailed along behind the rest of the fighters as they entered the building. The back entrance was poorly lit and smelled of stale piss, and the corridor they entered wasn't much better. The crowded dressing room they'd been using was at one end of the hall. But Xander ducked off to the side before they got there and made his way down a side route. The walls were plain cement, badly scuffed and splattered with he'd rather not know what. It had that familiar locker room reek that brought back such pleasant memories of being terrorized by Larry and his pals, before Larry discovered his softer side.

Several doors lined the hall, each dented and battered. The first few he tried were locked. The next opened to a closet that was stuffed full of toilet paper and mop buckets and big rolls of plastic trash bags.

When he opened the next, though, he was rewarded with the sight of a tiny man in a violently purple unitard

with matching frizzy wig. He was busy stretching out his hamstrings, and Xander just stood there with his mouth hanging open. He realized then that there were others in the room, and it was obviously a dressing room. Some guys were pulling on costumes, some were being taped up, a few were being pounded into submission by trainers. At the back of the room a bank of showers was running, steam wafting slowly away. A naked man was walking toward the showers, and Xander caught just a glimpse of a really nice ass and blond hair that was almost familiar. But before he could place it, an enormous man was shoving Xander out of the room, back into the hallway. The guy slammed the door shut.

“Qué está haciendo aquí, pendejo?” the giant demanded.

“Um, can you tell me where my locker room is? I got lost.”

“Cabrón,” growled the man. “That way.” And he pointed his log-sized arm back the way Xander had come.

Xander would have liked to continued exploring, but the man was still standing there, arms crossed on his chest, watching. So Xander turned around and headed back

down the hall. He guessed it was time to get ready for his match.

Part Eight

Spike poked his head out from the shower stall when he heard Gabriel, the half troll ejecting someone from the locker room. He couldn't see much, his bulk eclipsed most of the doorway, but beneath his crossed arms he saw a glimpse of a red cape sticking out from the bottom of a black velour jacket. The man left and Spike wrapped a towel around his waste as Gabriel shut the door.

“Amigo,” Spike called. “¿Qué?”

Gabriel snorted. “Marica Americano estúpido.”

Spike's eyebrow rose. “¿Qué él quiso?”

Gabriel leered at him teasingly. “Tu pendejo dulce, cabrón.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Él puede luchar tu madre para él.”

Gabriel laughed gregariously and Spike resumed drying himself. In the corner hung his leotard and mask.

It wasn't a bad cover, Spike thought. Pretend to be new and stupid, meanwhile you're keeping tabs on everything at the ground level. Don't get big enough to make a name, just stay in as long as no one will miss you, and then start all over again from the bottom up. No one would suspect. *No one who didn't have the brains to see through his little act.* Spike preened.

He whistled as he put on his costume.

The arena was loud as hell and the sheer number of excited humans in close proximity made him a little dizzy and more than a little thankful he'd eaten before leaving the hotel. Evidently, Mexico wasn't worried about trivialities like fire codes, or if they were, weren't fussed about enforcing them in a demon run establishment like this one.

“You ready?” Gabriel asked. Spike nodded and Gabriel pointed across the arena to some sort of pink, glittery

monstrosity. “El Lagarto. Good luck, amigo.”

Spike walked to the ropes as the announcer made his introduction. El Vampiro was met with the boos and hisses common to the rudos. Spike ignored them for the most part, though he thought with fondness that it had been some time since he'd been so thoroughly vilified. It added a little swagger to his strut, at any rate.

Despite being billed as an effeminate pink reptile, El Lagarto was actually a bit of a challenge. He was damned limber and threw himself around the ring with nearly superhuman speed, bouncing off the ropes and launching himself at Spike in some sort of flying head butt. Spike couldn't get a grip on him long enough to pin him, until the blighter thought he could get him in a choke hold, which was laughable really. Spike flipped the lizard over his shoulder and choke slammed him to the mat. It was over in a matter of minutes.

As the announcer congratulated him, Spike saw the one eyed luchador watching him intently and he smirked. He'd be in his camp tonight and make no mistake.

Suddenly there was a swell of noise and El Bucanero, if the shouting was any indicator of identity, was climbing

into the ring, shedding his cape and tossing it to the crowd.

Spike sized up his opponent. He was broader and his bare chest left no doubt in his mind that this was a fighter who would favor clever holds over acrobatics, which, as the smaller man, didn't leave him much room to maneuver. There was something else, though. Something about the way he held himself at the ready before sinking into position that seemed damnably familiar. Spike chalked it up to one big bad recognizing another in the wild and tried to get a swift advantage, his size and speed being his only advantage here. Spike managed a casita hold before he was roughly dislodged and subjected to la cruceta, which just *hurt*.

"Ow!" he cried out. Suddenly the hold released and El Bucanero staggered back. "Oh, had enough then?" Spike taunted before getting him in a dragon sleeper hold.

"S...Sp...ike..." the man choked out.

Spike dropped the hold in shock. "Harris?"

Harris looked around quickly to see if anyone heard. "Just play along," he said, then pinned him.

Spike struggled, instinctually reversing their positions in a campana invertida and thumping Harris into a clutch pin. “What in the bloody hell are you doing here, mate?” he asked as the ref counted.

Harris never got a chance to answer. Spike was pulled to his feet and paraded as the winner to the sounds of deafening cheers. Xander was led out of the ring, looking back over his shoulder and nearly tripping over his cape. Before Spike could call after him, someone was tapping his shoulder and trying to get his attention.

“El Vampiro?”

Spike whipped around, angrily. “What?”

A man in a brown trench coat and fedora lifted his head. “I am El Jefe.”

El Jefe was trouble; Spike had been in enough of it to know. Oh sure, he seemed friendly and accommodating at the outset, but he knew it was only a matter of time before he was knee deep in kitten debt and racked in the back room of a bar somewhere in Vegas.

He led him outside the arena and produced a contract from his voluminous coat. “Money, women...you like women? We have boys also. You live and train with our luchadores. You fight for us, and you want for nothing. Blood, power, fame...all yours.”

Spike knew a devil’s bargain when he heard one but there was no denying it was a damned tempting offer.

“And for how long?”

“Señor?”

“The terms of the contract. How long.”

El Jefe laughed. “It is a lifetime contract. You fight with us as long as you are able and we take care of your every need.”

Spike pictured young boys, eager to make it on their own, cuing up for the privilege of such security and suddenly got a clearer picture of the game.

“An’ if I want to retire early?”

El Jefe smiled a nasty, oily, smile. “And give up la lucha?”

Spike smiled back, took the pen and signed.

El Jefe clapped him on the back and laughed. “Welcome to the familia, El Vampiro. Go join your brothers on the bus. El Bucanero is new as well. You can stay with him until another room opens up.”

Spike sighed. “An’ how long is that going to be?”

El Jefe lost his smile. “I believe La Lagarto has been seeking retirement. See me before the fight tomorrow.”

Spike nodded grimly and El Jefe walked back inside. Spike gathered up his clothes from the locker room and followed the scent of burning oil to the bus.

Part Nine

Xander was so stupefied that he barely noticed that he’d lost his very first match. Somebody was pulling him along

to the locker room while someone else berated him for being totalmente estúpido and losing the bout so easily, but Xander was lost in a fog and barely noticed. He would have just stood in the locker room if Manuel hadn't slapped Xander's track suit against his chest and then thumped him upside the head. "Vayamos, idiota."

Xander followed him to the bus, and Manuel chattered away in Spanglish about what Xander needed to do to improve his moves, but Xander barely heard a word. The same refrain kept going through his head: *Spike is alive. Spike is here.*

They climbed on board. Pantalones Famosos sat next to him and cuffed him in the bicep. "Hey, it's okay, amigo. You were just un pocito nervioso, right? Happens a lot the first time. Next time you'll pin that puto in no time."

Xander started to mumble a thanks, but he was interrupted when El Vampiro—Spike!—came onto the bus. He was still in his costume and he stalked down the aisle like a panther on the prowl, barely glancing at Xander as he passed. The other luchadores greeted him with whistles and catcalls and cries of, "Carne fresca!"

Pantalones punched Xander again. "He's not so great.

Bajo y flaco, and that hair!” Xander kind of had the idea that Pantalones had a crush on him.

With an effort, Xander turned around in his seat to face forward. He spent the drive back to the hotel wondering what the hell was going on.

When the bus pulled to a coughing halt in the hotel parking lot, Xander tried to wait for Spike, but Pantalones dragged Xander into the lobby, and Xander lost sight of Spike among the sea of spandex and feathers. “You come to my room and I show you some moves you can use next time,” the luchador urged.

Xander had a sudden and vivid mental image of using *moves* on Spike, and he remembered exactly how the vampire’s firm body had felt against his as they wrestled. He swallowed. “Um, thanks, but another time, okay?” As Pantalones looked on in disappointment, Xander made his way to his room.

He intended on calling Willow immediately, but as he was still punching the numbers on his phone his door opened and, as Xander squawked slightly, in walked Spike himself. “What—what are you doing here?” Xander demanded, nearly dropping the phone.

Spike smirked. “M your new roomie.”

“Roomie! But—”

“Just signed on with you lot of poufters. I must say, I always knew you had it in you, whelp, but I never reckoned you’d be so flamboyant about it.”

“I am not flamboyant!” Xander protested. “I’m undercover.”

Spike prowled closer and looked him up and down. “You’ve been working out, mate.”

A stupid grin spread across Xander’s face and he preened a little. “Can you tell? ‘Cause I got really skinny in Africa and then when I came back—Hey! That is so not the issue right now! You’re supposed to be ashes under Sunnydale, not wrestling in Tijuana. What are you—oh, gods. You’re El Jefe!”

Spike rolled his eyes. “I am *not* El Jefe. Just signed a contract with the bloke, actually.”

Xander’s head was still spinning. It was like the mental

equivalent of the Tilt-a-Whirl, which Willow had always made him ride when the carnival came to town, and which always made him come perilously close to losing his corndogs, funnel cakes, cotton candy, and nachos. Now, he sat down heavily on the bed and tried to make some sense of it all. Spike stood with his hands on his slightly cocked hips—oh, so not a good time to think of that word—as if he were modeling the latest in skintight luchador-wear.

“You’re not dead,” Xander finally said.

“Course I’m dead, berk. But no deader than usual.”

“But Buffy said—”

“Yeah, I burned, all right. Got resurrected, didn’t I? Now I’m working with Peaches in LA.”

“You’re working with peaches?” Maybe someone had slipped Xander some bad tequila and this was all some sort of strange hallucination. Yeah, that made sense. Except, why would he hallucinate Spike, of all people? Spike in lycra. Spike in really, really tight lycra that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Xander dropped his head into his hands and moaned.

“You have something to drink around here?” Spike asked. Xander looked up just in time to see Spike bending over and poking his head into the mini-fridge. He moaned again and quickly hid his eyes.

“In the armoire,” Xander said into his palms.

Spike crowed with happiness when he saw the collection of liquor that Xander had laid in over the past few days. He hadn’t been able to resist—it was cheap and a little buzz made watching the telenovelas during the day more fun.

A few moments later, Spike plopped down on the mattress beside him and handed him a plastic cup of mezcal. “Arriba, abajo, al centro, y pa’dentro,” Spike said, and they both had a healthy chug.

“Why are you here?” Xander tried one more time, not really hopeful that it would make more sense this time.

“Told you. ‘M working with Angel. He’s running this evil law firm and—well, that’s a long story and I don’t understand it that well myself. We got word that this El Jefe bloke was into some dodgy business, forcing his

luchadores to fight to the death, that sort of thing. I'm meant to find him and...persuade him otherwise. I take it you're on a similar mission? Or perhaps you just fancied wearing a cape and glitter."

"Dawn made the outfit," Xander said defensively. "And yeah, same mission, more or less."

But Spike's face had softened. He pulled off his mask and for a moment he looked...wistful, Xander thought. "How is the Bit?"

"She's good. She's...she's growing up, I guess."

"And the others? They made it out all right?"

Xander slumped a little as a familiar, sharp pain stabbed into his heart. "Everyone but Anya."

Spike looked grim. He refilled their cups, though, and Xander yanked off his mask and let it fall to the floor. "To Anya," Spike said. "She was a grand old girl."

"To Anya," Xander agreed, and they both drank in silence for a while.

Then Xander noticed that Spike's head was cocked and the vampire was squinting at him. "Your eye, it doesn't get in the way?"

Xander shrugged. "I'm used to it, I guess. I've been told I look dashing with the patch on."

Spike reached forward, as if he were going to touch Xander's face. Xander froze, but then Spike allowed his hand to drop. "How's Buffy?" he asked, looking into his empty cup.

"She's...she's Buffy, you know? She keeps on fighting. God! I have to call her! When she hears you're alive—"

"No!" Spike yelled, and grabbed Xander's arm before Xander could reach for the phone. "Don't. She...I went out a hero, yeah? Let's keep it that way."

That wasn't the reaction Xander had expected, but he relaxed and held out his cup. "Hit me," he said, and Spike did.

"So," Xander said after another sip. "I guess we're both here for the same thing. Do you have some sort of game plan?"

