Hells Handyman

by Kazwil1 [archived by fhsa_archivist]

Summary

The story of a lowly carpenter. Who has his tools, his wits and a knack for ending up in situations he should know to stay the heck away from.

Notes

Note from Haven, the archivist: This story was originally archived at Fandom Haven Story Archive (FHSA), was scheduled to shut down at the end of 2016. To preserve the archive, I began working with the OTW to transfer the stories to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in November 2017. If you are this creator and the work hasn't transferred to your AO3 account, please contact me using the e-mail address on Fandom Haven Story Archive collection profile.
They waited.

For Xander to bring her home.

Giles lay on Buffy's sofa while Anya plies him tea, upstairs he can hear Buffy and Dawn arguing as to when the Slayer will take the younger Summer's out on her first patrol, which then morphs into a mad scramble as to who gets first dibs on the shower.

"Hey! No using the Slayer strength," a door slams. "Cheater!"

It is an almost typical domestic scene, one that he thought he'd never experience one again.

The world is safe, he can rest.

It seems his eyes have hardly closed when "Giles....Giles! Please wake up, something's wrong."

Anya's hand stabs his shoulder once more, making Giles aware of how much his body just *aches*.

"Yes, thank you, Anya. I believe that was the only part of me *not* damaged. So kind of you to rectify the oversight." His eyes are closed, and Giles is doubtful of generating sufficient energy to open them.

"Is he always this cranky when he wakes up? No wonder he doesn't have a girlfriend."

"Anya!"

Buffy's tone alerts him, annoyance underlined by fear.
Giles flails out in search of his glasses, mutters a "Thank you," as they are placed in his hand. Gradually the room swims into focus, three faces peering down with varying degrees of distress.

"Buffy?"

"They're not here, Giles. It's been six hours and no sign of them."

He struggles to sit up, smiles weakly as six hands steady and guide his pitiful effort.

"I went to see if Xander needed help," Anya wrings her hands. "Besides that ugly statue thingy there's nothing there."

"Willow and Xander are gone?"

"I thought...I thought you said he'd succeeded," Dawn is almost in tears. She immediately dives in for comfort when he raises an arm.

"Perhaps Xander has taken Willow back to his place ..."

"I checked that too," Anya interjects. "He hasn't been back there."

Cursing his sluggish brain, Giles attempts to focus. "We know Xander succeeded. We are here after all, are we not?"

Tentative nods all round.

Buffy scowls, "I don't like this, Giles. Something feels wrong."

"Something is wrong," a voice says.
"WILLOW!" Anya rushes forward, brushing past the witch who leans weakly against a doorframe, only to realise that the red head is alone. "Where is he? Where's Xander?"

Willow flinches.

Buffy takes in her friends appearance, and is reminded of her own self after resurrection; an empty shell incapable of coping. Asks a question already fearing the answer. "Willow? Where is he? You didn't...?"

Willow slides to the floor, met the Slayer's gaze with empty eyes. "I don't know. God help me, I DON'T KNOW!!"

And grief and pain they thought vanquished, returns.

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Raw.

On his outsides and insides, as if skin and bone have been sandblasted simultaneously.

Funny.

He's always imagined heaven as being less painful.

Can't feel anything, yet he feels everything. Sensory overload and he greets darkness once more with silent thanks.

Warmth on his back, dirt and stone compressed against his face. He's feeling much better.

If you count the over whelming sensation of being stomped by Godzilla as 'better'.

"Do ya think he's dead?"
An audience. Great.

"I told you we shouldn't have skipped class!" The voice is young, female, and obviously scared out of her mind.

Know the feeling kid.

Hey!

World. Still here.

He saved the world!

Next time he's gonna leave it to the professionals.

Voices bicker in the background, apparently debating if reporting a dead body will garner enough brownie points to be forgiven for skipping class.

Where's his Willow?

He can't....

Images. Hundreds and then thousands. Pictures and written words overlap one another until he is mentally crushed by the never ending tsunami.

Dirt in his mouth. The sound of his own screaming, and if anything the pressure in his head increases.

Darkness.

Time rolls on.
Hands. Attempting to be gentle as he's rolled onto his back and Xander lets out an un-manly moan that's kinda freaky.

From his perspective anyway.

Light. Bright and blinding.

"Pupils are re-active."

No shit!

"Stay with us man."

Actually, he'd rather not. Nothing personal fella's, he's just not in the mood. Heroes are entitled to some fringe benefits ya know. It's in the handbook.

Sleep now.

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"Humans First are thought responsible for the attack on an Eternal Life church in St. Louis. Stay tuned after this break."

And you know what? The newsreader actually appears as though he cares.

Go figure.

"Still watching the news, Xander?"

"Yeah Mick, still watching the news."
Mick is an orderly at the hospital. He reminds Xander of a Larry actually, football jock in size and buzz cut hairstyle— with a weird penchant for origami. Intimidating as hell until you get to know him, Xander suspects it's those little paper swan things; found to have a strange calming effect when floated across a bedpan.

"Ready to go?"

Hesitation in the pretence of looking around the sterile room that's been his home for the last two months, as though he actually *has* something to take. "Ready," and climbs into the wheelchair.

"There's a nice lady from Social Services waiting for you. She's cute."

"Color me happy."

"Ouch. Grouchy today aren't we?"

Grouchy? Doesn't even come close.

Because in the last two months Xander's discovered how scary cops can be when they find out you don't exist. He's also had the thrill of knowing how fast the hospital can assign a psychiatrist after his insistence the year is 2002 when *everyone* knows it's only 1998?

And let's not even *go* to the mind blowing discovery of looking into a mirror and finding out he's back to being seventeen again.

Then the fun really started.

The cops went from friendly to suspicious faster than he could swallow a Twinkie, and the psychiatrist wasted days in attempts to delve deeply into Xander's relationship with his mother.

Ladies and gentlemen, drum roll please.

Xander's fallen down the rabbit hole and he's not laughing.
No birth certificate. No social security number. If it wasn't for his total inability to walk through walls, Xander would say he's Caspar, your friendly ghost from another world.

They have shrimp though. He'd asked Mick one day and after a weird look the orderly returned with a recipe from a magazine just to confirm it.

The authorities are convinced he's a runaway. A crappy attitude and smart mouth haven't help much and his next destination on leaving hospital is some halfway house for teens.

It could be worse.

He could be in a world that's not his own.

Oh yeah. He is.

"Shoot me. Stuff me. Mount me."
As she manoeuvered her jeep down the driveway, Anita frowns at the emerald green van parked outside her house. "What the...?" Then she slams her palm against the steering wheel in annoyance. "Damn, I forgot."

"Forgot what?" Cherry pipes up from the back seat.

"Jean-Claude said he'd send someone to quote on fixing the kitchen."

It's four thirty in the afternoon and she's over an hour late. Frankly, it's a miracle the guy is still here. The erratic hours she keeps are a nightmare when attempting to obtain tradesmen, and her interaction with them in the past has never been pleasant.

She recalls one who actually insisted on calling her, "Little lady," and after his refusal to cease she'd spent the rest of their time together addressing him as "Lard guts."

Needless to say things hadn't ended well.

"Great, this is just great," she mutters.

With Micah and Caleb away interviewing potential bodyguards (pending her final approval), her kitty-cats weren't always on their best behaviour. It's likely the muscle bound redneck was pinned up a tree like some gibbering monkey.

A figure exits the van as she parks.

"Ms Blake?"

Okay, not muscle bound. Muscular, and much younger that she expected. Blue denim jeans and a white t-shirt covered by a long sleeve blue check shirt. About six foot in height with his black hair, brown eyes and crooked grin.
He has this boy next-door thing going for him. It works.

"Mr Harris, I presume." The handshake is firm; his hands are calloused in all the right places and not a single whiff of power.

"Please," the grin becomes wider. "Call me Xander."

"Fine. My apologies for being late, I honestly forgot you were coming."

"Yeah, I figured as much. Thought I'd just wait outside, Mr. Musketeer said your Nimir-raj was outta town and I didn't feel like playing fun and games with the kitties."

Anita whips her head sideways, while Cherry chokes back a laugh.

"You mean Jean-Claude."

Xander nods. "Yep, Puffy-sleeves himself." He met her gaze with serious eyes, "You gotta try and talk that man into something more modern, Ms Blake. God knows the dry-cleaning bills must be costing him a fortune alone."

Cherry and Xander are both in the house before Anita realises that she's standing on her front porch gaping like some loon.

She finds him waiting patiently inside, "I have to see to my pard. Cherry, could you show Mr. Harris the kitchen?"

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Xander shakes his head, Fang-boy was right, a god damned gun battle in her kitchen.

Cherry takes a seat at the table as he says, "I'm going to take some measurements and check the
damage, that alright by you?"

The wereleopard blinks, "Sure."

She watches as Xander moves about the kitchen taking measurements, opening cupboards to see how much damage they've suffered, making notes. A professional who knows his job replaces the goofy young guy.

Having said that, he maintains an almost constant chatter. What does Cherry do? How old is she? And has she seen that latest blockbuster from George Lucas?

This is nice, being treated like a regular girl, she finds their conversation becoming more animated.

Anita stands at the doorway taking it all in. The easy way in which Xander handles himself around her leopard, Cherry's animated face as they debate rock bands and groupies.

Her kitchen is depressing; she used to love the sunlight. Now? She wouldn't be surprised to find a pair of trolls in here it was so dark.

Xander's shaking his head at the boarded up sliding glass door when Cherry's chatter dies away, he immediately knows the cause and turns around.

"Hey, Ms. Blake."

Once again Anita is on the receiving end of that smile, and finds herself returning it. "Call me Anita."

"Okay," Xander glances down at his notes. "You're renting this place right?"

"Right," she scowls. Her landlord isn't particularly happy with her at the moment. Anita can't blame the man; gunfights tend to have a bad effect on property prices.

"I'm paying for all the repairs though. Is that a problem?"
"No, no," Xander waves her question aside. "I was just going to say that if you owned the place I could make some serious recommendations and improvements. For safety," he adds at her frown.

"Such as?"

Xander motions her over and crouches down by the oven. "I'd recommend you get rid of the gas for starters," he says, pointing to a bullet hole in the wall, an inch above the gas pipe.

"Shit."

"Yeah. That one could have been nasty."

"I had at least six people in here when this went down, some others in the rest of the house. Nasty doesn't even come close." She straightens up, and gives him the once over. Xander definitely knows his stuff. "Anything else?"

"Well," Xander has another look around the room then back at his notepad, chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully. "What about I do you two quotes? One that will keep your landlord happy, and another with some stuff I think you could use. That okay? You can mix and match if you want."