Spike shrugged and swirled the liquid in his cup. "This is it. I join your group, I keep an eye out so I can suss out exactly what El Jefe's up to and then I stop him."

"With you on the job, I guess I could head back to Iowa." Xander didn't feel as enthusiastic about that as he'd thought he might have. Then he smiled. "Unless you think three eyes are better than two?"

He hunched his shoulders, waiting for Spike to reject him, to tell him he was useless and send him away. But Spike seemed to think on it for a minute, and then he smiled back. "I reckon we could work together. You're not a bad fighter, are you?"

Xander felt suddenly and ridiculously elated. "Manuel says I'm pretty good. I watched a lot of WWF, back in the day." Then he yawned, one of those huge ones where your jaw nearly comes unhinged. "I'm wiped, Spike. Gonna sleep until noon. Let's talk about this then, okay?" When Spike nodded, Xander stood and stretched and made his way to the bathroom, where he pissed and brushed his teeth and exchanged his leotard for a pair of boxers.

Yawning more and scratching at his ass, he wandered back into the main room, only to stop short when he saw Spike's costume in a pile on the floor, and Spike tucked into bed with the blankets around his hips and his bare chest gleaming in the lamplight. Xander looked around, as if a second bed would magically materialize. Spike just grinned. "Make sure to draw those curtains tight, Harris. You wouldn't want to wake up in a bed full of ash."

Part Ten

The phone was ringing, dragging Spike up from oblivion and into a blistering headache and a taste like a decomposing dog in his mouth. He hit it, swore and fumbled it open.

"*What?*" he demanded.

"It's been a week, Spike."

Spike looked around the room for a minute remembering

where he was and saw the bright sunlight shining beneath the curtains of the east facing windows. He let out an aggrieved sigh. “Bloody hell, what time is it?” he whined.

The bed beside him was empty. A moment after he made this observation the sound of the tap running and the shower turning on answered the question of his erstwhile bedmate’s whereabouts.

“Seven-thirty.”

“*Seven-thirty!* S’early! Leave me the fuck alone!” he slurred around his furry tongue.

“Spike, you haven’t checked in and I need to know where we stand. What have you found out and what the *hell* is that sound?” Angel demanded.

Spike wearily sat up, the sheet pooling in his lap, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m in the enemy’s camp. Don’t know who’s calling the shots yet but it’s only a matter of time and Xander’s singing in the shower.”

“Fine, just don’t—did you say Xander’s in your shower?” Angel sputtered.

Spike smirked, "I did indeed. Counsel sent him to poke about or summat. Think he told me at one point but it made about as much sense to him as me which is a fat lot."

"Spike, you can't let him kill our client."

"Who said anything about killin'? You're the one with the bottom line, here, Peaches, not me. I could give a toss if these wankers are wagerin' seed, breed and generation on this caper."

"Spike..."

"Look, you sent me here. You want me to do the job? Then let me sort it. I'll call in a few days." Spike flipped the phone shut as Xander emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam looking far younger somehow than he had just the night before.

"Was that Angel?" Xander asked good-naturedly, slapping some sort of aftershave on his face.

"Poncy bugger can't stand not being able to order me around in person, I 'spect." Spike watched as Xander very

nearly bounced around, gathering his clothes and dressing in what was, he believed, far too chipper a manner for the hour. “An’ what’s got you so ruddy cheerful this morning?”

Xander shrugged and slipped on his shirt. “I’m meeting some of the guys for breakfast downstairs. You wanna come? Pantalones Famosos is going to show me some moves for the match tonight afterward. At least I think that’s what he meant...” Xander trailed off.

Spike snorted and tapped a cigarette out of the pack on the nightstand. “Think someone’s more interested in the famous pants of Xander Harris. He that bloke you were sitting with on the bus last night?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. He’s an okay, guy, really. Most of the guys are. They’ve all been really nice.”

“I’ll bet.” Spike smirked and lit up. “Pheromone cloud around here could choke a burro.”

“It’s not like that. I mean, nobody’s been pushy or anything.” Spike just nodded and blew a smoke ring. “And anyway, even if they were interested, it’s not like it’s a big deal, right?”

Spike's eyebrows rose of their own volition at the little nervous glances Xander was giving him. "Just put a sock on the door if you're entertaining gentlemen callers and we'll be just fine," he assured him dryly.

"I didn't mean I would, I just meant—" Xander spluttered and Spike rolled his eyes.

"As if I give a toss what anyone else does with their tackle. A bloke's business is his own and I'm not gonna pick on your little friends any more than I pick on you."

"Thank you—hey wait a minute—"

Spike chuckled and stabbed out his cigarette, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and grabbing up his jeans where they lay on the floor. He caught the sudden whiff of arousal directed at his bare arse and grinned. He gave it a little shake. Xander squeaked and ran out the door. Spike laughed and shimmied into his jeans. The boy was just too easy.

He almost left the room shirtless just to fuck with him, but he stopped himself. Thing of it was, as much fun as he was to torture, Harris was just about the only friendly

face he'd seen in an age. An' as much of a dear Fred was and as good as Charlie was to share a beer with now and again, it wasn't quite the same as bein' with someone who actually knew you. Spike snorted. Angel didn't count. Arrogant git never did take the time to see him for what he was rather than what he expected to see. And wasn't seeing Xander's stock in trade? No, he'd lay off the boy for the time being. Spike shrugged on a shirt and snatched up the other key card before trotting off to find Xander and his mates.

Xander was laughing easily at some story one of the other men was telling. Spike watched him from the shadows of the veranda, sitting and sipping a mimosa in the morning sun, looking for all the world like a carefree bachelor on holiday rather than the world weary knight in dented armor he knew him to be. He looked twenty-three for a change and Spike found he didn't much want to spoil it. He remembered feeling that way about Buffy, wanting to unburden her, give her a moment to be young again. It never amounted to much outside of the one time she let him hold her through the night. But that feeling of being able to give her that, that comfort, that safety, was as close to heaven as he ever came.

Spike frowned and wondered if it didn't bode ill that he

was waxing romantic over the Slayer's whipping boy. "Steady on. Just been too long since anyone fit enough for a fuck has crossed your path," he told himself, pointedly ignoring the fact that the fitness of said individual hadn't even entered into his poetic inner monologue.

And what was the berk doing inviting him to brekkie and sitting out in the damned sunshine, anyway? Spike leaned against a column and cleared his throat.

Xander turned around. "Oh! Hey, um, El Vampiro! Hey, guys, it's El Vampiro!" The one he recognized as Pantalones Famosos gave a tight little smile. "This is Manuel, and La Paloma Agresiva. You remember Pantalones right?"

Spike nodded a greeting. La Paloma Agresiva blew him a fey little kiss. Spike smiled and bowed gamely.

"So, um, would it be okay if we moved to one of the tables under the veranda? I don't think he wants to tan. Bad for the Vampiro image, I guess," Xander covered. Manuel and Paloma agreed immediately and began shifting their drinks.

Pantalones huffed and stood. "Diva," he muttered under his breath. Spike pretended not to notice and made a great show of pulling out Xander's chair for him before sitting down. Xander looked at him oddly but played along, obviously unsure if this was supposed to be another element of their personas or if he was just screwing with him. Spike winked at him and Xander grinned widely. He had no idea what he'd just confirmed to Xander, but he seemed for it and that was good enough if it bought him some leeway to fuck with his fan club.

"So, El Vampiro, you and El Bucanero know each other?" Paloma asked.

Spike leaned back and threw an arm around the back of Xander's chair. "Oh we go way back," he said, enjoying the looks of intrigue on Paloma's and Manuel's faces. Pantalones flinched visibly. Spike grinned.

"Um, yeah, we, uh, went to school together," Xander fabricated.

Paloma squealed. "Oh, a schoolboy romance, how sweet!" Manuel chuckled at Xander's blush. Spike smiled, his tongue perched lasciviously between his teeth.

“Not a boy any longer, though,” Pantalones observed cattily before Xander could correct Paloma’s assumption. “Deseos change.”

Spike leaned forward. “And we can change with them.” Paloma sighed at the romantic sentiment. Beside him Xander swallowed hard. Spike took pity on him and raised the hand draped over his chair to smack him playfully on the back of the head. “Course some of us are more adaptable than others.” Xander looked at him, irritation quickly fading to relief as he caught on to Spike’s teasing.

Pantalones didn’t lose his sour expression, however, and Spike found himself oddly pleased that he was still considered a rival for Xander’s affection. And since that didn’t bear thinking about, Spike ignored Xander’s protests and upended his mimosa. And when that didn’t cut it, he flagged down the waiter.

“Camarero,” Spike called. “Dos más, por favor.”

Xander shot him an imperious look. “Thirsty?”

Spike drank his retort.

Part Eleven

Xander was feeling full and mellow, a mimosa and huevos rancheros in his belly, a couple of new friends sitting around the table with him. And Spike. Spike, with whom he'd shared a bed last night, and who was now lounging comfortably, his arm flung around the back of Xander's chair so that it was almost but not quite touching Xander's back. And, unaccountably, Xander wasn't frightened or annoyed by the vampire's presence, but actually gladdened by it, and amused by the way Spike was clearly trying to get Pantalones Famosas's goat.

"So I was tied up in Xan—erm, El Bucanero's chair, and he was meant to be getting ready for work, but he couldn't, you see, because—"

"Ah!" Xander said, suddenly no longer so complacent. "Nobody wants to hear that old story!"

The looks of fascination on Manuel's and La Paloma's faces said otherwise, actually, but Pantalones saved him by abruptly standing. "We are sitting here and wasting the day," he announced. "I have promised to demonstrate some moves to El Bucanero, so next time he will beat the little rudo he fights."

Spike made a noise like he might argue, but Xander quickly bounced to his own feet. "That sounds great. Let's do it."

Although the luchadores did most of their practicing in the ring itself, before and after the matches, someone had set aside one of the hotel's conference rooms as well. It wasn't really a formal ring—there were no ropes, for instance—but the dimensions of a ring had been taped out on the carpet and a couple of blue mats had been set down in the middle. La Paloma said he was going to go get un facial, but Manuel tagged along with them and, somewhat to Xander's surprise, so did Spike.

The room was empty when they got there. Manuel and Spike leaned up against one wall, Spike with his arms crossed on his chest, while Xander and Pantalones squared up in the faux ring.

“Okay,” said Pantalones. “So you’re a pretty big guy, muy muscular, no? You must use that size and fuerza, uh, strength, because un hombre como El Vampiro, he’s gonna be faster than you.”

Xander wanted to point out that Spike was also a hell of a lot stronger, what with the whole vamp thing and all, but didn’t. He just nodded sagely.

“Okay. So rush me.”

Xander did. Pantalones stepped nimbly aside, grabbed Xander’s arm, and used it to fling him to the edge of the ring. When Xander came back, the other man put one arm around Xander’s shoulder and the other between Xander’s legs, lifted him, and used Xander’s own momentum to slam him to the floor. Without moving his hands, Pantalones quickly landed on top of Xander and ground their bodies together from knees to chests. Just when Xander was suspecting more than wrestling was going on, Pantalones jumped up. “See?” he grinned. “Easy.”

Xander grunted and then stood. They went through the motions again, and again he ended up flat on his back, the other luchador settled comfortably on top of him.

When they did it a third time, he became aware through the fabric of their jeans that Pantalones might be enjoying the demonstrations just a little too much, but Xander was hardly in any position to complain, because he wasn't hating it either. Somehow the small audience that now watched him only made the whole thing more...interesting.

Xander groaned, hoped everyone would think it was because he'd just been slammed to the floor for the fourth time, and abandoned the dregs of his heterosexuality.

The next time, Pantalones charged at Xander, and he'd been right—it was easy to throw the guy down and get on top of him. Xander hopped back to his feet, grinning happily.

“Muy buen! Now I show you another,” Pantalones said, and slapped Xander's back.

This time when Xander ran at him, Pantalones flipped Xander right away, sending Xander onto the floor. When Xander tried to sit up, the other man straddled his shoulder and pulled Xander's arms back and up, almost completely immobilizing Xander. At the same time,

Pantalones ground his groin into Xander's back. It took Xander several tries to perfect that one.

The next move involved both of them on their back, scissoring their legs so their crotches were right up against each other. Pantalones told him the name of the move, but by then Xander was a little too far gone to catch the Spanish, because the slow-motion way his opponent was doing it felt a hell of a lot more like foreplay than wrestling.

Pantalones seemed to think that last one needed a lot of practice, and Xander was just wondering how long this could go on before he completely embarrassed himself, because let's face it, he hadn't had any action but his own hand for a depressingly long time. But then he looked up and Spike was standing there, hands on his hips, glaring down at them. "Oi! I need a go as well!"

Pantalones untangled himself and gave Spike a triumphant little smile. "Of course. I will show you how—"

"No, you daft git! Not with you. With him!" Spike jabbed his finger toward Xander, who was still on the floor, his mouth gaping open a little. "I want to show him some

moves myself.”

Pantalones opened his mouth as if he were going to argue, but then Manuel stepped in and tugged him gently away. “Come on, mijo. Let el gabacho have a turn.” Pantalones scowled but allowed himself to be towed away.

Spike leered down at Xander. “Ready to give me a go, whelp?”

Xander swallowed, stood, and nodded.

Then they wrestled. It was different from the night before, when Xander had been so taken by surprise by discovering Spike. There was no cheering crowd here, either. And the thing was, although Spike was obviously holding back a little so as not to give away his demony identity, Xander didn't think he was holding back *that* much. Xander was actually giving him a pretty good fight, at least enough that Spike swore softly under his breath a few times and was soon panting almost as hard as Xander was.

But then somehow, the sight of Spike crouching in front of him, his lips curled up in a wicked smile and his tongue

curled behind his teeth, his strong chest moving rapidly up and down under his tight t-shirt, that was too much for Xander. He became so distracted he hardly reacted as Spike charged him, driving Xander backwards, out of the ring and against the wall. But then Spike didn't move away. Instead he pressed himself up against Xander in something that was most certainly not an approved *lucha libre* move, but Christ, so much better, and by the slightly wild look in Spike's eyes, Xander had the idea that the vampire had completely forgot they were supposed to be sparring.

Completely forgot, that is, until *Pantalones Famosas* marched over and tapped Spike on the shoulder angrily. "Cual es tu pinche pedo, pendejo? You're supposed to be wrestling him."

Spike growled and Xander thought he saw a flash of yellow in his eyes. "Vete a la chingada, wanker!"

Things might have turned ugly, but Manuel pulled on *Pantalones's* arm again, while Xander pried himself away from the wall—and Spike—and positioned himself between Spike and *Pantalones*. "Hey, guys. No need to fight over the Xan—El Bucanero. I think I've had enough for one morning. I'm gonna go take a shower, okay?"

Spike and Pantalones continued to glare at each other, but neither made any motion to actually fight. Xander started walking toward the door.

“Yeah. I expect I could use a shower as well,” Spike said, and sauntered off with him. The others didn’t follow.

As they walked back towards their room, Xander hissed, “We’re on a mission, remember? A mission that doesn’t include getting into catfights with other luchadores. If you keep this up you’re going to blow our cover.”

Spike stomped sulkily for a moment but then sagged. “You’re right. Sorry. Got a bit carried away.” Then he brightened and socked Xander in the bicep. “You really are not half bad at fighting, you know. A little more practice and you might even hold your own the next time a demon gets you. If it’s a small one.”

Xander couldn’t help it. Praise was such a rarity for him, and this came from such an unexpected source. He punched Spike back companionably and felt his face split into a goofy grin. Suddenly, neither anti-demon missions nor Mexican wrestling were at the top of his mind.

He could see Spike roll his eyes and then smirk. “C’mon, whelp. It’s time for a shower.”

Part Twelve

Spike was still buzzing on the high of a decent tussle for the first time in what felt like forever since getting his body back, the few short matches he’d fought not withstanding, so he could be forgiven for not noticing how unaccountably quiet Xander had become when they’d arrived back at the room. Spike hummed and stripped off his shirt with a flourish, not seeing that Xander had apparently gotten as far as his patch and no further.

“Whelp? Hey, Xander, what’s got you, mate?”

Xander sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating his patch and smiled a little. “Sorry. Just woolgathering I guess. You taking the first shower?”

Spike knew he wasn't getting the whole story but he didn't call him on it. Maybe he was having some sort of belated crisis over the stonker he'd been sporting on the mats. Spike rolled his eyes. As if he'd been the first bloke ever to get a stiffy wrestling. Well, bollocks to that. Harris would figure it out or he wouldn't, but since he was a damn sight better company when he wasn't brooding, "You go on, mate. Reckon you got tossed around more than me. Bit sore, are you?"

Xander flexed his shoulder experimentally and winced. "Yeah. Who knew having your arm used as a slingshot would hurt?"

Spike snorted. "Why don't you let me take a look then, make sure it isn't torn before you go warming it up."

Xander smiled at him then and the open gratitude on his face would have taken Spike's breath away if he'd had any. "Yeah, thanks."

No one had looked at him like that since Dru. It made doing what he did next seem as natural as anything. "Right then. Kit off, on the bed, face down."

Xander laughed. "Don't I at least get dinner first?" he

asked, stripping his shirt off and groaning as he leaned back on his elbows.

“Careful putting weight on that,” Spike chided. Xander waved him off and flopped onto his stomach. Spike nimbly climbed onto the bed and straddled Xander’s hips. The redness and slight swelling on the shoulder were obvious from his vantage point. Spike placed his hand over the injury and felt the heat seep into his hand with a gasp echoed from Xander beneath him. Xander stiffened momentarily then relaxed as the cold from Spike’s hand soothed the torn muscle. Spike was mesmerized by the feel of warm flesh beneath his hand, the pulse of blood beneath the skin, the scents of sweat, the acid tang of pain, and a little earthy arousal. It was a heady cocktail. His other hand came up and began to knead the muscles of his lower back. Xander moaned. Spike hardened, stilled and removed his hands as though burned before nearly flying off the bed. “Yeah, that shoulder is a right mess. Best keep it out of the heat until the swelling goes down,” he babbled from the corner of the room.

Xander rolled to his back and looked at him oddly. “I’ll get some ice sent up.”

“Yeah, s’good idea. Well, I’ll just be taking that shower then,” he said. Spike ran into the bathroom and slammed the door shut. He sank against the solid wooden weight and let his legs give out.

They weren’t wrestling back there. He was giving Xander a massage. A bloody good one at that, an’ why? Spike snorted. Because it was care, wasn’t it? Carin’ for someone else—that thing that always landed him in over his bloody head an’ whether he was getting his end away or not, it meant that stupid twonk William was havin’ his say again which meant he may as well set himself on fire now because he was a hairsbreadth away from falling for the git. It wasn’t the friction got him hard, it was *need*. It was trust.

It was damn stupid, is what it was, and he needed to get the fuck out of Mexico.

Spike angrily turned on the taps and got the shower running as hot as he could. He stepped in and the moment the heat began to seep into his bones he leaned against the shower wall and gave it another thought. Could just be proximity and a familiar face, he reasoned. Man was fine and fit and it’d be natural to fixate on him, lonely as he was. Could be they could just share a good

time and leave it at that. No sense in getting ahead of himself. *Yeah*, he thought, beginning to pull on his cock, *a nice little bonus that would be. Just a little Mexican vacation—a good fight, a good fuck—and back home to Angel and hell incorporated, no strings attached.*

Spike came against the shower wall with a smile on his face and a casual proposition on his lips for Xander as he followed the billowing cloud of steam back into the room.

El Jefe sat by the window. Xander stood nervously beside him.

“El Vampiro, forgive the intrusion, but I thought you were dissatisfied with your living arrangement. You did not come to see me so I thought I would discover if the situation had changed. Has it?”

Spike swallowed and looked at Xander. “I reckon we’re comfortable enough here,” he hedged.

El Jefe smiled lecherously. “I’m so glad you two have become better acquainted. We are a very close-knit familia and it always pains me when others do not get along. So then,” El Jefe stood, and replaced his hat on his

head. “I suppose someone else must fight La Lagarto this evening. Until tonight, gentlemen.” El Jefe left.

Xander pounced on him. “Okay, what the hell was that about? *That’s* El Jefe? He’s like Ricardo Montalban’s eviler twin! And what was he talking about—living arrangements?”

Spike held up his hands to forestall the flood of questions. “I tried to angle for a single when he brought me on. Thought it might be bad to let on that I knew you right off without knowing what I was walking in to.”

Xander accepted this and sank into the chair El Jefe just vacated. Spike opened a beer from the mini-bar and pressed it into Xander’s hand before taking a seat on the bed. Xander took a long swig and looked up at him. “I’m thinking La Lagarto isn’t supposed to be walking out of the ring tonight. He say anything to you?”

“Who, Lagarto?”

“El Jefe.”

Spike shrugged. “You think they’re planning to off him for trying to get out of his contract?”

“Could be. He’s a big name.”

Spike considered the possibility and found he couldn’t find fault with his reasoning. “So now that I’m out of the running, whose going to fight him? He got another rudo in his pocket?”

Xander swallowed another sip of beer and shook his head. “I don’t think he needs one. Técnicos can fight each other no problem. So the question is who’s getting the job?”

Spike watched as Xander lost himself in sussing out the puzzle and thought about the proposition he wanted to make. “Look, Xander, there’s something I want to talk to you about—”

Xander began muttering to himself and looked at his watch. “—Right, three hours before we get on the bus—”

“Xander, I’ve been thinking about this situation we’re both in and—where’re you going?”

Xander was by the door before he answered, grinning. “Got a few hours before the match to find out who the

axe man is. La Paloma hears everything and he likes to gossip.” Xander opened the door and took off without looking back to see the gobsmacked expression on Spike’s face.

“Xander!” Spike called after him in exasperation. With a roar he grabbed his pants and took off down the hall after him. “Bloody hell, wait up!”

Part Thirteen

As he did most afternoons, La Paloma was holding court by the pool, wearing only his miniscule Speedos and enormous sunglasses and working on his tan. There was a glass on the table beside him, and it was filled with lemon and lime slices and crushed ice, but Xander knew the liquid was only mineral water, because La Paloma was very conscious of his waistline. Three of the other luchadores sat near him, all talking in rapid Spanish Xander couldn’t follow.

Xander plopped himself down in a free chair. “Hi, guys. Hey, do you know if Johnny Depp ever stays here? ‘Cause I just saw this guy checking in who I swear looks just like him.” The luchadores looked at each other and then quickly scurried towards the front of the hotel. La Paloma stayed put, though, and Xander grinned at him. “What’s

up, Birdman?” Xander asked. He noticed absently the way little drips of sweat trickled down the man’s sculpted chest.

“Nada mucho,” said La Paloma. “It’s a fine afternoon, isn’t it? And where’s your friend El Vampiro?”

Xander looked guiltily into the shadows around the edge of the courtyard, where Spike was leaning against the wall and scowling at him. Xander felt a little twinge of guilt, because he had the feeling Spike had been going to say something important to him. But they were here on a mission, after all. Xander mumbled an unintelligible answer to La Paloma and waved vaguely in Spike’s direction. “So,” Xander said. “Have you heard who’s fighting who tonight?”

La Paloma chuckled. “You’re very eager! I think you’ll fight El Vampiro again. The crowd would like to see a rematch.”

Xander had mixed feelings about that. He hoped Spike didn’t decide to fight like they had that afternoon, not when they were wearing their costumes and on display in front of hundreds of people. “Oh, okay. ‘Cause I thought I heard something about El Legarto.”

La Paloma went very still for a moment. Xander couldn't make out his eyes under the dark shades, but he had the sense the man was looking closely at him. "Naw, man. You're not gonna fight him. Not yet. I hear Pantalones is gonna do it tonight."

Xander jerked back a little in surprise, the movement jarring his sore shoulder. "Pantalones? Really?"

"That's what I hear."

Xander nodded slowly. "Yeah, okay. Um...I think I'm going to go get ready. I'll see you later."

La Paloma took a sip of his water. "Hasta luego, El Bucanero."

Spike fell into step beside Xander as soon as Xander walked by. "He said it was gonna be—"

"Yeah, I heard, whelp. Vamp hearing, innit? I knew that tosser was bent."

Xander had actually thought Pantalones was a pretty nice guy, apart from his obvious animosity towards Spike.

Animosity which was totally misplaced, because there was no way Spike had the hots for Xander. Yeah, there had been some groping and ass-waving, but this was *Spike*. He was just teasing, just trying to get under Xander's skin a little, because that's what he did. And if Xander felt kind of disappointed over that, well, that was just plain stupid. Just kind of a lonely guy reacting to a familiar face in an unfamiliar place, when the only home he'd ever known was an enormous crater and his girl was long dead and his friends seemed happier when he was hundreds of miles away from them.

Spike elbowed Xander lightly in the side, breaking into his reverie. "What's going through that head of yours?"

They'd come to the elevators, and Xander stabbed viciously at the button. "I don't know. I mean, I suppose I could try and figure out where El Jefe's hiding out and...I dunno. Rub him out? I'm not a hit man! And besides, we don't really even know for sure if he's up to no good."

The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. "We might not be certain, but we have a pretty good idea, pet. But you're right—can't just eat the wanker. He's a client."

“What kind of clients do you people have, Spike?”

Spike shrugged. “Evil ones, mostly, I reckon.”

The car arrived on their floor. They both walked in silence until they got to their room, and then Spike unlocked it. Inside, Xander collapsed onto the bed. “I know why they sent me on this job,” Xander announced.

“Because you look so pretty in glittery Spandex?”

Xander threw a pillow at him and missed. “Because I’m the Zeppo, that’s why. Because it was this dopey excuse to get me out of their hair.”

Spike sighed and nodded. “Know how that feels, mate.” He sat next to Xander on the bed. “You could always tell them to bugger off. Get a real job. Weren’t you a pretty deft hand at hammering things? Hell, you could probably make a living as a luchador, if you gave it a real go.”

Xander glowed for a moment in the near-flattery then shook his head. “No. I’d never...I feel a stupid obligation, you know?”

Spike nodded again, and Xander got the sudden sense

the vampire *did* know exactly what he meant.