"Sounds good," and Anita can hardly stifle a yawn. "Sorry, it's been a hard day and I had an even longer night."

"Been there, done that."

Anita raises a brow "You raise zombies at night?"

Another laugh. "Only the alcoholic kind," Xander mimics raising a glass.

She's on the verge of pointing out he's a little young, but at this point he walks round the breakfast island and halts, staring down at the floor. The blood has been cleaned away yet the stains remain.

"One of yours?"
"Yes."

"Did they make it?"

"No."

"My condolences."

His sincerity can't be denied.

Despite what he's heard, it was obvious that the death had hurt. Xander makes his goodbyes and advises he'll be dropping by the quote in a few days. "I just have to check out some prices on materials first. Or if you want I can just drop it off to Sleeping Beauty at the Circus and you can pick it up next time you see him."

Anita freezes, and fast-forwards to pissed off when her long stare has no effect at all. "You know Jean-Claude's resting place?" She didn't know of any normal human who knew the Master of the City's daytime resting place.

She didn't class Edward as normal.

"Sure," Xander replies casually. "Who the hell do you think Jean-Claude calls when you've finished busting up his place?"

Anita bristles, Xander must have the preservation instinct of a lemming. She wonders why the hell Jean-Claude hasn't killed him by now, for the total lack of respect alone.

Xander snaps his fingers, "Whoops, I almost forgot. All my crew are human," and rolls his eyes off her look. "Hey, I deal mainly with weres and an occasional vamp. Neither of which appreciate strange beasties in their territory. The last thing I need is some dominance struggle while I'm trying to plaster a wall."

"You won't have any problems," she replies crisply.
"I know I won't," Xander states emphatically. "If you agree to the quote you also agree to an additional charge of a hundred bucks every time my crew and I have trouble."

"Define trouble."

He chuckles, "Sometimes weres like to play 'scare the human'. You'd be amazed how well behaved they can be when their alpha is charged for each transgression. Although," a soft smile. "I'm pretty certain that won't be happening here."

"You're right, it won't." And she's going to have a long talk with Jean-Claude later on tonight about this *handyman*.

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Anita wakes to the sound of her telephone, Nathaniel is kind enough to pass it across to her. A quick check of the clock tells her its eight-thirty; she's had a good four hours sleep.

It's depressing how usual that's become.

She moves and her foot hits Zane in the head, or maybe that was Cherry. She's not sure. With Micah away it's like her bedroom's become a sleep-over for the furry inclined.

"Hello?"

"What do you know about sword wielding green things?"

"If you woke me up to talk about your Ninja Turtle jammies Zerbrowski, I'm going back to sleep."

"Naaah, I'm a teddy bear and choo-choo man through and through," his laughter echoes down the line.
Unfortunately, Anita knows this for a fact. On account of Zerbrowski turning up to a crime scene with his pajamas poorly hidden by a jacket.

"What's happened?"

He sighs, "We're down at the warehouse district, two dead bodies and a third who might not make it. Dolph's interviewing the fourth guy, except the poor bastard's so scared we'll probably still be trying to get his name by the time you arrive."

Anita can't say no, and calls from the R.P.I.T unit are becoming more infrequent lately. As far as Dolph's concerned she's crossed over to the 'other side'.

She's not sure he's wrong.
Three news vans block Anita's access to the crime scene, forcing her to park on the pavement. A rookie looks like she's about to chastise her when Anita pulls out her badge, "R.P.I.T, and why the hell are they there?"

The young cop grimaces, "The reporters have just started filing their stories," and her gaze goes to the surrounding warehouses. "They said the buildings are playing havoc with reception."

Awww, diddums. Poor widdle reporters.

"If your sergeant finds out he's gonna have your ass in a sling," Anita's developed a hearty dislike for the news media lately.

"Ms. Blake?"

And turns to face the reason why.

"Mr. Lacey."

Benjamin Lacey started off his career as a fluffy entertainment reporter with ambition larger than the Hoover dam. Within five years his handsome face and perfect coiffure of brown hair grace the front page of magazines and he's the lead anchor on a nation wide 'investigative' show.

The fact that he's destroyed more lives than he 'helped' sticks in her craw.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Blake."

Ignoring his outstretched hand, she walks straight past. "I'm busy, Mr. Lacey. Go bother some one else."

Dreams are free and apparently paid attention to by no-one.
He starts to follow her.

"You don't return my calls, you refuse to grant interviews," Lacey beams a smile that never reaches his eyes. His teeth are abnormally white against solarium tanned skin and he's wearing an Armani blue suit with a manner so slick it would come as no surprise to find out he was made of teflon.

Anita finds it kinda spooky.

"I'm trying to file a balanced report here, Ms. Blake. How else am I going to get your view on things?"

Okay, that's it.

Anita turns so swiftly he almost runs into her, "I've seen your 'balanced' reports, and unlike others I have a more rounded perspective on the results. Like the fact that after your supposed expose in Delaware the death toll in lycanthropy ranks quadrupled. Or how about your story on vamps in local politics? Which resulted in the deaths of at least eighteen vampires."

Lacey has the gall to actually look offended, he probably practices in front of a mirror. "I took no part in those attacks, Ms. Blake."

"I know that," Anita curls her lips in contempt. "You just paint the targets in fluoro and step back to enjoy the carnage."

His public facade falters, revealing something much less pleasant. "You bitch!"

Anita smiles coldly. "Don't use your brush in St. Louis, Mr. Lacey. The city laws deal harshly with graffiti artists," and leaves him where he stands.

When she finally finds Zerbrowski and the rest of the squad, Anita greets them with a cheery hello.

She feels so much better now, thank you.
Pity it doesn't last.

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Anita's staring at a bloodstain on the wall over Dolph's head, considering he's six foot eight in height, that's one heck of a bloodstain.

"Well?"

Dragging her eyes away, she looks around the warehouse then back at Dolph and shook her head. "I don't know. The last time I came across something that used a sword it was a Fairy, but the witness said this thing is kinda green and ugly as sin. Doesn't sound like any fairy I've heard of."

Dolph closes his notepad with a growl. "I'd hoped you'd do better."

That hurt. "I'd hoped I'd do better too, Dolph. But if I don't know then I can't make something up just to keep you happy."

His eyes narrow, "Why not? You seem to be developing a habit of it lately."

She crowds his personal space, anger seeping into her voice "If you don't want me here, I'll go. And while you and I act pissy at each other perhaps we can meet later over more of this things victims."

"You're angry," he sounds surprised.

Anita stifles a scream. "Damn right I'm angry," she flings her arm wide to encompass the two corpses lying on the warehouse floor. "Seeing this shit and knowing I have no clue as to what did it *makes* me angry. Aren't you?"

Dolph nods slowly, his whole expression is weary, as if life has worn him down. He indicates the bags, some have split open spilling their contents all over the floor. "What do you think about the salt?"
It's the closest thing Anita's going to get to an apology.

"Salts used in a variety of different magic rituals," she shrugs. "But you can find salt anywhere, you don't kill over it."

"We have two bodies and a D.O.A at the hospital that says otherwise."

They stand together in silence, each attempting to find an angle, which remains frustratingly elusive.

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A reporter talks earnestly into the camera, Xander is watching the late news.

Again.

'Cause lets face it, every time he thinks he's got this world pigeon holed, up pops something else. His apartment is lined with shelves, housing an eclectic mix of books concerning history, the paranormal and architecture/building.

Deep in thought his gaze runs along the spines. There's a pattern to this world, like plans for a building and yet..... something is missing, he just can't figure out what.

"Giles would be so proud."

He misses them like an amputated limb.

His first year marked by half started conversations to people who weren't there. Looking over his shoulder to share a joke or smile only to find empty space.

Was he sane? Was he insane? Would some one wake him up? Dear God would someone *please* wake him up!

A fucking nightmare that only became worse.
So Xander did what he does best. He ran.

To St. Louis.

"Shit!"

He switches off the news, shakes himself out of the funk he knows is about to hit. With a sigh he eyes the red light flashing on his answering machine, and the twelve messages he's managed to ignore so far.

A jarring ring has him jumping like a schoolgirl on her first date.

"Yes?"

"Do you *ever* check your messages?"

Xander grimaces. "Jason. To what do I owe the honor of this call?"

"Jean-Claude wants to see you. Actually, he expected you about an hour ago," the werewolf practically growls.

"Ooh, be still my beating heart. I told him I wouldn't have Anita's quote ready for another day, I'll call him tomorrow."

One heartbeat, two heartbeats....

"Xander! Geez, are you sure you and Anita aren't related?"

"Positive."
"Yeah? Well I'd pay to have the blood work done 'cause I don't believe it. You both seem to major in pissing off Jean-Claude."

"Color me impressed," Xander snarks back.

"C'mon Xander," Jason whines. "You know I'm gonna get into trouble if you don't come."

As he looks around his empty apartment, Xander shrugs. His choices are either stay home and be depressed, or visit the Circus and piss off the Master of the City.

"I'll be there in half an hour."
Xander walks past a long line of people waiting to enter the Circus of the Damned, giant clowns with fangs peer down from the roof.

He looks towards the heavens. "I know your laughing at this, you bastard. I just know it!"

Still wearing the same faded jeans, Xander's only concession to meeting Jean-Claude is a fresh white t-shirt and he's swapped his check shirt for a brown leather jacket. Stepping inside his skin starts crawling, God he hates this place, and recognises a familiar face.

"Buzz," making sure their eyes lock, he greets the vampire with a wide grin.

The vampire shivers and is the first to glance away. "Xander, Jean-Claude's expecting you," and points to the left. "Jason's waiting at the ticket booth."

Damn but he loves doing that.

Nothing freaks a young vampire out more than meeting their eyes, especially when they can't figure out as to how it's possible.

Xander didn't know either but that was beside the point. It was fun.

Like the good little werewolf he is, Jason's exactly where Buzz said he would be.

Xander raises a brow. "Hey, Jason," and tosses the werewolf a jaunty salute. "Take me to your leader."

As per usual Jason's wearing clothes that defy decency laws. In Xander's humble opinion, Jason takes the phrase 'If you've got it, flaunt it,' waaay to seriously.

And he's not jealous. He's *not*.
Jason rakes the human from head to foot, shudders at the sight of Xander's work boots. "Can't you at least *once* dress appropriately?"

"I still have one of my Hawaiian shirts in the car. You want me to go back and put it on?"

The blond spins on his heels muttering, "Twins, separated at birth. It's the only explanation."