Xander pulled himself to a sitting position, again ignoring the ache in his shoulder. “Okay. Enough with the self-pity. We need to deal with this. Maybe I should call Giles and see what he wants me to do.”

Spike lifted an eyebrow. “Aren’t you old enough to make some decisions on your own?”

Spike was right. He couldn’t just keep running to Giles or the girls all the time. He stared down at his feet and thought, and when that didn’t work he stared down at Spike’s feet, and he’d never noticed before that Spike had really nice feet, sort of delicate and sensitive looking, and he wondered whether vampires were ticklish, and this so wasn’t helping solve anything.

He stood. “I’m going to go talk to Pantalones.”

Spike gave him one of those strange looks Xander couldn’t read at all. He had a bunch of them, and they didn’t make any more sense to Xander than some of those weird English words he used. But Spike didn’t say anything as Xander marched out the door.

Xander knew which room was Pantalones's because the luchador had invited him there several times. It was one floor down from his and down the hall. He knocked loudly, and a moment later Pantalones swung the door open. He was shirtless and wearing a pair of blue and white striped Bermuda shorts. He looked a little haggard, Xander thought, but his face split into a huge grin when he saw Xander.

"Oye, guëy! Qué onda?" Pantalones gestured at Xander to come inside. He'd decorated his room, Xander saw. A couple of lucha posters hung on the walls, including one featuring Pantalones himself. There were also some little colored glass bottles on the windowsill and on the bedside tables some pictures of a bunch of smiling people—men, women, children—who looked a lot like Pantalones himself.

"Want a drink?" Pantalones asked, walking toward the minifridge. "Cerveza?"

"Um, no thanks. I thinking drinking before a fight's probably a bad idea."

Pantalones waved his hand dismissively. "You're gonna fight that little rudo again esta noche. You can beat him,

no problem. He's llamativo, no? Flashy. But you are better fighter." He put an arm around Xander's shoulders and steered him toward the unmade bed, then sort of pushed him down on it. Pantalones sat down, too, so close that their thighs were touching.

"So what's up, compadre?"

How did you accuse a guy of planning to kill another guy?
"I, uh, I was thinking about tonight's fight."

Pantalones put his arm back around Xander's shoulders. "Don't think too much. You've been practicing. You just *do* and you'll be fine. What you really need, mi amigo, is to relax *uno poquito*." His free hand landed just above Xander's knee. "I can help you relax," Pantalones breathed into Xander's ear.

Xander gulped. "Relaxing is good. But I'm not sure I'm ready to, uh, relax with another guy."

"Oh, es muy fácil." Pantalones scooted himself a little closer and crept his hand up Xander's leg a few inches. "Tarea que agrada presto se acaba."

Xander had no idea what that meant. It kind of sounded

sexy, though. Pantalones kind of sounded sexy, with his gravelly voice and the way he managed a sort of purr at the end of his sentences, and the way he rolled his r's with wild abandon, which made Xander wonder just how nimble the guy's tongue was.

Pantalones's hand inched higher, and it was very close to going where no man had gone before. No man but Xander. And uh, Pantalones himself. And Spike. And Manuel. And several other luchadores, during practice.

Xander groaned, and the wrestler seemed to take that as encouragement, because he moved his fingers even more. This was *not* why Xander was here, he reminded himself. But he didn't say anything, just sat there, wavering on the brink of indecision, when there was a loud pounding at the door.

Pantalones sighed with exasperation and got up to answer it. From the angle where he was sitting, Xander couldn't see who was there, but he could sure hear: "Oi! What the bloody hell is going on here, colero?"

Part Fourteen

Xander lay on the bed, flushed and breathing heavily. Pantalones was draped across him like a cheap serape.

“I asked you a bloody question, mate,” Spike growled from the doorway. He could feel the barrier’s energy skittering across his skin and he had to resist the urge to throw himself against it.

“Come in Spike,” Xander said at the same time Pantalones told him, “I don’t have to explain anything to you.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Spike hauled him up by his collar and pulled Xander off the bed, shoving Pantalones roughly away. He swung wildly and struck Spike hard across the jaw.

“Spike, don’t—” Xander tried.

Spike grinned and kicked Pantalones in the stomach, sending him crashing into a small table.

“Spike, he didn’t do anything wrong!”

Spike dragged the fallen man up by his shirt and punched him the face. “He touched you!”

“And I could have stopped him any time I wanted!”
Xander yelled back.

Spike froze and dropped the bloodied luchador. So Xander wanted the bloke. And here he stood like a bloody pillock trying to defend his honor. Because he’d thought... He’d hoped... “Right. Sod this.” Spike turned and left.

“Spike! Wait!” Xander called after him. Spike ignored him and slammed open the door to the stairwell.

He was on his sixth or seventh tequila when El Jefe found him sitting in the hotel bar.

“El Vampiro. Mind if I join you?”

Spike snorted into his shot glass. “Be my bloody guest.”

El Jefe sat in the chair beside him. “We have a problem.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. La Lagarto’s opponent is being treated for a concussion, a broken jaw and several broken ribs as we speak. Pantalones Famosos, you remember him?”

Spike swallowed another shot. “S’a shame.”

“We take our obligations very seriously in Lucha Libre. You have interfered in a fellow wrestler’s ability to meet his contractual responsibilities. I cannot allow this.”

Spike looked into El Jefe’s gray, lined face. “So fine me.”

“If only it were that simple. It was difficult maintaining order when I took over this club three months ago, but gradually, the luchadores came to respect my authority and the way I do business. I cannot afford to be lenient now. You will take Pantalones Famosos place in the ring tonight. One of you shall be crowned victor, and the other released from their contract.

And El Bucanero shall fight the winner to the death.”

Spike stayed well away from Xander in the remaining hour before the bus departed and he sat as far from him

on the bus as was possible, despite Xander's every effort to catch his eye. When they rattled to a stop outside the ring, he was herded back toward the visitors' locker room. El Jefe apparently drew the line at making luchadores shower with their executioners.

He was welcomed with a grim smile and a pat on the back from Gabriel that nearly sent him sprawling. "Mala suerte, mijo," he said.

Several things had become apparent to Spike in the last few hours. Firstly, he'd wager his soul that El Jefe had obtained control of the lucha club from whomever had their name on the contract back at Wolfram & Hart, and had orchestrated the transaction to be not only silent, but to go unmarked by the legions of evil lawyers with their fingers in every gray-shaded pie on this plane. Secondly, many of the blokes wrestling seemed to be demons of the sort that passed for human, were largely peaceful, and had been wrestling long before the reign of El Jefe, so the death matches had to be his doing.

Question was, was the former owner complicit with the change? If not, then it was a simple matter of killing El Jefe and whatever means he had of insuring that bloke's compliance would likely disappear and the matter of life

for life matches would resolve itself on its own. But if he wasn't being coerced...

Spike turned his face into the stinging spray of the shower. Negotiating was a fiddly business and he had no patience for it.

Spike turned off the taps and ambled into the empty locker room. His bout with La Lagarto wasn't scheduled for another hour but the others, not slated for career ending matches, were already ringside.

So it understandably startled him when Xander burst in wearing his black velour warm-up suit, Púrpura Grande's wig, and Manuel's blue and yellow mask—the eyes covered by a pair of cheap black sunglasses.

“What the hell?”

Xander flattened his back against the door. “I'm in disguise. Look, I don't have a lot of time, but you need to know, El Jefe isn't the real owner of the club.”

Spike smiled at Xander's eagerness. “Had managed to work out that part myself, actually.”

Xander deflated somewhat. “Oh. Well did you also figure out that La Paloma’s the one he stole it from? He found me and told me what happened. El Jefe’s blackmailing him.”

Well that settled that. “Right. You go on and head back to Grover’s Corners then. I’ll deal with El Jefe.”

Xander stood there in his ridiculous getup unmoving. “But I can’t leave now! Not when we’re so close—”

“Ain’t no ‘we’, about it mate. I got a job to do and when it’s done, yours is too. Best get yourself gone. I don’t reckon the geezer’s going down without a fight.”

“So that’s it? You’re cutting me out, just like that? Fuck you, Spike! I thought—fuck, never mind what I thought. Well, thanks for humoring the cripple, I guess. I almost felt like a real person there for a while.”

“Oh, don’t you go playing the martyr with me! As if this whole entire cock-up wasn’t your doing—”

“My fault? How in God’s name is this my fault?”

“If I’d known you were panting after that tosser—”

“Panting after—you—you moron! I didn’t want that, I was trying to get information!”

Spike scoffed. “Didn’t have you pegged for resorting to that kind of caper to get your end away—”

Xander grit his teeth, fists clenched and Spike recognized he was about four words from a sound thrashing, or would have been back in the chipped days. “He came on to me—I can’t help that I reacted! I have been confused and horny for almost *two weeks*! I would have responded to a *Fyarl demon* if he’d offered to touch my penis! And for your information, it was your fucking fault for getting me worked up in the first place! Do you have any idea what it’s like sleeping next to you every damned night and never getting any privacy to jerk off?”

Spike snorted. “Seem to recall a bloke tying me to a chair and shaking his arse about in my face once, yeah.”

Xander made a frustrated sound. “Well you should have said something! Was gonna ask you, but then you just couldn’t wait—”

“So ask me now.”

“—What?”

“Ask. Me.”

Spike blinked and stared at the tile, trying to remember what he wanted to ask when the words fell out of his mouth in an inaudible jumble. “Wanna shag?”

“What?”

“I asked if you wanna shag! Just, you know, comfort, or what have you.”

“No.”

Spike’s mouth gaped. “No,” he repeated, uncomprehendingly.

“No.”

Spike shut his mouth and reined in his temper and hurt. “Fine. Just, bloody, fine.”

“I want dinner. And maybe a movie.”

Spike stared at the git making demands in that ridiculous

costume. “Sorry?”

Xander sighed and took off the wig and mask before running a hand through his sable hair. “Look, you don’t do casual sex any better than I do, and I just can’t anymore. I need to matter to somebody. I want someone to brag to the girls about so they stop fixing me up on blind dates with the best looking girls they can find who will date someone with a hollow eye socket. I don’t want to spend another year going dateless to every birthday party and I’m going to put a fucking bullet through my head if I have to take one more pity invitation to spend Christmas with Giles. I don’t want to be alone anymore. And I don’t think I want you to have to be, either. I might want more than an experimental or comfort or pity fuck. I’m pretty sure I just want you.

“But mostly, I just want to shut the hell up and kiss you right now because I need something to go right today. So can I? Please?”

Spike nodded wordlessly, and as the sweetest lips he’d ever tasted closed over his he let himself fall. It felt like coming home.

All too soon, Xander pulled back. “Look, you need to

know El Jefe's got himself mojoed up. La Paloma couldn't say who or how—I think he's been geased, or something—but you're not going to get him without getting at whoever's helping him first.”

“Mate, did you miss the part where I'm supposed to be killing you tonight? Little slap on the wrist for fighting over a choice bloke?”

Xander smirked. “Paloma had an idea. I think there's a way we can fight and still walk away from it, no harm, no foul.” There was a confident gleam in Xander's eye.

Spike liked it. “I'm listening.”

Part Fifteen

“How badly would your ego be damaged if you lost to a one-eyed human?”

Spike tilted his head in that way he had, thought on it for

a moment, and then grinned. He reached out and just barely touched Xander's face so that Xander's entire body felt weak and shivery. "Depends what the consolation prize is," he purred.

Xander swallowed and wondered, for about the ten thousandth time in his life, what he'd got himself into. "Then here's the deal. El Jefe doesn't realize you're a vamp, does he?"

"No, I don't expect he does. Some of the fighters are demons. You know that, yeah?" Xander nodded ruefully. "But peaceful ones. No vamps."

"Paloma figured out you're a member of the undead nation. 'Course, he signed a contract with your law firm to begin with, so I suppose he knows about vampires with souls. Anyway, he'd really like to get control of the group back. He's not happy about seeing his guys slaughter each other either, I think."

"Right. Paloma's a peach. So what's the plan, Xan?"

Xander smiled. "Spike, you're a dead man."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander felt kind of sorry for El Lagarto. He hadn't actually had much of a chance to get to know the glittery lizard, in part because the other guy's English was as bad as Xander's Spanish. Plus the odd look Xander had seen in Legarto's eyes now and then, combined with the fact that Xander had never once spotted him out of costume, had given Xander the fairly firm impression that Legarto was not exactly human. Xander had enough possibly demonic gay luchadores lusting after him; he hadn't needed another. So he'd kept his distance from Legarto.

But he had the idea that Legarto was a pretty decent guy. Which is why he felt bad when the match began, because it was very clear that the lizard was about to get his ass handed to him on a platter.

Spike prowled into the ring looking as deadly as anything Xander had ever seen. And as sexy, but that was so not what he needed to be thinking right now.

The crowd could tell he meant business and they roared with approval.

Legarto could tell, too, and Xander thought he saw the poor guy's knees shaking. It occurred to Xander then that

it was perfectly possible that nobody had informed El Lagarto that he was not the one who would be battling to the death tonight. Xander wondered what he would think when he came out of the bout with his life but minus his job.

Manuel came up close behind Xander and set a hand on Xander's shoulder. "This should be good," he said.

It was. Spike twisted and spun and flew so far through the air Xander could have sworn he had wings. El Legarto was putting up a pretty good fight too, and no wonder—he thought if he didn't he was toast. But Spike was faster and stronger and it was no real contest. In fact, the whole thing could have been over in minutes, but Xander could tell that Spike was drawing the whole thing out, toying with Legarto the way he used to toy with demons back when they were on patrol in Sunnydale. He looked lethal and magnificent, and Xander's heart swelled with the knowledge that that creature up there was *his*.

At least it was only his heart that swelled.

When Spike finally pinned his opponent and the officials called the match, Spike stood and gave Legarto a hand up. The lizard was clearly bewildered and he blinked

around himself in shock. The crowd, though, was cheering and screaming, and El Vampiro was prancing triumphantly around the ring.

Eventually, El Legarto made his way out of the ring and walked slowly by Xander. He looked dazed. Then the announcer shouted something Xander didn't catch—no doubt the upcoming match between El Vampiro and El Bucanero, and Legarto froze in front of Xander. “Usted sabe que él va a matarle?” he said.

“Sorry. No comprendo.”

Legarto looked exasperated. He pointed at Spike, who was still basking in the crowd's admiration, then at Xander, then sliced his hand dramatically across his throat.

“Ah,” Xander said. And then he shook his head, and mimed back, this time indicating that he would kill Spike. He couldn't read the luchador's face very well due to the mask, but he thought he saw a mixture of doubt and pity there. Then Paloma came and, without looking at Xander, led the sparkling lizard away.

There was an intermission of some kind. People filed out

of their seats and then back, clutching paper cups of beer. All the patrons with children left, though, and Xander wondered how so many people could be complacent about death. Not just complacent—complicit.

Spike came bouncing out of the ring and ran past Xander, probably to towel off in the locker room. He flashed Xander a quick glance as he passed, and anybody looking probably wouldn't have noticed, but Xander saw blue eyes that flashed with heated desire. Xander tried to hide an answering smile.

He heard more footsteps behind him, slow, slightly shuffling ones, and wasn't very surprised to turn and find El Jefe staring at him. "This will be a fight to the death," he said.

Xander pretended to be shocked. "What? No way! That's, that's—"

El Jefe waved a dismissive hand. "No point arguing. El Vampiro has already agreed. I generally have to use slightly more persuasive techniques under these circumstances, but I don't believe you have any family I can threaten or enrich, do you? But it doesn't matter.

Either you kill El Vampiro or he will certainly kill you.”

“I’m not gonna step in that ring, then!” Xander stubbornly folded his arms across his chest.

“You will. Or else you will be thrown in there. If it were me, I would prefer a more dignified entrance.”

Xander looked around him wildly, as if he were calculating the chances of making a run for it, and then slumped in mock defeat. El Jefe clapped him on the shoulder and shuffled away.

About fifteen minutes later there were more announcements followed by more urgent movements by the spectators towards their seats. Xander heard his name called and feigned reluctance until somebody shoved him forward. Then he trudged into the ring, followed closely by Spike. Xander didn’t have to fake a good case of nerves as he stood waiting for the match to begin. He and Spike hadn’t exactly had a lot of time to choreograph this, and he was about to get very physical with someone he badly wanted to get very physical with. In a totally different way.

The bell rang and Spike immediately launched himself at

Xander. Xander ducked. Spike clambered to the top of the ropes and jumped off, flipping in midair and landing on Xander. Xander was momentarily very thankful he didn't have to wrestle Angel. He bucked Spike off himself and leapt to his feet, trying to get his breath back. Spike was already up on the ropes again, but this time Xander managed to duck and mostly avoid him, and the two of them went rolling together in some sort of bizarre somersault where each had his face planted in the other's crotch. Xander vowed to remember that one later, but for now he pulled himself away.

Before Spike could stand, Xander threw himself on top of him. Spike made a very satisfying *oof* sound. They twisted around one another for several seconds—Spike managing to get in an innocent-seeming squeeze of Xander's ass—and then Spike put his feet around Xander's head. Xander stood again, so that Spike was now upside down. But Spike twisted his legs around, toppling Xander back to the floor.

Several more moves followed, all lightning quick. They flung one another around, they leapt into the air, they rammed their arms into each others' chests, they grabbed one another's masks and tights and used them as handles. The crowd loved it. They were screaming and

cheering so loudly Xander couldn't hear anything. It didn't seem to him that the audience really cared who won, as long as someone was bashing someone else.

Xander was hot and sweaty and sore and having a lot of fun. But he was also beginning to tire a little bit and Spike nearly took out Xander's left knee with a good kick. Xander decided it was time to end the match and so, as they'd agreed ahead of time, he erupted in a fury of attacks that ended with Xander throwing Spike out of the ring. Spike lay on his stomach on the cement floor, perhaps genuinely dazed, and Xander vaulted over the ropes, picked up a folding chair, and brought it down on Spike's head.

There was a lot of blood.

Spike twitched a few times and then went very still.

It was an eerie thing when several hundred people went suddenly, deafeningly silent.

The referee came over and flipped Spike onto his back. Xander winced at the way the vampire's—his vampire's—head flopped and the way his white chest was unmoving. The referee was joined by another, and

they poked at Spike for several minutes, searching for a pulse. One of them shook his head and the spectators gasped.

El Jefe appeared and he walked slowly toward Spike. With some difficulty, he knelt on one knee. Then he, too, searched for a pulse, and he pulled back Spike's eyelids. One of the referees had to help him stand again. El Jefe whispered something in the man's ear.

The referee walked over to Xander, who'd been standing by the ropes this entire time, and raised Xander's arm. "El ganador!" he shouted, and the crowd erupted.

Xander just stood there. Eventually the referee let him go. Manuel came and took Xander's arm. Xander allowed himself to be led away with only once glance back at the corpse of the vampire he might be falling in love with.

Part Sixteen

Manuel held off the other wrestlers from the locker room while Xander changed his clothes and gathered his things. He had to act quickly.

Manuel caught him at the door before he left. “I’ll cover for you, mijo. La Paloma already bought off the coroner. He’ll be waiting in the blue van by the west doors, entiende?”

Xander nodded and grasped his arm in thanks before braving the crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of the ruthless, one-eyed exotico.

The five minutes it took to race down the cement corridor to the exit were among the longest of his life, not knowing how much he’d truly damaged Spike or what condition he’d find him in. There was so much blood—

“Xander! Psst! Querido!” La Paloma was hanging out the side of the van and waving frantically.

Xander ran and jumped inside. The door slammed shut behind him and tires squealed as they peeled out of the parking lot.

Spike lay propped up on several blankets, bloodied and bruised, but otherwise no worse for wear, nursing a Big Gulp full of blood. “Hey, Xan,” he said, smiling.

Xander let out a ragged breath and sank down beside him. “Oh, thank God,” he said, hoarsely.

“Not worried were you? Had a lot worse—from you an’ all,” Spike reminded him.

Xander laughed a little and swiped at his eyes with a grimy hand. “Sorry, just—I had to make it look good, but I didn’t know how hard I got you, you know? And you just looked so—so—”

“Dead?” Spike offered.

Xander let out a breath. “Yeah.”

Spike shrugged stiffly. “Still here.”

Xander ran a hand gently through Spike’s disheveled hair, carefully avoiding the tender places. “Yeah, you are. Glad I didn’t do anything to change that.”

“Me too.” Spike relaxed into Xander’s touch and dozed

off. Through the tinted windows, Xander tracked the stars in the night sky, so much like the ones that watched over him in Africa, and knew with utter certainty that no matter the outcome of this assignment, he wasn't returning to Iowa.

The house was well off the main roads and warm light poured from every adobe window making it glow like a beacon against the desert sky. An older woman stood on the front porch, waiting for them as the van finally came to a stop on the gravel drive.

Xander gently shook Spike awake. "We're here."

Spike blinked and nodded curtly, allowing Xander to help him out of the van.

The woman stepped forward and embraced Xander warmly, kissing both his cheeks. "Gracias, mis hijos," she told them, releasing him only to crush Spike to her substantial bosom. "Usted es agradable aquí."

"Gracias," Spike said with surprising grace, allowing her to take his elbow and pull him inside. Xander and La Paloma followed, exchanging amused glances.

“Your room is down the hall to your right.” Paloma told them. “The baño is there also, you can’t miss it. Go get your rest, we’ll deal with the bastardo mago in la mañana.”

They gratefully said goodnight to La Paloma and his mother and left them in search of shower and sleep.

There was a big wrought iron bed in the center of the room covered in downy white pillows and blankets that instantly made him take note of his cleanliness or apparent lack thereof.

Xander heard a low whistle from the adjacent bathroom and found Spike hovering lustfully over the large copper bathtub. There was a large walk-in shower on the opposite wall and a marble topped vanity in between.

“Well, Harris, we really fell upstairs this time. M’only sorry I can’t think of a way to make Angel foot the bill.”

Xander chuckled. “We should get Paloma to draw up an invoice.”

“Yeah,” Spike grinned.

An awkward moment of expectant silence and then, “Look, um, I’m gonna jump in the shower, so the tub’s all yours. Unless you two’d like to be alone?” Xander added wryly.

Spike flipped him off and flung the taps open.

Twenty or so minutes later, Xander turned off the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist that he’d most likely told Anya was too expensive back when they’d been playing house together. He should have been better to her. He shouldn’t have been so tight with his money.

He should have loved her more when he had the chance.

Xander threw his clothes on in a hurry and went off to find the kitchen.

Spike was still soaking in the tub when Xander returned with blood of indeterminate origin. “Hey, I bring sustenance,” he announced.

Spike peeled open his eyes and reached for the mug. “Ta, ever so.”

Xander sat on the floor beside the tub, pulled his knees up to his chest and watched him drink. Spike observed him warily over the top of the mug. Xander took it from him wordlessly when Spike was finished and set it on the vanity before taking a washcloth and gently beginning to clear away the dried blood from Spike's hair and face. He didn't look Spike in the eye. He didn't want to see judgment or rejection or pity but he needed to do this right now because he needed to believe things were going to be different this time. He was going to be different this time.

He knew it couldn't last and he wasn't really surprised when Spike grabbed his wrist and stopped him. "Xander, what're you doing, luv? S'nice, but this isn't us."

"It could be," Xander answered, staring determinedly at the terracotta tiles. "Don't know any other way to be."

"No, you don't do things by halves, do you?" Spike took the washcloth from him. "Look, Harris, you need to understand that I'm still a mean bastard. I'm not a patient man, I like violence, and blood and I don't much care if I'm fucking or fighting when I get it. I'm a demon. M'not gonna be easy."

Xander couldn't help himself. "Gosh, and all my other lovers have been such wilting flowers. Be gentle?"

"Oi! M'not joking!"

Xander laughed because it was easier and because this much he knew was them. "I'm sorry. You're being serious. Go back to the part about the rough sex?"

Spike growled in frustration and splashed Xander, drenching the front of his shirt. Xander's eyes widened. He stuck his arm over the edge of the tub and retaliated, grinning.

Suddenly and without warning strong, wet hands were dragging his clothed body into the tub. Xander laughed in surprised delight and Spike's mouth closed over his demandingly. When Spike released him, Xander saw knowing in his eyes.

"Don't let me fuck this up," Xander begged.

Spike tightened his grip on the back of Xander's head. "Don't let me hurt you."

Xander kissed him then, because he couldn't come up

with a better response, and anyway, there was a drop of water running down Spike's cheek and onto his throat that he needed to taste.

Spike moaned and Xander smiled against his neck and nipped gently. Spike took his hand and placed it on his swollen cock, grinding up into his palm. Xander fisted him greedily and continued sucking and licking the beautiful little spot above his collarbone until it was purple with borrowed blood and Spike was whining with need and fumbling for the opening of Xander's pants with one hand and trying to grip the tub with the other. Cool fingers fondled his balls and Xander plastered himself against Spike with a needy sound. Their teeth and lips clashed and sucked and bit and tongues explored and the water sloshed over the edge of the tub. They jerked each other frantically, breathing hard and hurried and the raw, honest *need* put such a sharp edge on his pleasure Xander came with a shout. Seconds later Spike tensed and Xander pulled his body tight against his as Spike's cock pulsed in his hand.

Xander wanted to collapse in a boneless sprawl over the body of his magnificent, wonderful, perfect, beautiful lover, but had to content himself with holding Spike close, as they were still in the tub. The rapidly cooling tub

in which he was submerged in his rapidly chilling clothes with a vampire who was slowly leaching the heat from his body.

Spike rubbed at Xander's arms as if realizing this for himself and moved to stand on wobbly legs. Xander steadied him and helped him out of the tub before getting out himself, shivering violently.

He stripped, and Spike wrapped him in a towel with an incongruously coy smile.

That night, for the forty-third time they slept under the same roof. For the twenty-eighth time they walked into the bedroom they would be sharing and Xander turned down the bed. For the fifteenth time they slid into bed beside one another, said good night for the twelfth time, and for the fourth time they kissed, and when Spike pillowed his head on Xander's arm for the first time, he fell asleep thinking it felt like they'd been sleeping like this for years.