"Hey! I resent that. Not only am I younger, I'm prettier," the remainder of Xander's humor dies when they enter the circus tent.

If he could have ignored the atmosphere, he would have. The ring and what went on inside it were bad enough, but the sight of families and their obvious excitement makes his stomach turn.

These are monsters, you fools. If you forget that, you die.

Xander never forgot.

Jean-Claude's private booth looms ever closer as they climb the stairs, Jason drops back to walk beside him and after a few moments asks. "What's with you tonight, you're not usually this snarly. Did something happen at Anita's?"

"No," Xander sounds bored. "Nothing happened at Anita's. I'm tired and I can't say I'm in the mood for Jean-Claude's games. Let it rest, okay?"

"Xander...," Jason freezes as Xander rounds on him. With an expression colder than stone and eyes harder than slate.

"Leave it."

Jason finds himself staring at a stranger that's replaced Jean-Claude's pet human. For a split second, Xander appears old beyond his years and scarier as hell, and then it was gone as the human gives a tired sigh and ran a hand through his hair.
"I'm sorry, Jason. I shouldn't take my crappy mood out on you."

"Why not? Everyone else does," the tension brakes as they laugh.

Jason halts at the curtained doorway motioning Xander inside. "You know the way."

Okay, this was different. "You're not coming in?"

The werewolf shook his head, "I was instructed to stay outside."

Xander likes this less and less.

Pitch black and then the wooden door, he opens it with a certain amount of trepidation.

"Alexander," Jean-Claude is seated on the couch against the wall. Asher stands beside him.

"Jean-Claude, Asher," both vampires receive a stiff nod in greeting. They're alone and alarm bells start ringing in Xander's head.

"You met with Anita?"

Xander's eyes narrow, "You know I did, Jean-Claude. If you want an estimate I can give you one," his gaze flicks to Asher's closed face. "But somehow I don't think that's why I'm here."

"How long have you been here under my protection?"

Shit. So this is how it was going to go.

"Almost two years, unless you're using a different calendar than me."
With elegant grace, Jean-Claude steeples his fingers, "Have I not provided and kept my end of the bargain?"

"You have. As have I," Xander adds with snarl. His confusion deepens, for life of him he can't figure out what the vampire wants. "What the hell is going on?"

At this point, Asher steps forward. "Jean-Claude has received another petition from the Master of Los Angeles."

"Fuck!"

In an instant, Asher is less than a step away. "His conversation with Angelus has led him to believe that you are willing to return to Los Angeles."

"WHAT! Are you nuts?"

Still reeling from Asher's statement, Xander misses the significant look passing between the vampires.

With a visible shake, Xander gathers himself. He met Asher's, then Jean-Claude's eyes. "No. Nyet. Nada. I'm not, nor will I *ever* be ready to return to L.A. I don't know what Angelus said to give you the impression I was, but he's wrong."

Asher turns to Jean-Claude, "It appears that Angelus was lying."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps, he has not yet had time to change Alexander's mind."

"Angelus can be very persuasive," Asher replies.

"Oui."

Xander starts waving his arms. "Hellooo, remember me? The human who's still wondering what the hell is going on!"
Jean-Claude and Asher are not listening, if fact, they both appear rather distracted. Unbeknownst to Xander, Anita has just entered the Circus.

"Alexander, why don't you wait outside for a while."

"Go to hell, French-fry. I'm not leaving until I get some answ..Ooompf!"

When the little tweetie-birds stop circling his head, Xander finds his back pressed against a wall, and Jean-Claude's hand around his throat.

For a vampire who has clowns on his roof, Jean-Claude has a shitty sense of humor.

"Do not mistake my generosity for weakness Alexander," the Master vampire hisses. "Others in my place would have killed you long ago, there are few who would tolerate a human immune to our powers. Especially one who is reluctant to divulge how this can be so."

Xander realises his feet aren't even touching the carpet, and points to Jean-Claude's hand.

"Thanks," he wheezes as he hits the floor.

Climbing unsteadily to his feet, Xander says "I *don't* know why your vampy mojo has no effect on me, Jean-Claude. I've already told you that."

"But you have an idea," Asher interjects softly.

Both vampires are stunned by the darkness and desolation Xander's face reveals as he mutters. "And maybe you don't ever wanna know. Because if I ever have to tell you then the shit has well and truly hit the fan."

With that, he walks over to the bar and grabs a bottle of Jim Bean. "I'll go watch the show, call me," Xander freezes for a moment at his last turn of phrase, then starts sniggering as he exits the room.
"A most unusual human," Asher says when Xander has gone.

"Oui. What did you make of his comments?"

"He truly does not wish to return to L.A. The question remains as to why Angelus refuses to accept this."

"Angelus knows something," Jean-Claude states. "Aurielius and his line have always divined their power of prophecy to their advantage. We do not know what Angelus' seer has told him, yet we know the boy is at its centre."

Asher nods, "Then we must keep young Mr. Harris close, oui?"

Jean-Claude agrees.
"Xander?"

"Yes, Jason."

"You want me to get something for your throat?"

Xander waves his bottle of JD, "Got that covered," and sets about making himself comfortable on the bleachers. A physical impossibility no matter what creature you are.

After much whispered chatter, two families pick up their belongings and move with self-righteous distaste.

If he actually gave a shit he might have been vaguely insulted.

"So, I take it things didn't go well?"

Xander turns his head, slowly. The sympathy appears genuine, for a change.

After a shrug and a hefty swig, Xander finds himself saying "Not too bad. I got mouthy then Jean-Claude reminded me of my manners..... in that playful 'bitch-slap' way all vampires have."

Jason winced, "Been there." And filches Xander's bottle.

A comfy silence between the used and abused ensues, punctuated by alternate swallowing of JD.

Xander's posture changes not one iota as he spots Anita climbing the stairs.
She's so small, feminine; and deadlier than sack of pissed off rattlesnakes.
Funny how they've never met before today.
Over the past two years in some ways he's come to think of himself as her butler, complete with nail-gun and measuring tape. Diligently picking up and hammering back together the pieces (often itty bitty pieces) in the aftermath of yet another wild party she's thrown the night before.

Petite women with an appetite for destruction have a fascination few can resist. The conflict of light and dark is magnetic.

His lips twist in a cynical smile. Some things never change.

One row away and her head does a whip like double take thing, and the fun is about to start.

"WHAT the *hell* do the two of you think you're doing?"

Jason yips and twirls in his seat like a guilty puppy, while Xander merely pokes his head round the wide-eyed werewolf, "Hi, Anita. How's things?"

Anita's forthcoming tirade dissipates as she spies a vivid red handprint marring Xander's neck. "What happened to your throat, Xander?"

"This old thing?" His feigned surprise lapses into bitterness. "I had a hissy fit in the presence of greatness, far be it from me to complain."

She stiffens, "Jean-Claude did this?"

What is it with women who date vampires? They always seem shocked when their boys act like one.

"Either that, or those wax figures have *really* come a long way."

Jason's head swivels back and forth between them. The realisation Jean-Claude and Asher are not too far away looming in his thoughts.
Tag team wrestling comes to mind.

He starts to grin. "Did you want to see Jean-Claude, Anita?"

Anita's intent stare settles on Xander neck, her voice eerily calm. "Yes. Yes, I do."

The last human she knew who played with monsters was Phillip, Anita still stops by his grave if she's in the same cemetery. She's not about to go through that again.

Anita sets off to see Jean-Claude with Xander's cavalier shout of, "Say hi from me!" ringing in her ears.

Jason quickly makes to follow and feels a tug on his sleeve.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

The blond grins at Xander, "Are you kidding? I'm not gonna miss this for the world!"

***

Jean-Claude heaves a sigh, Anita's jolt of anger thrumming through their link alerts him to her meeting with Alexander.

It could be nothing else.

Her entrance is announced in a swirl of power and outrage.

"This is an unexpected surprise, ma petite."

"So it appears," she replies darkly, her gaze zeroing in on his hands. "Xander's well on the way to drinking himself into a stupor. I'll skip my lecture on underage drinking and go straight to why your
Sometimes, her predictability in these matters works to his advantage. "I do not involve myself in the discipline of your leopards, Anita. You need not concern yourself as to how and why I handle those under my protection."

This was news.

She's always stuck her nose into Jean-Claude's business. Things aren't about to change just because they're back together.

Xander is under Jean-Claude's protection? Why?

"Why does a human come to the Master of the City for protection?"

Jean-Claude waves his hand in elegant dismissal. "That is between Alexander and myself. If he chooses to tell you, that is his business."

As he expects, she refuses to let the matter rest. "Fine. He's just a kid, Jean-Claude. He doesn't need the shit in your life, it could get him killed."

"Nothing is ever what is seems, ma petite. Your *friend* Edward is human. Would you call him defenceless?"

Edward is the deadliest human she knows. A sociopathic hit man who got tired of killing humans, too easy. The monsters call him Death.

"Comparing Xander to Edward is like comparing a guppy to a white pointer. The difference is in the teeth."

"Hey! I resemble that remark," Xander weaves his way into the room. A morose scowl on his features as he complains, "They said I was scaring the customers."
In earnest indignation he glares at Asher, "A hundred and one things out there just waiting to nibble on them and their scared of me!"

Anita's sharp indrawn breath at Xander's eye contact with the other vampire produces a smile from Jean-Claude.

One that he quickly hides as she snaps her head in his direction, "How?"

He shrugs, "We do not know, and Alexander is reluctant to provide any further illumination."

Xander plants his back against a convenient wall, slides down until his ass hits carpet.

Legs drawn up against his body with the bottle dangling loosely from his fingertips, he cocks his head sideways and grins at the accusing faces turned his way. "Ain't life a bitch."

Only Jason returns the smile.

With a visible shake of her head in exasperation, Anita returns to more urgent matters. The upcoming visit of Musette being one, and Richard's determination to get killed another.

Other than an ever-increasing impatience with vampire protocol and men in general, the conversation proves fruitless.

From his observation post against the wall, Xander concludes that Hellmouth diplomacy is better. Monster arrives. Monster gets killed, end of story.

Oopsie. Did he say that out loud?

"Do you have *any* idea what the hell he's talking about?" Anita asks a laughing Jason.

Jean-Claude and Asher however, eye Xander with keen interest.

By unspoken agreement, Asher glides forward "What is this Hellmouth you speak of, Alexander?"

Jean-Claude hisses, damn this human! "Jason, put him in a cab. My patience is wearing thin."

Still laughing, Jason hauls Xander up by the scruff of his neck and walks the human out of the room.