Part Seventeen

Spike woke up with a nasty headache, but that was okay, because he also woke up with arms around him and a soft cock nestled against the his arse, and he was warm, like he was burning again but without the pain. He twisted around and nuzzled lightly at Xander's neck, and then there were prickly bristles and morning breath, but he could manage that as well because of the wide smile Xander gave him as soon as he opened his eyes. A smile like someone had just unexpectedly given him a gift he'd been wishing for all his life.

"Morning," Xander said.

Spike glanced at the window, where a bit of light was sneaking through the edges of the curtains—and, thankfully, not making its way to him. "More like afternoon, I reckon."

Xander kissed Spike's nose and *giggled*, which was so ridiculous Spike couldn't help but chuckle himself. "How's the noggin?" Xander asked.

“I’ll mend. Don’t know that you had to hit me so hard, though.”

Xander shrugged, which did interesting things where their bodies were pressed together. “Consider us even. Microscope, remember?”

“Was evil then.”

Xander palmed Spike’s arse. “You’re still relatively Big Baddish.”

Spike snorted and then groaned slightly when Xander squeezed harder, drawing them impossibly even closer together. “For a bloke who’s new to this, you’re not very timid, pet.”

“It’s the new me. If I see something I want I’m not going to waste time with the angst.”

That was a philosophy Spike could admire, and he was about to demonstrate to Xander just how much he admired it, when there was a hearty knock on their door, and La Paloma came in, his grin a mile wide. “Mama has been waiting hours to feed you two, and she can’t wait any longer. She’s going to come in here in uno momento

whether you two are decent or not. Knowing Mama, she may be hoping you are not.” He winked.

Reluctantly, Spike and Xander drew apart, and then they both sat up. Xander made sure the blankets covered them securely from the waist down.

“Erm, does your mum know about my particular dietary needs?” Spike asked.

“Oh, sí. You are not our first demon guest, sabes, although you are the first vampire.”

Just then the old bird bustled in with a tray in her hands, and Spike noticed that she made certain to get a good eyeful of their bare chests. “Buenas tardes, mijos!” she sang. “Did you sleep well?”

Xander’s face was a charming bright red. “Yeah, thanks, ma’am,” he mumbled.

“Muy bien! Enjoy your meal!” And with another ogle she was gone.

Paloma sat down in the room’s sole chair and laughed as Xander tore into warm homemade tortillas and chorizo

and eggs. All the while Xander was making little noises of happiness that sounded to Spike remarkably like the sounds he'd made the night before in the bath. But Spike didn't mind because there was a huge mug of blood for him, so fresh it was still warm from the vein. It nearly baa-ed at him, and it was one of the tastiest meals he's had since he gave up on eating humans. There were also two bowls of thick, foamy chocolate, redolent of cinnamon, that reminded Spike of Joyce and made him want to lick the tasty mustache off Xander's lip.

Paloma waited patiently until Spike and Xander had decimated their meals, then took the tray from them and set it on the floor. "We need to talk, mis amigos."

Spike nodded. "You have another scheme?"

"I'm afraid not. You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish, of course, El Vampiro—"

"Just call me Spike, mate."

"Spike. But if El Bucanero returns to the ring, El Jefe will certainly put him in another death match. But if you leave, nobody will stop El Jefe."

“How’s he making the others fight?”

“He threatens their families. One luchador—Tornado Misterio—he refused, and soon after, his sister and her children all died in a house fire.” Paloma frowned.

“Tornado killed himself just a few weeks later.”

Xander had been uncharacteristically quiet. “What’s in it for him?”

“He is paid more for the death matches, and attendance is increased.”

“And the cops don’t care?”

Paloma shrugged. “He pays them off, I think. Besides, who cries if a few more demons die?”

Xander’s jaw worked. “Some demons have people who care about them.”

“I know. I care about my luchadores. They are almost my family. Every time one of them dies...it is like losing a brother.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Xander said, sounding very

determined for a naked man.

Paloma smiled. “Gracias. Now I think I will leave you alone for a while, but El Bucanero will be missed if he does not return to the hotel soon.”

As soon as he was gone, Xander turned to Spike and gripped one of Spike’s knees with his palm. “Shit! What are we gonna do? ‘Cause no offense, but planning isn’t exactly your strongpoint, is it? Or mine.”

Spike had to admit his boy was right. But before he could say anything in response, Xander’s jacket, which was on the floor, began to play a tinny version of an Indigo Girls song. Spike raised an eyebrow at him. “Willow set the phone up for me,” Xander said defensively and scrambled for it. Spike enjoyed the view as Xander bent to retrieve it.

“Hey, Will,” Xander said. His eyes shifted toward Spike.

“Right,” Spike said and stood. Mustn’t let the Scoobies know what Xander had been shagging. He stalked toward the loo in search of his clothing, but Xander caught at his arm as Spike passed him and didn’t let go. Spike huffed out a breath and listened in.

“Xan? Are you okay? We haven’t heard from you in a while and I was kinda worried.”

“I’m fine, Will. Making some progress on the case, even.”

“Really? That’s great.” Spike hated the way she sounded slightly surprised, like none of them had expected Xander to accomplish anything. “Do you think you’ll be able to come back home soon?”

Xander sighed. “Iowa’s not home, Willow.”

“But everybody’s here.”

Xander glanced up at Spike’s face and smiled. “Not everybody.”

“Xan?”

“I’ve kind of met someone. Well, not met, really, because, I mean, we already knew each other. But now we’ve really, uh, *met*.”

There was a brief pause as Red tried to translate his babble into English. Then she made a happy little squeak.

“Really? Who is she?”

“Not she. He.”

This time the silence was longer, no doubt as the witch tried to remember the gay welcome wagon speech. Finally, she said, “Wow. That’s...wow! That’s great! Do I know him?”

Spike waited for the evasions, but Xander simply said, “Yep. It’s Spike. I’ve met Spike, Will.” Suddenly Spike’s head stopped aching.

The pause on the other end of the phone was so long this time that Spike wondered if she’d fainted. But eventually, in a tiny voice, she said, “Have you been possessed? Or...or enthralled, maybe?”

“Nope. Just...I’m kind of falling for Spike, and that’s all.” He smiled up at Spike again and finally let go of his arm. “It feels right.”

“I’m...oh.”

“So I’m gonna let you digest that for a while, and you can go tell everyone else if you want and you can all freak

out, and I'll give you a call later, when we've saved the day." He slid his mobile phone closed and tossed it onto the bed.

"That was unexpected, love."

"I told you. New me. Oh, shit. Maybe you didn't want Buffy to know." Xander looked suddenly distressed.

"Nah, 't's fine. 'M only sorry I can't be there to see her face when she hears about it."

Xander's frown turned to a grin and he began to giggle again. "And Giles! I bet he polishes right through his glasses. Man, I wish we were there."

Spike grabbed the back of Xander's neck and drew him closer. "Tell you what. Let's get this business sorted and then we can go to LA together and snog in Peaches' office instead."

Xander kissed him, his mouth tasting of chocolate and spices and chiles. When he stopped to catch his breath, he said, "You got yourself a deal."

Part Eighteen

Xander sat on the side of the hill overlooking the hotel property, not especially deep in thought, mostly, just grateful for the quiet.

After some discussion on possible avenues of attack, they decided the first order of business ought to be removing the geas on La Paloma. To that end, Spike was going to track down the nearest bruja, according to the gossip from Paloma's mother, while Xander attempted to maintain their cover and keep a close eye on El Jefe.

The situation back at the hotel, however, had changed. His room had been reassigned while he was away, his things moved to a larger suite. Men and women were crowded into the lobby looking to get a piece of him. La Paloma was keeping his distance, which was smart, but intimidating for Xander who had to rely on his own wits to navigate the groping and the stealth—which was considerably less stealthy with the throng of gropers at

his heels.

El Jefe was holding court poolside. He gave Xander a knowing smile when he saw him approaching and waved him over. “El Bucanero! Mi hijo! Come join me, won’t you?”

Xander glared in the direction of his groupies and reluctantly took a seat at the table.

“You’re fighting El Coyote del Futuro tonight.”

Xander gave him a hard look. “To the death?”

“Sí. Naturalmente.”

“*Why?* Why are you doing this to me?” Xander demanded.

El Jefe chuckled and stamped out his cigar. “Because you need to learn. I took you on because Orozco vouched for you, but I won’t have my luchadores fighting like dogs over a bone. You are here for one reason only—to fight—and that only because I wish it. There is nothing else. You will fight El Coyote tonight and you will learn your place.”

He never did find out where his new room was. He wanted out of the hotel, out of the job, out of the whole damn country. Xander tossed a rock down the hillside, pulled out his phone and dialed Spike.

“How’s the search coming?” he asked.

“Bloody slow, what with it still being day an’ all. The old woman’s gone asking round her sister’s place north of here. Should know something in a few hours.”

“Problem—I’m fighting in two hours.”

“Fuck.”

“Bout sums it up. Any other brilliant ideas?”

“Yeah, hang on—hey!” There was static and a scuffling sound from Spike’s end.

“Spike?” There was no answer. “Spike?”

A distinctive click sounded behind his left ear. Xander jumped and dropped the phone as he felt the gun barrel pressed to the back of his head.

“Turn around slowly.” Xander knew that voice. How did he know that voice?

Xander turned around. He did a double take. “Wait— Wesley? Watcher Wesley?”

The gun didn’t waver. Wesley nodded his acknowledgement. “He’s here, Angel.”

Angel came up the hill behind Wesley. “Thanks Wes,” he said, without removing his eyes from Xander.

He was starting to get the impression that something had gone very, very wrong. “What’s going on?” he asked.

With no more warning, Angel surged forward and hauled Xander up by the neck, choking him. “How did you do it? Did you fight? Did he have a chance, or did you stab him in the back, you little shit? *How did it happen?*”

Xander couldn’t answer with his windpipe being crushed.

“Angel, I don’t think he can breathe to speak like that,” Wesley observed calmly. Angel released his hold and dropped him to the ground.

Xander gasped for air. “What the *fuck* are you talking about?” he panted, rubbing at his neck.

“I haven’t been in contact with Spike since he told me you were here. Then I get a call last night from his liaison saying *you killed him.*” Angel leaned over him menacingly. “Spike said you were working for the council. Was it a hit job? Was it *personal?*”

Xander stared incredulously at Angel. “He’s not dead! We staged his death in the ring last night *because we’re undercover*, you asshole! Now would you get the fuck out of here?”

“Where is he?”

Covered in sand and dust, Xander struggled to his feet. “In hiding and following a lead.”

“I want to see him.”

Xander threw up his hands. “Great! Me too.” Xander bent down and picked his phone up off the ground and started walking back toward the hotel. “You have a car?”

Wesley answered. "A jeep. Parked about a mile up the road."

Xander kept walking. "I'll meet you there." A second later he was being dangled by his throat again.

"How do I know you're telling the truth," Angel demanded. Xander didn't waste time in pulling the stake from his pocket and digging it into Angel's chest.

He dropped to the ground and kicked out, catching Angel in the knee. Angel went down with a sharp cry. The gun came back out. "Do you have another option, you paranoid Neanderthal?"

"Why don't we escort you," Wesley suggested.

"You can't, you'll blow my cover," Xander explained.

"Well that's too bad for you, isn't it?" Angel smirked.

Xander nearly pulled out his hair. "You've got some fucking balls! Is this mission worth getting Spike and I killed or not? After everything we've been through to do your dirty work, which by the way, is nothing but a big Wolfram & Hart fuckup, you're going to throw it away

because you suddenly decide you give a shit about Spike?
FUCK YOU!”

Five minutes later, Xander strode boldly into the lobby with a man on each arm. Angel was stiff and silent, but Wesley was surprisingly convincing as a simpering trick. Fortunately, Manuel was in the lobby, going over the schedule with several of the other luchadores. “Hey, Manuel,” he called. “I’ll find my own ride to the ring tonight, okay?” He tried a leer on for size, drawing on his memory of his last encounter with Pantalones Famosos. It must have been convincing. Manuel waved him off with a laugh. Xander pinched Angel’s ass as they walked out the door.

There was a black SUV in the driveway of Paloma’s house. Mentally, Xander calculated the odds they were interrupting a kidnapping for ransom by Columbians or being shadowed by Mulder and Scully.

Then he saw the hula girl on the dashboard and the fuzzy dice on the mirror. The vanity plates read SLYR 1.

Xander had really been hoping for Gillian Anderson.

Spike was sporting a black eye and glaring at Buffy and

Dawn seated across the living room when they entered.

Angel froze in the doorway. Wesley stood cautiously beside him.

“Xander! Spike’s not the First!” Dawn stood and gestured excitedly to Spike.

“He’s not? Gosh, I guess that *would* explain the hot, corporeal man sex.” Xander pushed past Angel and sat beside Spike, checking out the shiner Buffy’d landed on him. Spike swatted his hand away.

“Spike turns up alive in Mexico and he’s *nice* to you? It didn’t exactly take Andrew’s panic attack to make that leap,” Buffy pointed out.

“Sex?” Angel asked stupidly. They ignored him.

“I found him in the ring kicking my ass. I figured it was safe to assume he was telling the truth.”

“And what’s the deal with telling Willow you’re not coming home?” Dawn asked.

Xander sighed. Beside him Spike stiffened and Xander

took his hand. “Look, I was really mad at Giles for sending me to Africa by myself. But even though I wasn’t so much pushed out of the nest as drop-kicked into a war-zone, I eventually figured out that I could handle things just fine on my own. Dawn, you and Buffy and Willow and Giles are my family and I love you. But, I’m a grown man. I can’t be an errand boy for the rest of my life.”

“Okay, so no more errand boy!” Dawn pleaded. “I get that, but why do you have to leave us?”

Buffy he noticed wasn’t chiming into the discussion, but was looking thoughtfully between him and Spike.

“I don’t want to leave you guys. But I’ve gone on exactly one mission by myself since coming back to the States, and after two weeks you guys decided you needed to drive to Tijuana to rescue me. I *want* to stay with the council, but your confidence in me isn’t exactly overwhelming.”

“Xander’s right,” Buffy said quietly. “You’re right,” she added, coming over to sit beside him. “We haven’t been fair to you. But you’re wrong about one thing. You can’t do this alone. None of us can. Willow and I hold on too tight sometimes, but it’s not because we don’t trust you.

We just don't know what we'd do without you," she said.

Xander pulled her into a crushing hug. A few tears escaped into her hair.

"He won't be alone, Buffy," Spike said softly.

Buffy pulled back and smiled soggily before leaning over and taking Spike's hand. "I know."

Dawn, obviously feeling left out, took her opportunity to throw her arms around Spike's neck. He smiled at Xander over her shoulder, then his eyes traveled down to the purpling bruises around his neck. Spike gently pried Dawn off of him, eyes yellow and feral.

"Xander," he growled. "*Who touched you?*"

Part Nineteen

The blood had finally stopped oozing from the bite mark on Angel's neck and from his smashed nose, but the pouf was still holding a damp cloth to his puffy lip and glaring at Spike. Spike was glaring back through the one eye that wasn't swollen. Xander, meanwhile, was bandaging the hole in Spike's back where somebody had bloody staked him, while Xander paused momentarily to send his own

dirty looks at Percy and the Slayer. Things were rather tense.

But then Mama Paloma bustled in with more hot chocolate and fresh blood, and she tutted over everyone's wounds and passed around pan dulce until the atmosphere calmed a bit. Dawn managed to insinuate herself between Spike and Xander and they layered their arms over her shoulders.

"What the hell is going on?" Angel demanded, his eyes shifting from Spike to Xander.

"I *told* you," Xander said. "We're undercover. El Jefe forced us to fight to the death, so I pretended to kill Spike. So now Spike's lying low while we try to figure out how to put the whammy on El Jefe. And in about an hour I'm supposed to fight again and this time without a handy undead guy to play cadaver."

"I mean what the hell's going on with you two?"

Spike sneered. "Jealous, Peaches?"

There was a strange shift in Angel's eyes, Spike thought, and perhaps in Wes's as well, but before Angel had a

chance to answer, Xander whacked Spike lightly on the back of his head. “Focus, Spike. I promise you—we figure this thing out and you and Deadboy can work out whatever vampire testosterone thing you have going. Hell, I’ll back you up. I figure I owe him a bruise or two. But I have about sixty minutes until El Coyote del Futuro tries to murder me, so can we **concentrate on** that, please?”

Spike sighed. “Yeah. Sorry, Xan.”

Angel looked down at his lap and mumbled something that might also have been an apology.

Buffy had been leaning against one wall, mug in one hand, frowning at them all. “Look, this is no prob. I’ll just go kick El Jefe’s ass and we can all get back to America where things are almost normal.”

“Can’t do it, love,” Spike said. “He has some kind of protective mojo.”

The face she made in response showed that she had as high an opinion of magic as he did.

“Why can’t we just leave?” Dawn chimed in. “We can

head [back up](#) to LA, I can get some shopping done, and Xander and Spike can tell me all about how they ended up with the big gay love, 'cause I bet it's all romantic and everything."

Xander snickered softly and Angel shuddered. But then it was Xander who said, "Dawnie, we can't go. Good people are dying here. Well, good people and good demons. And I have a job to do and I'd really like to finish it."

She nodded and leaned against Xander, while Spike had to quell ridiculously poncy pride in how brave his boy was.

"What do we know about this El Coyote fellow?" Wesley said, suddenly [all business](#).

Spike and Xander looked at each other and then they both shrugged. Spike hadn't exchanged more than a word or two with the bloke and hadn't paid him much mind, especially since he seemed to be one of the few luchadores who wasn't drooling over El Bucanero.

"And this El Jefe? Is he working alone?"

"No," Spike answered. "He has a minion of some kind,

but we don't know who."

Wesley tapped at his chin.

"You have something churning in that Watcher head of yours?"

"Perhaps. It's risky for both of you, though."

Xander squeezed Spike's shoulder. "Risky is my middle name. Will it solve all our problems so we can save the day and get the hell out of here?"

"I hope so. Xander, do you know whether El Jefe is attracted to men or women?"

"No idea. As far as I know the bastard's got a thing for sheep."

Wesley nodded thoughtfully. "Then we shall need assistance from both Buffy and Angel. Do you think the two of you could manage to wear something a bit, erm, provocative?"

Buffy just raised her eyebrows, but the old sod looked like he might be suffering from a vampire version of

apoplexy. “Provocative?” Angel choked out.

Mama Paloma had been listening from the doorway. Now she beamed at them all. “Sí! I have some of mi hijo’s things that will fit you well, señor. And you, princesa, I think we can find you something as well. My neighbor’s daughter is tiny like you, and she has these skirts....”

“We haven’t much time,” Wesley began, but Spike suddenly stood and hauled Xander to his feet as well.

“You lot can scheme and play dress-up. I want some time with my boy, ” Spike said. Xander smiled at him in a way that made Spike’s knees slightly wobbly.

There may have been some protests from the gathered crowd, but Spike ignored them. Instead, he dragged Xander out of the room, toward the bedroom they’d shared the night before. As soon as they were inside, Spike slammed the door behind them and then pushed Xander up against one wall, plastering his own body hard against Xander’s. He nibbled at Xander’s warm neck—suppressing a snarl at the bruises that were blossoming there—and Xander groaned.

“There’s a plan,” Xander said, his voice slightly hoarse.

“We should hear the plan because we’re in it.”

Spike bucked his hips hard against Xander’s. “They can fill us in on the way there, pet. Right now, I want this.” *I need this*, he could have said. “Feel how much I want you, Xan. How hard I am already, just, just smelling you.”

Xander groaned again and his eyelashes fluttered, but he hadn’t capitulated yet. “But tonight...it’s important, Spike. Wes said it would be risky. We could die.”

“All the more reason why we should do this now,” Spike responded, grinding his groin against Xander’s and then licking along the pulsing carotid.

“Oh, fuck,” Xander said, and apparently that was his surrender, because his tense body relaxed and he reached around to grab Spike’s arse and draw them closer together.

“No time for that, love,” Spike chuckled. His own hands were tugging Xander’s shirt out of his trousers, searching desperately for smooth skin to touch. Xander responded by tilting his head a bit and then they were kissing, hard and hungry, their tongues sliding around each other. Spike had a mental image of how Xander would look

when they pulled apart, lips swollen and eye glassy, and that alone was nearly enough to send Spike into an embarrassingly quick climax.

But then Xander suddenly froze. Confused, Spike moved his head back, to discover Xander staring at him with such ferocity Spike almost expected that single eye to turn yellow. "Listen to me," Xander said, his voice low and urgent. "We're gonna get through this, okay? 'Cause we've both survived a lot worse. And then we're gonna spend some time, just the two of us, with no Slayers or Watchers or semi-homicidal grandsires and nothing nearby that wants us dead. But right now, would you do something for me, Spike?"

"Anything," Spike said. He'd fall on a bloody stake if that's what his boy asked for. He'd listen to sodding Barry Manilow.

"Bite me."

Spike blinked. Surely he'd misheard. "Say again?"

"Bite me. I want...I want to know what it's like."

Spike found it impossible to speak at all, and he had to

swallow. Twice. “Are you certain?”

Xander grinned and then bit at Spike’s neck, making Spike shudder and whimper. “Absolutely,” Xander rasped.

“Why?” Spike had to ask. Perhaps the boy had been harboring a vampire kink all these years, and Spike was only a means to indulge.

Xander worried at his lip for a moment, clearly gathering his thoughts. “Because you’re a vampire, Spike. It’s what you do when you have sex, right?” He blushed and looked away. “I sort of read some of Giles’ racier books, sometimes.”

“We do, sometimes, pet. Don’t have to.” He usually had with Dru, but had never dared with Buffy.

Xander met his gaze again. “I want you to. ‘Cause if we’re gonna do this, this thing, this *us*—and I really hope we are—I want you to be what you really are. A goddamn hot vampire with a soul. And I get to be the one-eyed former Zeppo who’s actually not such a loser after all, right?”

He was so earnest about it, and Spike was almost dizzy with the knowledge that the boy truly wanted *him*, wanted all that he was. It took all of Spike's will not to break into ridiculous tears like a big girl's blouse. But he used one thumb to stroke under Xander's empty eye socket, and he said, "You are anything but a loser, Xander."

And then he vamped out.

It wasn't much of a bite—he wasn't meaning to hurt the boy, after all, and it had been so long he wasn't certain whether to trust himself. So it was barely more than a nip, just sinking his fangs slightly into yielding flesh. But it was enough. Xander cried out something incoherent—forgetting or not caring about their audience two rooms away—and clutched so hard at Spike that it might have hurt, but that hardly mattered, and as the trickle of blood hit his tastebuds, Spike was lost. They both thrust their clothed bodies together frantically and came in their jeans like teenagers, in Spike's case, at least, the orgasm hitting him so hard he would have crumpled to the ground if Xander hadn't been holding him so tightly.

Afterward, Spike licked away the last of Xander's blood, soothing the tiny wounds with his tongue, and then

collapsed against Xander's heaving chest.

"Fuck," Xander said in a weak and shaky voice. "We are so going to do that again."

Part Twenty

By the time they staggered, disheveled out of the room, Xander with an artfully placed bandana around his neck that fooled exactly no one, Buffy and Angel were dressed to the nines and making googly eyes at each other while Wesley and Dawn prepared a circle for casting.

"Ah, yes, our capable heroes return. So nice of you to join us," Wesley remarked distractedly. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" Spike asked, guardedly.

"For this," Dawn replied as without further ado she and Wesley shoved Angel and Buffy into the closet Mama Paloma indicated, slammed the door shut with a snap

and slid a chair under the handle. Their muffled, but outraged cries echoed through the room.

“Sello silencioso,” Wesley enchanted lazily, his smudge stick tracing the corners of the closet door and plunging the room into silence. “Ah, that’s better.”

Xander watched, dumbstruck. “But—what? Wait, don’t we—”

“Are you kidding?” Dawn asked. “Playing dress up was just a distraction to get them out of the way.”

“So do we have a plan, or not, Percy?” Spike asked pointedly. As they watched, Wesley settled into the center of the circle and Dawn handed him a piece of paper. He sprinkled something over the page, said the magic words, and, “Hey, isn’t that Red’s spell for finding demons?” Spike asked.

The paper began to glow and finally to illuminate something on the page. “Yes, after a fashion,” Wesley confirmed. “However, this should show us magic practitioners rather than demons. Dawn and I will take this and find the person behind El Jefe’s invulnerability. We’ll be able to reverse the spell they cast back onto the

caster fairly simply, providing there aren't too many magic users in the area and we don't run out of this," he said, holding up a small pouch.

"Right. I'll dog the big man himself, and when you give the word—"

"You'll take him into custody unharmed," Xander finished, a warning note in his voice.

Spike scoffed. "You can't be serious, after everything he's done? Everyone he's..." Xander glared at Spike and he trailed off. "Fine. Safe as houses. And you?"

"And me?" Xander asked Wesley.

Wesley stepped forward and placed his hand on Xander's shoulder. "I'm afraid you're going to have to fight, Xander. And you're going to have to win."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander stared out over the arena. Somewhere Wesley and Dawn were sprinkling fairy dust on strangers and muttering incantations. His pugnacious lover was most

likely lurking close to wherever El Jefe was holed up—either his box, or working the floor, taking bets. And here he stood, on his own, exactly where he claimed he wanted to be—big with the danger and the responsibility—while Angel and Buffy were locked in La Paloma’s closet and hopefully working out their issues.

Oddly, enough, he wasn’t that worried about the fight. He knew it was going to be hard, El Coyote was a pretty even match for size and strength and he’d been wrestling longer, but Xander looked around and he *saw*. These weren’t warriors. These were men—young men—and demons. Men who only wanted a chance to provide for themselves, to live, to love. They fought for their identities, their place in the world.

Xander had left that basement behind a long time ago.