Alone with the vampires, Anita glares at Jean-Claude. "When he sobers up tell him I want that quote. Micah arrives back tonight, I'm going home."

"You could stay, ma petite."

His request brings forth a snort of disgust. "And you could stop bullying kids, Jean-Claude. Pick on someone else next time if you want me to stay."

It occurs to her as she walks down the stairs how surprised she was to see Xander at the Circus. And that she has more friends amongst the preternatural community than she does human.

Even the relationship with Ronnie, her closest friend, is close to falling apart because of Anita's continued association with Jean-Claude.

Somewhere along the line Anita's convinced herself it's because humans die too easily and that it hurts too much, and maybe sometimes she even believes it.

Trouble is, she's losing contact with the ordinary people. Losing contact with 'normal' society is a danger she doesn't want to contemplate. Because once she starts seeing them as less than herself, she ceases to *be* herself.
She finds Jason lounging against a wall near the ticket booth and rolls her eyes as two giggling females who can't be more than fifteen flit past vying for his attention.

"A little young for you aren't they?"

His smile drops, "Don't you mean a little too human?"

God dammit!

"No, Jason. I meant what I said. All I'd ask is that any one you're serious about sees you change before things get out of control. Speaking of seeing," she scours the surrounding area. "Did you put Xander into a cab already?"

The werewolf smiles a tad maliciously, "He wasn't feeling too well," and nods towards the bathroom.

Oh.

Anita can't say she's feeling all that sympathetic, her brow rises as a rather pale and drawn Xander appears through the crowd.

Somewhat shamefaced, he offers her a weak smile. "Sorry about earlier, Anita. Bad attack of homesickness."

"Drinking isn't going to get you any closer to home, Xander. And drinking around vampires is just plain stupid."

"But it got me away from Jean-Claude, didn't it?"

His wink and tone leave them blinking in stunned silence.
Xander's not anywhere near as drunk as he pretended to be.

Jason's jaw drops, "You were faking?!

"Not entirely," the admission comes with a rueful shrug. "And I said more than I intended" Xander mutters to himself. Oh well, can't be helped. "The Big Bads never pay attention to the village idiot, Jason. Believe me, I know."

Anita ponders that last remark, and his aptitude for deception makes her uneasy.

She sighs. Unhappy he was drunk. Unhappy he's not as drunk as she thought.

No wonder people call her a contrary bitch.

"You're still not driving," she announces as they exit the Circus.

"Contrary to popular misconception, Anita. I'm not stupid," Xander walks blithely past the cab rank. "I just need to get some stuff out of my car."

He turns to Jason, "And why are you still here?"

"Jean-Claude said I had to see you into a cab. You aren't in one, yet."

She walks briskly ahead, with Xander and Jason's arguing banter providing background noise. The street is lined with cars; hers is parked three blocks away. Great.

Only a reflection on the window of a teal Ford station wagon saves her.

Anita launches herself forward as the sword carves through metal like butter. Bluish sparks showering her and she lands on her back with the Browning bucking in her hand.

Three. Four. Five in the heart, silver bullets.
It doesn't even flinch.

"Shit!"

Anita rolls to her feet in time to see Jason attack the creature from behind.

And be thrown fifteen feet onto the roof of a cadillac for his effort. The caddy crumples under the werewolf's impact like a tin foil sponge.

Xander's nowhere to be seen, smart boy. One less distraction for her to worry about.

She ejects the silver bullets and slams in good old-fashioned lead. Six shots into the back and all she succeeds in doing is reminding it she's still here.

Her Uzi is in the jeep. Crap!

"Okay, this is getting old. Jean-Claude!"

{{I am coming, ma petite}}

She receives a brief image of Jean-Claude and Asher running through the Circus.

Richard's alarm and strength joins the mix.

The marks flare inside her and between them as Anita backs off to give herself more space.

Jason is now fully changed, apparently none the worse for wear. And judging from the growls, he's about as pissed as she is. Before she can stop him, Jason launches at the creature again and the sword flashes.

Jason lies on the ground, gutted. His intestines steaming in the cool night air. Not dead, but if she can't get to him soon he might be.
Calm before the storm.

For a split second, silence reigns as the two combatants eye each other.

Not a vampire, not a were. Not like anything she's ever seen before and she's seen a *lot*. Clothes draped around its body in haphazard fashion, warrior chic for ugly things.

Greenish blood weeping from wounds but other than that she might as well have been hitting it with feathers for all the effect she's having.

Anita lashes out with her power, seeking that life force all things have, it's like sucking at a deflated balloon. Nothing.

"Damn! Looks like we're going to have to do things the old fashioned way," Anita draws the knife from its resting place down her back.

This was going to hurt.

Ugly comes in with sword swinging. Unfortunately he's not stupid and ignores her feint to the left. No option but to step *into* the blow to avoid having her head sliced off.

If she'd have been human, it would have killed her.

Cracking of bone and brief sensation of weightlessness before she skids across metal and hits brick.

Somewhere in the distance she can hear a car alarm start blaring. Lying on her side with vision fading in and out, Jean-Claude's panic combined with Richard's driving rage and fear are almost overwhelming.

A pair of legs suddenly blocks her view of the creature, "Hey there, Ugly."

Xander.
Pushing herself upright is a chore and hurts like hell. On the verge of telling him to run she spies the gun held confidently in his hands.

"Since when do carpenters carry shotguns?"

"Termites can be a bitch."

"Guns don't work," she said as the creature moves in closer.

Commotion to the left as Jean-Claude, Asher and half a dozen weres arrive.

Xander steps away from her snarling, "They can't hurt it. Tell them to stay out of my line."

As Anita wonders why the hell she allows him to go, she frantically motions for Jean-Claude to halt, Xander swiftly closes the gap between himself and the Mohra demon.

The shotgun swings up in one smooth motion and belches fire.

Directly at the red jewel embedded in the creatures forehead.

Holy Shit!

Ear piercing scream and the rest watch in awe as bright light erupts in a dazzling display that engulfs the Mohra demon and seems to tear a space in the fabric of reality.

Then it was gone.

Xander's smug satisfaction rings out loud and clear, "Now that's more like it! Demons who clean up after themselves."

And his words jump-start the crowd.
Jean-Claude's chief concern is Anita.

Anita's chief concern is Jason.

Somewhere at the edge of the gathering crowd, Asher is marshalling the troops and encouraging one and all to go back inside.

Meanwhile, the cab rank empties out quicker than women's underwear at a forty percent off sale.

Xander takes in the scene at a glance, tucks the shotgun underneath his jacket and slowly back steps until he merges with the shadows. Time to leave.

Almost makes it too. His keys are in the car door when instinct has him turning with shotgun raised.

"Going somewhere?"

Xander stares at Jean-Claude down the length of a gun barrel. "I'm going home. Unlike some I don't get to sleep in tomorrow."

The vampire eyes the gun with idle curiosity. "We have much to discuss, Alexander. Your departure would be....inconvenient."

"You'd be surprised how many vamps I've *inconvenienced*."

"Two years under my protection, and this is the way you thank me?"

Xander rolls his shoulders to get the kinks out, "See, that's why I don't like you guys, always with the lies," his voice hardens. "'Cause what you really been doing is trying to figure out why vampire powers have no effect on me, and how you can use it."

"I have a City to protect. It would be foolish of me to ignore anything that can assist in that endeavour."
As a harsh bark of laughter spills out into the night, Jean-Claude knows he's made an error in judgement.

"Protection? Don't insult me," Xander sneers. "Vampires aren't about protection, they're about Power. Who wants it, who wields it, and how they can get more. That's what vamps are about."

"You speak as one with experience in these matters," the vampire probes. "I presume your time with Angelus was informative?"

Like a switch, Xander's animated features slide into an expressionless void. "That's one way of putting it."

"And what's the other way?" Anita steps out of the dark and she has to give Xander credit, he never takes his eyes off Jean-Claude. "Put the gun down, Xander."

"I just want to go home, Anita. If Jean-Claude will let me that is."

"Jean-Claude?"

The dark haired vampire is unmoved. "He knows something, ma petite. He knew how to kill the creature, which means he knows what it was."

Yeah, she'd kinda figured that one out already.

"Jason's going to be okay, thanks for asking guys."

They're pretty much ignoring her completely. Men!

She aims the Browning. "I can't let you kill him, Xander."

"If I wanted Jean-Claude deader than he is, I could have killed him years ago. Like I said, I just
wanna go home."

It takes a lot to know there's a gun pointed at your head and *not* look. Almost everyone does, it didn't matter if they were vamp, a shifter or human. Even if they were under the mistaken belief it wouldn't hurt them, a gun is not something to be ignored.

The fact that Xander continues to do so speaks volumes.

Anita tries another tact. "Xander, killing a vampire is harder than it looks."

"Been killing vamps since I was sixteen. Always seemed pretty easy to me."

Anita blinks, that was curveball she wasn't expecting. Even Jean-Claude appears surprised.

"Who did they kill? Family? Friend?"

He shrugs, "No family," Xander appears to think about it. "Which is kinda strange 'cause that one I wouldn't have minded too much. As for the rest? Friends, lover, and people I knew and barely spoke to. What say we just tick box D and put it down as all of the above."

"Yet you came to me for protection," Jean-Claude interjects.

Xander grins at the vampire. "You used me, I used you. It was a fair exchange. I had no complaints."

Okay, now she's just confused. "So why do you want to kill him now?"

And Xander's irritation is obvious. "I *don't*. I just wanted to go home and Mr Pushy here came over all demanding we chat. If he wants to talk, fine. We can do it tomorrow, I'm not going anywhere."

Jean-Claude is actually amused. "It appears he is like you more than I thought, ma petite."
"Funny, Jean-Claude. Very funny," the tension has dissipated. She turns to Jean-Claude and tries to be reasonable. "He saved my ass tonight. I say if he wants to go home you should let him, providing he tells us what that thing was. Agreed?"

"Oui."

"Mohra demon," Xander answers immediately and lowers the gun. "Only way to kill them is to smash the jewel in their skull. We done? Good," he turns his back and opens the car door.

"Wait a minute," Anita grips the door. No way he can open it further unless she allows it. "I've never heard of these 'Mohra' demons. Demons can't be killed by bullets, only faith."

For some reason that seems to amuse him greatly.

"Yeah? Well I guess you don't know everything," Xander makes no effort to hide his mockery.

Less than a foot separates them. Close enough to hear her swift intake of breath and spot how her eyes narrow at his insult. Easy for Xander to see that coldness creep into her expression, and match it with his own.

"I've answered your question. Can I go?"

Anita raises her hand from the door; her next words a warning. "Jean-Claude expects you at the Circus tomorrow night. Be there."

Xander's grin is wry, "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

***

On the way home, Xander keeps to the speed limit. Stops at every red light, he even politely ignores the teens that scream past and cut him off.

Only when the front door is safely locked behind him does he allow himself the luxury of emotion. His fist slams into a wall, plaster cracks and the pain is almost a relief.
"SHIT!"

The jacket is violently ripped off and thrown across the room as he storms around the apartment. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

He's kept his head down, stayed out of trouble. Now things are shot to hell, literally. "Christ! I should have just nailed a sign to my head saying 'Stranger. Not of this world!'. God, I'm an idiot!"

Eventually he comes to halt in the middle of room, with both fists clenched at his side while his chest rises and falls in agitation.

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh on yourself?"

His head snaps sideways to the familiar figure leaning against the doorframe to his bedroom.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Hurtful pout, "You're not happy to see me?"

She does this to him every time, he should be sick of it by now. But he's not, like some junkie in need of a fix he can never find the strength to push her away.

"I'm always happy to see you, Wills. You know that."
Her dress is beige cheesecloth with fine lace edging, and a belt of intricate twisted black leather emphasises her tiny waist. Multi-colored hair streaked in green, blue and purple together with her own deep red. Somehow her eyes seem greener.

"You don't sound happy to me, Alexander."

He flinches, "DON'T call me that."

In bare feet she pads across grey carpet, her expression all curious and concerned. So close now as to have shattered 'personal space' protocol, Willow raises her hand as if to cup his face.

Unconsciously, Xander angles his head into the caress, "I miss you."

"I know."

A ragged breath for self-control before he can face her. "You're getting better, less wispy and more solid tonight."

Perky Willow grin as she twirls around with excitement, "Way cool, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Cool," his flat tone belies the words.

Skipping over to sit on his kitchen table, her legs swing idly as she crinkles her nose at leftovers he's forgotten to throw out. He can see the coffee grinder on the kitchen bench through her stomach.

"Why are you here?"

"Because you want me to be."
Xander sinks down onto the couch, buries his head into his hands. "Just when I think I'm sane....."

"Hey, hey, hey. Enough of that mister. We have work to do."

"It's," glances at his watch. "Two thirty in the morning." Xander leans back against the couch and throws an arm across his face; exhaustion catching up now the Mohra induced adrenaline rush has gone. "Why don't you come back tomorrow?"

"Because tomorrow night you go before the Master of the City to explain how you know about Mohra demons. That's why."

"Oh. That."

"Yes. That."

Outright stubbornness squares off against single minded determination.

Out of his sight her expression turns sly. "You should talk to Narcissus, get him to give you some backup in case things turn nasty."

Xander catapults from the sofa, "WHAT!! Are you *insane*? I'm not going to that sado-masochistic psycho for help!"

He paces about the room, arms flying like windmills. "Anita and her guys hate his guts. If I turn up with the hyenas in tow they will never trust me. No. Way."

FauxWillow draws herself upright, "Narcissus will not refuse. He *cannot*.

She becomes more conciliatory, leaving the table she floats towards him her voice whisper soft. "You can't run forever, Xander."

Unable to continue the conversation, or perhaps hoping she'll just fade away, Xander makes his way into the spare bedroom. Bookshelves cover every conceivable wall space, floor to ceiling.
Without hesitation Xander digs his fingernails against the plastic edging of the light switch. Which swings open to reveal a more complex electronic system beneath, presses his against the small screen.

A series of tumbling clicks, three ceiling panels retract. The innocuous white step-ladder leaning against one of the bookshelves takes on new meaning as he positions it beneath the newly revealed opening and uses it to climb up and grab a piece of rope.

A sharp tug and another ladder slides down.

He climbs the ladder, laughing as she says with a tinge of disbelief, "I can't believe you told me you were reading those electronic magazines so you could make your own toy car!"

The attic is another world.

Xander can never stop the thrill that overcomes him when he's here. This is *his* place. "I can feel your impatience from over here. Wanna know how I did it?"

"Well, duh!" fauxWillow stomps a foot in frustration. "Damn it. I loath working with the vocab of a Californian witch."

"Jean-Claude put me to work on the construction crew that built this block of apartments," Xander explains. "Halfway through the foreman died of a heart attack and his replacement was a disgrace."

Shaking his head at the memory, Xander continues. "Anyways, I'd already conned Jean-Claude into letting me rent the top apartment. When the new guy came in I adjusted a few things on the plans," he chuckles. "Last minute changes *requested* by Jean-Claude. I needed the extra support, a bit of sound proofing, and this is the result," his arms stretch wide to encompass the attic.

Weapons of almost every description take up most of the space on one wall. Shotguns. Automatic rifles, a Heckler & Koch G36C assault rifle. Glock and various other handguns hang neatly in their place.

Underneath the cabinets are drawers housing the required ammunition.
Against another wall is what Xander refers to as his "Cutlery."

Katanas in various lengths. A Ghurka kukhri. Even a Roman Gladius sheathed within its leather scabbard hangs above a series of knives and a multitude of other sharp weapons with razor edges that gleam.

"You never cease to surprise me," fauxWillow comments with a pout. "I thought we had no secrets."

"Yep," his voice echoes from within the enclosed space of a cabinet he's opened. "I'm all with the secrets. I'm secret agent man - man without a clue."

"Oooh, sarcasm. I'm all shivery and scared."

Xander emerges to favour her with a caustic stare. "I find that hard to believe, considering I can't even *touch* you and all."

Willow eyes the rolled up papers within his hand, "Whatchya got there?"

"None of your business," walking straight through her, Xander climbs back down the ladder.

"I *hate* it when you do that!"

"I know."

Back on the couch and he drags the coffee table over. The rolled up papers are large, like sheets they use for architecture and building design. Xander makes no attempt to unroll them.

For the moment, he's content to just sit here.

"At first all I wanted to do was get back home, kept waiting for some portal to open up and you...the *real* you and Buffy would be all weepy and say they've come to take me home.... But that was never going to happen was it?"
His sharp glance finds her eyeing him sadly.

"No, it was never going to happen."

Xander gives a brusque nod and returns to staring at the rolls of paper, "So, to keep myself busy. Between fighting for my life and the whole trying not to go crazy thing, I thought I'd try and work out what was different. This world and mine, you know?"

And he thinks her tears would work better if he knew they were real. If he knew she really cared.

"Show me what you have, Alexander."

So he unrolls the papers, grabs a shoe off the floor to keep one side in place, allowing him to flick over the pages with ease.

"I was never good at the Math," he explains quickly. "Wasn't much good at anything other than hammering a nail and watching Buffy's back...."

"You were good at the things that mattered, Xander. You loved. You were loyal...," fauxWillow trails off as he holds up a hand.

"Try not to make me sound like Lassie, okay?"

She smiles. "Okay."

Xander finally taps the papers," Well, am I even close?"

Despite his previous denials the first two sheets are covered on both sides with complex mathematical equations. She wonders if he's aware of the fact that he's one of perhaps a handful of people in the entire world who can understand them.

The final page is the conclusion, summed up in stark yet simple words.
HELMOUTH = VAMPIRES + DEMONS + SLAYER

NO HELLMOUTH = VAMPIRES/SOULS -DEMONS - SLAYER

The being he knows as fauxWillow seems impressed. "The true concept would literally blow your mind. It's a little oversimplified. But for a mortal? Not too shabby."

Xander's snort of derision rings out loud and clear. "I bet you say that to all the boys," he stares pensively at the page. "'Cause the demon thing had me going for a while, then I realised that in *this* world they have to be summoned. But back home? They pop up like genetically altered wheat."

"You keep saying that...'back home'."

His expression becomes mutinous. "Because it is."

"I will not take away your dreams, Alexander. After all, what are we without our dreams?"

In the blink of an eye the room temperature drops to zero. "You *bitch*," his gaze turns cold. "You fucking bitch! Don't you dare talk to me about dreams especially MINE. You brought me here. You took MY dreams. I don't even know if you are what you say you are. And you know what? I don't CARE. Get out."

"Alexander...."

"GET OUT!"

Gradually, she begins to disappear, but not without one last parting shot. "The game is in play, Alexander. You WILL participate. Not because of me, but because you cannot turn away from what is coming. Your heart and sword are your own White Knight, but the board upon which you stand is
mine. Remember that.”

Her words still ringing in his ears, Xander remains seated, his thumb absently tracing calluses on a palm. "As if I could forget."

****

"Something wrong with your hand, X-ray?"

"What?" It takes a moment to recall the name. "'Copter, right?"

Zuesman's Home for Boys, or, as the occupants prefer to call it, The Zoo, has some thirty residents and eight full time staff. Having only been here three days, Xander hasn't met or even spoken to all of them.

Copter stood out though. Seventeen years of age and already pushing six five with biceps the size of small hams, he cut a mountainous path wherever he went. Shaved head with skin of the deepest ebony, he reminds Xander of that actor in The Green Mile.

Except there is nothing shy or withdrawn with this giant.

"Copter's my name," and he nods down at Xander's hand. "You been rubbing your palm like that for ten minutes. I've been watchin'."

Oh. "Well, obsessive compulsions are in this year or so I've been told, and we have been advised that we must "learn to fit in". I'm just doing my part." Impossible to say he's missing calluses that signify he once used to be a grown up.

Raised brow, "Sure, X-ray. You just about the fittenest person in here, what with you scaring the shit out the babies and all."

Verbal repartee? He can do that.
"I scare babies? Did I miss the nursery on my tour?"

Copter's booming laugh startles some pedestrians, who take in the large sign proclaiming this building to be the County of L.A property and what its used for, look at the two kids seated on the steps, and promptly go scuttling away.

After he settles, Copter leans back on his elbows and checks out the newbie up close. At first glance you'd say not much to look at, dark hair that's probably never gone below the collar but is starting to creep towards it, no earrings, no tattoos. Hell, X-ray looks pure white bread suburban muffin just waitin' to be gobbled up by the nasties.

"The babies are what we call the pretenders, man. Strutting around like the big bad wolf when all the time they're shittin' in their pants crying for momma."

"Speaking as one who bears a striking resemblance to your description. May I ask *why* I scare those who join me trembling in the shadows?"

"You don't tremble, X-ray." As Xander's face closes down, Copter nods sagely.

"Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about. You've done some hard yards, man. Ya try and hide it but you can't hide in The Zoo."

So much for maintaining a low profile, Xander knows exactly when he blew it. "That little incident with Vasquez?"