He’d been hardened on the plains of the Serengeti, tried in the vacant eyes of young girls, starving in Ethiopia. He’d had his ass handed to him by a dozen or more big bads all more fearsome than a few big guys in lycra. Hell, he was dating one of them. No, he wasn’t really worried about the fight, all told. He knew when he got into the ring that he’d bring with him everything he was, everything he’d ever been and done and he wouldn’t be

found lacking.

“El Bucanero, get it together, cabrón,” Manuel told him with a slap to the shoulder. “El Coyote’s getting in the ring. Go, mijo! Buena suerte!”

Xander ran out onto the floor of the arena to the sound of deafening cheers.

No, Xander reflected as he deflected El Coyote’s flying head-butt, he was worried because two very thuggish looking fellows had Spike strung between them just outside the ring with two more coming up behind with Dawn and Wesley.

He clotheslined El Coyote, who seemed oblivious to the show outside the ring and looked around the arena, getting the lay of the land. Manuel stood at the entrance, looking panicked.

Thinking quickly, Xander returned to the fight. Launching himself off the ropes, he grit his teeth and took El Coyote down in a complete shot. The crowd went crazy. The ref was at his side. He saw El Jefe, then, just outside the ring, watching. He looked completely unconcerned by the turn of events, as if his deceased wrestlers spontaneously

resurrected all the time. And maybe they did. He was used to working with demons. Maybe some of them regenerated. He didn't know. What Xander did know was that it was time to put on a show worthy of his hours in front of the TV watching Wrestlemania as a kid. He drew himself up, puffing out his chest and making the most of his broad upper body before telegraphing his killing blow, lifting his foot off the mat. He brought it down swiftly. The audience gasped.

His foot stopped an inch from Coyote's nose.

"No!" he shouted. The Master of Ceremonies crawled through the ropes, bringing his microphone as Xander waved Manuel over. Manuel shook his head, no. Xander nodded vigorously. Reluctantly, Manuel ran into the arena and into the ring.

Xander grabbed the microphone from the MC. "I need you to translate," he hissed. Manuel nodded and took the microphone from him. El Jefe stood outside the ring and nodded to the behemoths holding Spike. One of them raised a club-like fist and smashed it into Spike's jaw. "No!" he cried out. The crowd began to agitate, straining to see what was happening that was causing such a commotion in the ring.

“El Vampiro!” Manuel announced brightly. Xander looked at him in confusion. He shrugged. The crowd lost their minds, stomping and cheering. El Jefe glared and signaled for his release. They dropped him and Spike sagged to the floor before gaining his feet and stumbling forward. Xander reached his hand through the ropes and helped pull Spike into the ring.

“Destiny cast us as enemies in the ring, but fate brought us together! Now love has conquered death and El Vampiro returns, undead, to bring vengeance upon those who tried to separate us!” Xander announced with great theatricality.

Manuel translated and the arena erupted into deafening cheers, hisses and applause by turns.

“What are you *doing*, Xander?” Spike hissed beside him.

“Shh. Just go with it,” he told him, before launching into his next diatribe. “My brother, and little sister were captured, and held prisoner! Tortured, if I refused to fight—if I refused to kill my lover!”

The spotlight was now trained on Wesley and Dawn who

were doing their best to look sympathetic and helpless despite the fact that Dawn had just kicked her jailer in the shin. Manuel translated and the crowd leaped to their feet, outraged.

“It ends tonight! Luchadores! Exoticos! We fight with passion! We love passionately! And this man—” Xander pointed to El Jefe, the follow spot illuminating him for all to see, “—has twisted our love for our families, our friends, our lovers and turned us into animals! I am not an animal!” Beside him, Spike chuckled. Xander smiled back, picking up steam, and ran with it. “I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of Men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day! Um...” Xander stalled, “You have come to fight as free men, and free men you are...” Xander trailed off, looking to Spike for help.

Spike snorted and took the microphone. “Prefiero morir de pie que vivir siempre arrodillado!” The crowd cheered. The other wrestlers stood there, tensed and waiting. “So *get* him!” Spike commanded in exasperation.

Finally, the other wrestlers surged forward, swarming El Jefe to the sound of the crowd’s encouragement. The

first few to reach him bounced off as though reflected by an invisible forcefield. Manuel, standing beside them, raised his hand and said “Parada.” Immediately, El Jefe was on the ground, Púrpura Grande standing over him with a folding chair.

Dawn and Wesley ran into the ring, brandishing the paper and the pouch of pixie dust. “Xander, it’s him! He’s the one casting the spells!”

Xander turned to Manuel who was looking dejectedly at his shiny blue boots while the other wrestlers beat El Jefe into a bloody pulp.

“He killed my sister.”

Xander nodded and put an arm around his shoulders. “It’s over now.”

Wesley and Dawn immobilized El Jefe and led him, bound, out to the jeep. They were, perhaps, less than expeditious about it, but if a few stray bottles managed to meet their mark they could hardly be held responsible.

“Will you be all right?” Xander asked Manuel.

Manuel nodded. “La Paloma will take care of things here. Thank you, Xander. And Spike, you have our gratitude.”

“Our pleasure, mate.”

With a last look back at the dissipating chaos, Xander let Spike take his hand and lead him out of the arena.

Part Twenty-One

Although El Jefe was trussed up securely and tightly gagged, he was still managing to glare at them ferociously from the floor of the jeep. So Spike yanked Xander’s mask off his head, leaving Xander’s hair in wild disarray. Spike jammed the mask on over El Jefe’s bald head, just enough to blindfold the wanker. Then Spike remembered that Xander had fought that evening, and as Xander tried to fuss over Spike’s sore jaw, Spike did a quick check of his boy’s body for damage. Nothing but a few new bruises, he concluded.

Dawn was turned around in her seat, watching them. Her eyes were glittery with excitement. “Did you see, Spike? Xander was, like, totally awesome! The way he clobbered that guy and gave that speech?”

“Course I saw. I was there, wasn’t I?”

Xander smiled weakly at them both. “I was pretty good, wasn’t I?”

“You’re very good, pet,” Spike said, and he leered and patted Xander’s upper thigh, just because he knew it would make his boy blush.

Just a few minutes later they pulled to a stop in front of Paloma’s house. Wesley checked to make sure El Jefe wasn’t going anywhere—just to make sure, he muttered a phrase in Latin that turned the bloke stiff as a board—and then they trooped towards the door, where Mama Paloma was waiting for them with a big grin.

“You have beaten that cabrón, sí?”

Spike gestured towards the jeep. “He’s in there. If you fancy letting him know your opinion of how he treated your son, help yourself.”

Mama Paloma nodded and made a face that, frankly, Spike found a bit scary. Making a mental note never to cross her, Spike entered the house, closely followed by Xander and Wesley and Dawn. Mama Paloma went off to share her thoughts with their captive.

Well, one of their captives. Because inside the house, the chair was still tilted up under the cupboard door. The four of them paused and eyed the door with some trepidation. "Can't we just keep them in there?" Spike asked. Dawn whacked him in the shoulder. But still none of them moved to release them.

"Do you think they've killed each other?" Xander said. "Or maybe they're, uh, occupado."

Wesley turned his head and gave Xander a truly evil look, which Xander blithely ignored.

When none of them yet was brave enough to make a move, Dawn huffed out an irritated breath, stamped her foot, and walked forward. Wesley, Spike, and Xander took a few hurried steps backward.

Buffy and Angel tumbled out of the closet looking

rumpled and angry, but not quite homicidal. Angel was wearing a pair of low-cut, skin tight leather trousers that even Angelus wouldn't have squeezed himself into and an equally tight sleeveless t-shirt with a deeply scooped neck. He had a hot pink scarf around his neck. Buffy was wearing something akin to her usual, only with more Spandex.

“What the *hell*—“ Angel began.

“Chill,” Dawn said. “It’s under control. Xander was totally bad-ass and he and Spike were all with the speeches, and I got to kick a really big goon. And nobody got killed and that El Jefe dude is toast.”

Angel glared at Spike. “You killed him? I told you, you weren’t supposed to—“

“Untwist your knickers, Peaches. He’s alive. More or less. At least he was when we turned him over to Mama Paloma.”

Angel’s scowl lightened a notch or two.

But Buffy still had her hands on her hips. “Why did you lock us up? We could have helped, you know.”

Wesley said, “Yes, but as you can see, we did perfectly well without you. I thought—erm, *we* thought it was more important that you two settle your...differences.”

“Way to go with the diplomatic,” Buffy said. But she did look a trifle less angry, and even Angel had smoothed his hackles.

Xander moved close beside Spike and put his arm around Spike’s waist. His warmth was lovely, but even better was the knowledge that Xander wasn’t ashamed of him, wasn’t ashamed to let the world know they were lovers. Buffy gave them both a strange little smile, as if she was happy for them but, perhaps, wistful over something she had missed. “So did you settle?” Xander asked her.

“Yeah, actually.” She took a deep breath. “We’re gonna go to LA. I think with Willow and Giles helping, we could find a way to defeat these lawyer guys. ‘Cause this fighting them from within thing is pretty lame.”

Dawn squealed. “We get to go to LA? Really?” She threw her arms around Buffy in an enthusiastic hug. “Oh, man, I am so not gonna miss Iowa. I’m going to go to the beach and do some shopping, and—“

“We’re going there to fight evil, Dawn, remember?”
Buffy said.

“Oh, yeah. I’ll totally do that, too. Only with a tan and better outfits.”

Wesley had been quiet, but now he cleared his throat. “So I expect you two have renewed your...friendship as well.” His face was very carefully blank, but Spike could hear his racing heart.

Angel and Buffy exchanged a quick look. “We’re friends, Wes,” Angel said. “But just friends. Buffy’s, uh, still baking.” He looked down at his feet which were, Spike noticed with glee, ensconced in flip-flops that matched the scarf.

Buffy gave Wesley a warm and slightly mischievous smile. “And Angel thinks he might want to explore other opportunities.” Wes’s heart sped up so fast Spike feared he was going to drop dead on the spot, and the ex-Watcher caught Angel’s eye before they both looked away.

Xander snickered softly. “I guess Angel’s really out of the

closet,” he whispered into Spike’s ear, but of course Angel heard and made a sour face at them both.

“Wow. Is it something in the water?” Dawn said.

“T’s only new for Xan,” Spike replied. “Angelus and I go way back, and Percy must have had some adventures at school, yeah?” Dawn looked intrigued, but Spike withered slightly under the combined glares of the rest of the group.

Angel blustered his way forward. “That’s enough. We’ve got El Jefe to deliver to the firm’s holding cells. Come on, Spike.”

“No.”

That stopped the ponce up short. “We’re leaving. I guess Xander can come in the jeep instead of Buffy’s car.”

“You lot can toddle off home if you want, but I’m not going and neither is Xander.” They hadn’t actually discussed this ahead of time, so he was slightly relieved when Xander held him tighter in agreement.

Angel rolled his eyes. “What? You want a honeymoon? A

vacation in sunny Mexico? We've got work to do, Spike. Wolfram and Hart is—“

“I know what Wolfram and Hart is. And you can go do your bloody work with them. We're going to go off and fight demons the old-fashioned way.”

“You're going to fight demons without backup? You'll get yourself dusted.”

Spike had to hold back a growl. “I'll have plenty of backup. My boy's a brilliant fighter. You should have seen him in the ring.”

Angel and Buffy both looked slightly skeptical, but Wesley and Dawn nodded, and Xander turned a smile on Spike that was so bright Spike nearly feared incineration.

In the end there were slightly teary hugs from Dawn and then more from the Slayer. Wesley shook their hands. Even Angel managed a nod, which was close as the old git could get to civil, Spike reckoned. And then they were gone, and Mama Paloma was shooing Spike and Xander into the bedroom, where a tray of food was waiting for them, along with a bottle of wine and a jug of fresh goat's blood. “Go, mijos,” she said. “Relajase. Celebre!”

“I don’t want to impose,” Xander said, eyeing the empanadas.

She slapped him on the shoulder. “Impose? You are part of la familia now. This will always be your home.”

“Thank you.” Xander bent down a little and kissed her cheek, and Spike did likewise. She giggled like a teenager and then left them alone, shutting the door firmly behind herself.

Xander took a big bite from one of the empanadas and then came close to Spike, breathing fruit-scented crumbs into Spike’s face. Spike squeezed Xander’s arse, which was still covered with his luchador tights, and wondered whether his boy would be willing to wear the costume again, on special occasions. “So,” said Xander. “Where do we go from here?”

“The bed would be nice. Or perhaps you’d prefer the bath again, or I could just lean you over that table there....”

Xander pressed soft lips to Spike’s bruised jaw. “I meant a little more longer term. Maybe I should keep fighting

for a while since we're broke."

"Fight if you like, but we don't need the dosh." As Xander looked on in puzzlement, Spike pulled from his pocket the hefty wad of dollars and pesos he'd lifted from El Jefe. That tosser certainly wasn't going to need it now, and neither did Wolfram and Hart.

Xander's eyes went slightly wide. "I guess that'll keep us in blood and nachos for a while. Think it's enough to get us a car, too? Maybe something a little flashy?"

Spike laughed and leaned in close again, inhaling the sweat and sugar scent of Xander. His Xander. "How about a Viper, love?"

The End