Copter's face glazes over with happiness at the memory. "Shit, yeah. Where'd you learn to....," his arms and feet shoot out in a parody of Jackie Chan.

"In another world," Xander's unfocused eyes stare upwards at the smoggy L.A sky. "'S a hell of world you live in, X-ray."

"'Cept I don't live in it anymore."

And he needs to change this conversation, "We get day trips here, right?"
A wry smile escapes Copter, "Don't like people digging do you? Fine. Yeah, we get time out, a field trip if we're 'good little boys'. Once a month."

Xander shook his head. "Can't wait that long. Stuff to do, people to see...."

Copter can practically see the wheels turning, asks mildly. "Fixing on doing a runner?" And guffaws loudly as Xander neatly slips into an innocent wide-eyed expression. "Gotta do better than that, supervisors have pretty much seen it all, X-ray. 'Specially El Diablo."

Michael 'El Diablo' Estevez runs the place. Thirty-two years of age, he can't be more than five nine but is built like a god damned tank with fading gang tattoos on his wrists and arms; and took shit off no one.

"Yeah," Xander chews on his bottom lip deep. "El Diablo's gonna be a toughie. Think he knows I worked Vasquez over?"

"Does the sun shine?"

"Crap."

"You can walk out any time," Copter nods towards the open gate. "Why don't you?"

Xander grunts in disgust, "No point running around L.A without knowing where I'm going. I need a computer and ....where's the library?"

"Huh?"

A plan forming, Xander repeats, "The City library. Where is it?"

"Downtown. But we already got a library here. No way their just gonna let you waltz off to go book readin'."
With a wink, Xander rises and dusting the dirt from his jeans chants happily. "Trust the man with the plan, Copter. Trust the man with plan."

And some how, Copter doesn't doubt him for a second. "You're one scary white-boy, you know that?"

Hesitating by the door, Xander looks back over his shoulder. "Would you believe that I'm considered perfectly harmless back home?"

"No."

The rapid-fire reply leaves Xander blinking in bemusement, he dismisses Copter's comment with a shrug. "I'm nothing special," he disappears into the building.

Left to his own devices, Copter mutters out loud. "You're a lot of things, X-ray. Damned if I know what exactly, but 'nothing special' sure as shit ain't one of 'em."
"He went home?" Dolph drawls like he can't quiet believe it, or her.

"It's not like I had a lot of choices, Dolph." Anita glanced down the hospital corridor, great, here comes Richard. "Jason was lying gutted on the ground, I had a crowd of Vamps, Weres and Humans rollicking all over the crime scene. What the hell did you expect me to do?"

She greets Richard by way of a terse nod, "Jason's going to be okay, but you might want to ask the doctors if you can go in and see him."

"Thank you," he heads towards the nurses station trailed by Shang-Da.

"My, my, that was chilly."

"Can it, Dolph." Seems there was a time when she had no men in her life and now she's tripping over them. She should have stuck with penguins.

"What can you tell me about this Xander guy?"

"He's Jean-Claude's carpenter."

In the ensuing silence a distant call for doctor so and so to please come the emergency room echoes over the P.A system.

Dolph takes a deep breath, the kind of punctuating 'calm myself' breath that stops you from committing violence while you wallow in disbelief. "Carpenter? You're telling me a *carpenter* shoots this..what did you call it," checks his notes. "This Mohra demon and then goes home to bed?!"

"Yep."

"A carpenter who just so happens to have a shotgun in his car?"
"He said it was for termites." Oh, and doesn't that go down a treat.

"Anita..."

"Cross my heart, Dolph. Termites. Maybe he used to work in Canada. Big trees, big termites. Who knows!"

And Dolph, who has obviously given up all hope on making sense of this conversation, asks wearily. "Address?"

"You'll have to ask Jean-Claude."

"I'll do that."

You'd think the police would be pleased someone's just destroyed a monster that killed three people. Anita is. Cops are funny like that, like it's a personal insult or something. Who cares so long as the bad guys are dead and the good guys are still standing?

And yeah. She's beginning to see why her and Dolph are having problems.

At this point, Anita should be mentioning Xander's comment about killing vamps since he was sixteen. She hasn't. Xander pretty much saved her ass tonight and that cuts him a bit of slack as far as she's concerned, which runs out tomarrr..tonight.

She'll have to reschedule her appointments. Bert's going to have a hissy fit. She finds Dolph favouring her with an appraising stare, "What?"

"Anything else I should know about this guy?"

"I only met him yesterday, Dolph. I've told you all I know. Hell, Jason can probably tell you more about Xander than I can. They seemed pretty chatty with one another."
Hard cop eyes give her another once over. After a moment, Dolph nods, apparently convinced she's not hiding something, which she isn't, not really. Been awhile since that's happened, she's almost forgotten what it feels like.

"Okay then," Dolph tucks his notebook away. "We'll contact Jean-Claude," he looks over her shoulder. "Looks like your ex wants to have a chat. Be seeing you, Anita."

Maybe its her, but that sounds more like a threat than a goodbye.

She doesn't need to hear the soft scuff sounds of Richard's shoes to know he's behind her.

"Anita."

"Richard."

Shang-Da hovers in the background, disapprovingly silent as usual.

Even in his plain blue jeans and navy sweater, Richard is still capable of making her ache. But her will to live clashes with his morals. Eventually, those morals are going to get him killed.

"They wouldn't allow me to talk to Jason for long," Richard runs a tired hand through chestnut coloured hair. "I suppose I should thank you."

"No, you shouldn't."

"Anita...."

"I wasn't the one to save him, Richard. Save the gesture for Jean Claude's carpenter."

"Xander?"
Is she the only person who hasn't met Xander before?

"What do you know about him?" Maybe Richard can fill in some of the blanks. Jean-Claude has been provocatively silent on the subject.

With a frown, he shrugs. "Not much. He's done some renovations for different members of the pack. From what I've heard his crew do a damned good job, on time and within budget."

Yep. Should have definitely stuck with the penguins. God knows they can't be as thick as men.

"Richard! I'm not asking for a reference here. Xander used a shotgun to blast a monster to pieces tonight...actually, he blasted it into thin air," she impatiently waves aside his silent query. "Can we stick to the point here? Xander. Personal stuff. Anything."

"I know he's been working off and on for Jean Claude for about two years," he replies. "I've met him a couple of times, seems a nice guy."

"He's not afraid."

Both her and Richard turn to stare at Shang-Da.

"Afraid of what?" Anita presses for a further explanation.

"Of us."

The word "monsters" remains unsaid, yet it connects them all.

"He knows what we are," Shang-Da continues with slightly unfocused eyes, as if he's caught in a memory. "'Really' knows. Pack, Pard, Vampire. He knows us the way a swordsman knows his blade, or a sniper knows his target."

Interesting analogies aside, "How?"

Shang-Da shrugs, like he's used up his word quota for the week.
"Friend or foe?"

The oriental werewolf cocks his head and fixes her with a patented Shang-Da inscrutable gaze, "He is like a Dragon best left sleeping. Only the Dragon knows."

And pithy proverbs at four in the morning only piss her off. She rounds on Richard, "Well?"

"Shang-Da's right," Richard's handsome face darkens. "I remember when I met Xander there wasn't even a hint of fear. That's unusual. Although," he adds like an afterthought, "I still don't think he's dangerous."

Anita rolls her eyes. Yeah. And so says the man who once dated The Executioner.

****

The sun is up, low on the horizon. Peeking between buildings with enough light to send blood shot eyeballs scurrying for shelter behind slitted eyelids.

Just enough light to remind Xander he's spent the last four hours in a ten by ten interview room with three other men playing verbal dodge ball until he felt his tongue was going to bleed.

And he recalls some long forgotten memories like a) air-conditioning in police stations is for shit and b) the aroma of fading cologne and sweat sticks to skin like fucking glue!

"Being interviewed by the cops is like dancing in a strip joint. Go all the way down to skin and their still not satisfied."

A passing hooker with peroxide hair like straw snickers as she's hauled inside.

"Christ! Home, shower, food. I'm going to be late for work. If I'm working that is...what day is it again?"

"Saturday," Bacchus shifts his briefcase into his other hand as he follows Xander down the stairs, past a couple of patrolmen who give them the hairy eyeball.
Xander turns as they reach the bottom, eyes the werehyena up and down. "Almost didn't recognise you in the suit and all. Very Aly McBeal of you, Bacchus."

"Charmed, I'm sure."

"Charmed?" Xander's mouth twists amusement. "Man, that Aaron Spelling is *everywhere*."  

Bacchus endures the comment with a stoic face. "Xander. Before you leave I'd like to discuss what happened tonight."

Xander wheels away, steps between two patrol cars and starts wandering down the road as he looks for a cab, his expression one of mutinous stubborn denial. "Nothing to discuss."

"I disagree," Bacchus follows on the pavement, forced to raise his voice in an effort to be heard. "As, I'm sure, would Narcissus."

A furnace like blast of Power drives Bacchus to his knees.

Briefcase handle shattering in his grip, the werehyena struggles to avoid Change. His beast answering the Call and then....frozen. Immobile in time like some insect stuck in amber.

Footsteps, and Bacchus raises his eyes.

Xander looms above him, silent and removed. The carpenter's pupils now changed to the vertical slits of a hyena, one hand held out with fingers splayed wide. Bacchus can't free his gaze from the hand, if it closes to a fist he knows the Change will continue unchecked.

"I have to ask," Bacchus says through clenched teeth. "Narcissus will demand an explanation."

"There are two reasons," Xander growls. "Two reasons why Narcissus still lives, Bacchus. One: He's pregnant. Two: I feel partially responsible for what happened with Chimera. Don't push my patience any further."
A patrol car pulls up behind Xander.

"Hey....Hey! Everything alright there?"

And Bacchus sucks in air like a landed fish as the crushing weight of Power lifts.

Xander sunny smile. "My friend just lost his footing."

Internally Xander winces. And could he *get* any more cliched? Bacchus rises to the cause like the good little trooper he is.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." Rises to his feet brushing at his knees. "Sorry, to busy talking. Not watching what I was doing."

The cop has plainly heard better bullshit from a five year old. "You sure?"

"Positive."

Xander endures another once over, water off a ducks back since he's been getting them all night. Smile the right smile and helpfully pick up Bacchus's briefcase. See? Best buds, Officer. We're all good here.

Time to go.

Bacchus trailing silently behind and Xander feels like all types of shit. Dirty on the inside as well as the outside now.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"Narcissus is my Oba, Xander."

Meaning: I'm my Alpha's shit kicker, Xander. I'm used to it.
"My condolences."

Meaning: I can't kill him for you but I sure wish I could.

"He will want to speak with you," Bacchus begins tentatively.

"HE can get stuffed."

"Regularly."

Xander's cynical bark of laughter contains little humour. "If Narcissus paid as much attention to his Pack as he does to ....."

"We have grown strong," Bacchus interjects forcibly. "Our Oba kept us safe when we were outnumbered by the wolves and rats. What else is there?"

Xander's steps falter, there's a devastating truth in the question. The safety of pack is paramount. Everything else is just a means to an end. Even his own wishes and desires.

"I never wanted this," he confesses wearily to a startled Bacchus. "I had a life, friends. And okay," Xander starts to babble. "Perhaps that life was gonna one day get me killed and those friends were occasionally at the top of the list of the usual suspects, but it was MY choice."

Bacchus's eyes widen in surprise, and incomprehension. "You are Babalawo- The Father of Secrets. Our connection to Orun and the Creator, you have only to make your presence known and anything you desire is within your grasp."

Xander looks around and finds they've arrived at Bacchus's car, he leans back against the frame with hands buried deep in the pockets of his jacket and stares at the ground. Thinking of another world, another life as he murmurs softly. "Not everything, Bacchus. Not everything."

He's so tired. So tired of lying and pretending. The Mohra demons arrival here signals change, and it's not of the good. The End of Days is coming. He can't help if he's on the outer and unknown.
The unease from Bacchus is palpable, Xander feels kinda sorry for the guy.

"Perhaps," Xander says out loud. "Perhaps SHE is right, it's time for me to stop running. Although," he grins widely at the werehyena. "You know this means I'm gonna hafta apologise for telling HER to piss off last night, don't you? Man," scowling he scuffs a shoe against the pavement. "I hate it when she's right and I get the 'I told you so routine'."

Bacchus pales, appearing to almost weave on his feet. "You...you..." Only Xander's slap on the back reminds the hyena to suck in some air.

"Relax," he tells the hyperventilating werehyena. "Take it from me, SHE's used to it." Adding in a chirpy fashion. "Believe me, I've said worse."

The usually stoic hyena practically coughs up a lung at the very thought.

Decision made, Xander's next words are crisp and to the point. "Tell Narcissus to set up the meeting with Jean-Claude for tonight. But *not* to give away anything if he can help it."

"The Executioner will be there," Bacchus says with concern. "She doesn't like surprises."

"Tough," Xander snaps. "Anita will just have to deal."

"If anything happens to you...."

Xander wiggles his eyebrows, "Father of Secrets here, Bacchus. I can handle a pissed off Necromancer. Even one as trigger happy as Anita." He yawns, "Have Narcissus make it around eightish, I need some sleep."

Bacchus sighs, bearing the look of a man who's just been given the shittiest job in the world.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Xander spots a cab and hails it with a wave. As he opens the door he says over his shoulder, "Oh, and Bacchus? Make sure you bring me a couple of boxes of
dominos for tonight's show and tell."

"Dominos?"

"Things tumble, Bacchus." Xander's expression is grim as he settles into the cab. "Let's just pray we don't all go tumbling down with it."
Los Angeles: 1998

At first, information came to the media via some telephone calls and 'sources'. After contacting LAPD all suspicions are promptly confirmed by a curt, "No comment."

Two of the largest Shifter gangs in L.A are involved in an all out battle. So the race is on to report it and find out why.

"C'mon, Brad. Move it!"

Brad Walker, all five foot three of him, snarls at the agitated red head sitting next to him. "I'm goin' as fast as I can, Patty." He glances down at the dashboard of the news van, "Shit, any faster and I'm gonna need a pilots licence."

Patricia Westwood is thirty two years of age with long red hair, blue eyes and a steely determination that men call cute right up until the time its turned their way. Pretty enough to sit behind a news desk she's a multi-award winner investigative journalist. Many of those awards based on her stories about the injustices experienced by the preternatural community within L.A.

In other words, she has sources. Damned good ones in fact, which is why she's so pissed off now. "I can't believe I didn't hear about this one brewing. Last I heard the Ogun and Maravilla had a truce!"

Walker snorts at her outraged disbelief. "This might come as a bit of a shock, Trish. But your guys and gals on the ground don't know everything and besides....," his voice trails off.

"Besides what? I'm still human? Is that what you were going to say?"

Walker takes a corner doing ninety and still manages to shrug. "Hey, all I'm saying is those beasties don't trust us, that's all. Not even you."

Patricia swallows her next remark, there's no point. Brad's views are well known to her, she's lucky he's a damned fine camera man who can keep his mouth shut when he films.
"Just get us in there before LAPD block off all access," she instructs curtly.

"Right," he drawls. "Stuck between hyenas and rats who give 'armed to the teeth' new meaning. Oh the joy."

****

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum...," Xander fends off Copter's appalled stare with a shrug.

Blood and fear float on a limpid L.A breeze...Hmmm, molasses laced with lemon fizz.

There's something inherently ridiculous about two humans creeping about with shotguns that brings Elmer Fudd to mind.

Except Xander's hunting furballs of a different ilk; more teeth, less sly Bugs Bunny wit.

He hunts with bile, hate and a calm cold certainty that this world has changed him to suit its needs. Five months on in L.A and somehow his life has taken a U-turn he never expected. Again!

Ha! Ever the chameleon is Xander Harris and this night... this night he's going shove it down their fucking throats until they choke on it.

And he hopes whatever brought him here is fucking happy, that he's come so far to stoop so low. Clicks his tongue in disgust at this rambling internal monologue.

"X-ray?"

"I'm fine, just trying to figure out which god I pissed off enough to fuck up my life so completely." Insert philosophical shrug here.

Xander halts as the whooping call of a hyena echoes down concrete canyons, a call promptly returned in surround sound. "Holy Cowboys and Indians, Batman! How many do we have out here tonight?"
Hundreds for sure, he can feel them.

Just like how he feels like sun-baked earth, a multitude of tiny fissures and cracks opening up underneath his skin.

"Hold it."

Copter freezes, eyes straining as he peers into the darkness. "You see something?"

"Maybe."

"Yours or them?"

"I'd know if it was one of ours."

Under Copter's silent yet continued eloquent stare, Xander blinks innocently, "What?"

"You gotta *talk* to some people about this, X-ray. You know that, right?"

"Sure, 'cause that ended SO well last time."

Copter winces, "I don't know what went down between you and that babe, man. But them Valley girls...."

Xander's not listening, "Let's go," he sets off at a rapid pace.

"....Will break your heart."

Copter follows still muttering underneath his breath, "And if I ever find that bitch I'm gonna snap her fucking neck!"
X-ray never told Copter what went down, he just disappears one night to see some girl and when he came back two days later it was a different guy who in Copter's opinion, just happened to share X-ray's skin.

Then X-ray had met Leeta and everything (in Copter's opinion) went to shit. And god dammit! How fast is a skinny white boy allowed to move anyways? He starts to jog while rumbling in annoyance, "Slow down, X-ray. This body is built for lovin' not speed!"

Using the recess of a shop front for cover, Xander waits for Copter to catch up. A smile grim at the realisation he shouldn't have even been able to hear the complaint.

Shouldn't be able to see so clearly either but he can. Leaning his back against steel shutters he mutters, "Why does this shit always happen to me?"

In the privacy of darkness his profile reveals the feral savagery of a soul pushed too far too fast, emotional exhaustion kept at bay by the stubbornness of glacial rage. And Xander wonders if he would have fallen for Leeta so hard if he hadn't been so desperate to cling to something. Anything.

Copter arrives huffing and puffing like a runaway train, Xander raises an eyebrow, "Too many burgers, dude." His mask firmly back on 'cause it wouldn't do to shock the kiddies.

"Get..." doubled over at the waist, Copter thinks he's going to hurl.

"...stuffed."

He's obviously forgotten about the shotgun currently pointing at Xander's groin, at least, Xander hopes it just an error.

He uses a finger to pointedly push the barrel away. "I need you to cover me."

"Huh?" Oh, right. "Like the movies, sure. I got your back."

It's a crock of shit and they both know it. Copter still thinks a Remington 870 is an electric shaver, Xander even caught him smuggling a spider out of their dorm at The Zoo so it wouldn't get stomped.
"No," Copter's stomach turns cold at the indifference in Xander's voice. "Not like the movies, 'cause this time? This time someone's gonna die."

"I know you got reason but...."

Xander's hand slashes downwards.

Copter sighs at the inevitable; Xander always was one stubborn son of a bitch. "Be careful."

"Always."

Making no attempt to hide, Xander walks deep into the alley. The time for games has long passed and stealth would be a wasted effort, the wererat can smell him.

"I know you're here, cholo. I can smell that skanky aftershave of yours a mile away."

And what makes him look up he'll never know. A split second wasted gaping as a blur of dark fur plummets down towards him, "Awww, crap!"

He dives to avoid claws the size of a dinner plate, Xander misses having his head ripped off but succeeds in a glancing blow from the wererat's six foot tail that whips round to hit his chest like some gigantic pink lead pipe, rib bones crack.

Bouncing down the alley like an air hockey puck on speed, he comes to rest in a pile of cabbage and-sniff-plum sauce. Xander figures he'll probably recover from the shock of finding the Remington still clutched tightly in his hands.

But if he stays here like this he's dead.

Oh.
That's something of a surprise. Let's hear it for those old Hellmouth get up and go instincts, guaranteed to override a suicidal death wish when you least expect it.

Distant whoops bring some sort of comfort; the clan are coming. And maybe he's cracking up but there's renewed energy when he slithers out of the garbage.

Renewed eyesight too apparently 'cause he can see as clear as day.

Finds himself staring down a rat the size of a small horse. Black fur, icky buckteeth and all.

"Ah, there you are."

Cobalt black eyes glitter with unresolved malice. "I knew we should have should have killed you."

"Yeah," twisted smile. "You should have."

Xander brings up the Remington asking conversationally, "Tell me, Santo. You gonna die as easy as your buddies?"

Apparently not.

Xander shoots only to find the wererat has already moved, not fast enough though as Santo's shoulder is torn to pieces.

"Silver bullets," Xander drawls over high-pitched screams. "Shoe's on the other foot now isn't it? You sadistic fuck!"

Ignoring his shoulder, Santo charges, too fast for Xander to shoot and the impact of fur and flesh is sickening. Flat on his back with the shotgun held crossways in both hands, Xander holds Santo off while dodging incisors that will rip him to shreds if they make contact.

Xander plants his feet flat against the wererat's chest and with desperate strength flings Santo off. The wererat lands...well, like a rat. Agile, surefooted and ready for more.
They've fought the entire length of the alley. Partially obscured by smoke from a nearby fire, Santo stands at the entrance of the alley and suddenly, Xander just wants this to be over.

"Enough."

Five shots left in the magazine and Xander uses four, sheer force of impact sends Santo staggering backwards out onto the street.

With his chest ripped open the wererat should be dead. On his knees with his world the smeared grey of impending death, Santo can only listen as justice is served.

Distinct sound of another round being pumped, hot muzzle against his head as a voice rough with emotion says, "For Leeta."

Darkness.
part 9

"Holy shit!!"

Brad lowers the camera, the executed wererat lies sprawled not more than thirty feet away with its brains scattered all over the road.

The burly cameraman glances over to find Patricia pale faced, her mouth open in horror. "Patty..." She pays him no mind, her eyes still fixed on the blood soaked boy standing over the body.

As they watch, the dark haired youth flings his arms wide, tips back his head to scream an inhuman whooping cry of victory.

A hyena version of the Tabernacle choir answers, their cries resonate down to the bone.

"Sweet Jesus!"

Those answering calls are close and getting closer.

Jump starting some primal flight instincts, Brad grabs Patty's arm, dragging her frantically towards their van, "C'mon! Move it."

Too late, even as Patty shakes herself free of the scene the street comes alive.

The larger females come first, mouths open in that typical hyena grin, their muzzles matted with blood, the males following closely behind.

Brad's shoulders slump, "We're fucked."

"Stay still," Patricia hisses as the first hyena lopes towards them. After a cursory sniff it ignores them and keeps going, followed by more.

So many hyenas squeeze into the restricted confines of the street that they mill about, all trying to get
to lone figure standing not too far away. Wall to wall fur. Patty fights a shiver as something brushes against her leg.

Brad stifles a hysterical giggle, "Never a dog catcher around when you need one, is there?"

She'd hit him if she could, "Will you shut-up!"

High pitched squeals of excitement as hyenas jostle for position around where the rat lies.

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Most predatory shifters eat their enemies," Patricia supplies calmly.

"What are we then?"

She frowns, "I don't know."

"You don't KNOW!!" With a moan he buries his face in his hands, "We are so fucked!"

***

Xander can feel them, in his head. A deep abiding satisfaction of vengeance well served, of enemies defeated. Smoke from the fire has become denser, so yeah, that's the reason his eyes are watering; ash drifts down like black snow.

Venus bumps her massive shoulder against his leg.

"Yes, I know," his hand drifts down to scratch her head. She will lead the Ogun now that Leeta is gone.

"C'mon, lets find out who they are." He glances to his left; Copter stands on the sidewalk like some
silent sentinel, "You coming?"

"You gonna kill them too?"

"They seem harmless enough."

"That's not an answer, X-Ray."

"No, it isn't." Xander's emotional withdrawal is frightening.

Patricia inhales sharply as hyenas part like the Red Sea. "Buckle up, kiddo. We've got company coming." Brad looks up in joyous wonder.

"The police?"

"No," she nods towards the approaching group.

His eyes widen as the stone-faced youth walks towards them, flanked on either side by a dark giant and a hyena. "I am NEVER paying another city tax again," the cameraman bitterly complains.

"That's okay," Xander responds as he comes to halt. "Look how much fun you can have when you don't." Patricia has a hard time not staring, black on black eyes with vertical slits; hyena eyes.

"You call this FUN?"

"No. We call this justice."

Her volatile temper flares and Brad's frantic 'shut up before you get us both killed', motions are just fanning the flames, her lips curl in disgust. "Taking the Ogun name to heart are we?"

"Warboys by name, War-weres by nature."
"So, the Maravilla started it and your gonna end it? Is that how it goes?"

"It's already gone."

Silence all round as *that* particular piece of news goes down.

Copter and Brad eye each other with similar bemusement. They silently agree to sit this one out and stay in their respective corners.

"The police will be here soon," frustration sharpens her voice. Patricia tries valiantly to make him see reason, "I hope your revenge was worth getting your and your clan killed."

Xander shrugs, "The Clan don't answer to the police and they don't answer to me." He points to the black limousine that has approached unobservered, "They answer to her."

*********

Her presence sent the Ogun into frenzy; in reality they truly were the 'wild-children' of the Clan and of some low standing. To have their Iyalode present at their victory was, in their minds, an honour.

Xander's kind of speechless himself.

Five occupants exit the limo, two female bodyguards easily discerned by their sharp eyes, protective stance and loose clothes to allow mobility. The other three are all considerably better dresses and consist of two women and a man.

A tall thin woman with wisps of grey in her brown hair detaches herself from the group, she's wearing a caftan of all things and although her power is strong but she is not the Iyalode. She reminds Xander of a maths teacher he had in fifth grade, no-nonsense and mind your P's and Q's.

"I assume you have a plan to get them out of here?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Some storm tunnels that lead to a couple of abandoned warehouses back in their
own turf. We've got carcasses waiting so they eat, change of clothes too."

A crisp nod, "Good," she turns to Venus. "We must leave now, we've paid enough to keep them out for another fifteen minutes. After that, all bets are off. He," she points to Xander, "stays. The Iyalode wishes to speak with him," she claps her hands, "Come, let's move."

***

They separate him so neatly from the others it took his breath away. A look, a word, and if that failed- straight up intimidation. Xander has newfound empathy with that lone zebra that always buys it in those National Geographic documentaries.

The limousine cruises like a dark whisper, he cocks a brow as they and the following confiscated news van are waved through the police roadblock. "Neat."

Next to him, the man who had introduced himself as Stavros twitches.

"Neat? You call this NEAT? Do you have any idea what you've done tonight?" A short stocky man of Greek heritage, his dark curly hair frames a swarthy face and deeply set intelligent eyes.

Still looking out the window, Xander retorts blandly, "Do you have any idea how much I don't care?"

Stavros blinks; to be dismissed so casually out of hand is a somewhat new experience. His eyes flick to the woman seated opposite, her faint smile at his consternation supplies no direction at all.

So he tries another tact, "Xander, is it?" Nod. "Can you tell us where you're from?"

"A galaxy far, far, away."

This time, the woman laughs outright, "Oh, I'm going to *like* you. I can tell."

"You're not helping," Stavros admonishes with a mock frown.
"You cannot intimidate him, Stavros. He is not like one of those congressmen who cower in your wake," she chides him with a wave from an elegant hand. "I doubt he even knows who you are."

"A hyena in a three thousand dollar suit," Xander inserts crisply. Her accent reminds him of Kendra, although it is softened by American overtones and nowhere near as thick as the dead Slayers.

Skin like a caramel cream, black hair to her waist and so dark it shines, this woman dresses in Dior and her green eyes dance with humour. Yet her power is so strong it is a giant hand pressed against his chest. And though he tries to avoid it, his gaze keeps skimming back to her again and again.

Here he is, covered in enough grime and blood to seriously mess with her leather seats, and she somehow manages to make him feel like an equal with nothing more than a smile.

"If he doesn't want to tell us where he's from then perhaps I can," and Xander stiffens at her deceptively sweet tone. He folds his arms across his chest and tries to look bored, "Go for it."

"When he arrived in our world," she lays a hand on his knee in an attempt to calm the suddenly startled boy. "When he arrived everything was the same yet different. Different enough that he thought he was going crazy, and the violent migraines didn't help."

Frozen in place, Xander can only listen with his heart in his throat.

"Sleep was next to impossible, all these images and words every time he closed his eyes," her glance is sympathetic. "Everything he ever read, everything he's ever seen or heard all crowding inside his brain waiting to accessed."

The tension is palpable now, Xander's fists are clenched at his side and the desire to open the door and bolt is almost overwhelming, yet he stays.

"Maybe they give him pills to stop the headaches, but those soon cease to have any effect. And one day, one day he meets one of us, a hyena, and those headaches mysteriously stop. Perhaps a bit of that isolation starts to drift away, perhaps he's found that connection he was looking for and didn't even know what it was. And things start to change."
"How," Xander croaks. "How do you know? What are you?"

Epiphany draws herself upright; so regal she needs no crown. "I am Iyalode of the Alake River Clan. But you already know I am Alpha, that is not the question you should be asking. The question you should be asking yourself, Xander. Is who and what YOU are!"

The car slows to a crawl and black iron gates open up. Wherever they were supposed to be going, they have apparently arrived.

*****

Copter stands in the middle of the foyer and tries not to gape as his head swivels around to take in more luxury than he's even seen in his entire life. Sure, he's seen Lifestyles of the 'Rich and Fatuous' but damn! This place is gob smack material if ever he saw it.

"Wow," Brad steps up beside him. If his neck tips back any further some bones are gonna crack.

"Yeah."

The two have bonded; being politely but forcibly kidnapped by hyenas and shoved into the cramped back of a news van tends to do that to total strangers.

"This way," one of their 'chaperons' stands by a door. She's all of five four and can't weigh more than a hundred pounds dripping wet, yet both men comply without a murmur of dissent.

As he walks past her, Brad takes up their running arguement, "You know you're paying for that door, right?"

"Relax, honey," Daria replies in her thick southern drawl. "Y'all still got the another one. Just tell that wildcat of yours to behave herself and we won't have any more trouble."

Patricia files silently by with head held high, her clothes a little rumpled and her cheeks flushed with righteous indignation and anger.
Copter hesitates by the door, "Where's X-Ray?"

"X-Ray? That's his name?" With close-cropped pink hair and abs of steel, Daria's biker-babe appearance is at odds with the catch of awe in her voice.

"It's Xander, actually. 'Cept his eyes just got this look, ya know?"

"Really?"

And Copter might have finally got some information about what the hell was going on when a voice interjects, "Your friend is just freshening up, he's fine."

Stavros can intimidate without a word, Daria ducks her head in embarrassment at being caught out and quickly ushers Copter inside the other room.

Once he's alone, Stavros allows his grim facade to slip and rolls his eyes.

In his role as Bashuron of the Clan, he is in charge of all military actions. By rights, Xander's efforts this night should have him searching for blood, but Stavros didn't become a multi-millionaire by dwelling on the past.

"Stavros?"

He sighs as his Iyalode glides down the stairs, "It's started already."

Epiphany's gesture signifies its of no consequence, she heads to the patio at the back of the house, in dire need of open air and a place to think. "What did you expect?" She offers him some coffee, which he accepts. "Xander is the first Ori of Life in sixty years..."

"Fifty eight," he says, with the certainty of a man who deals in figures every day. "Verkuta was murdered by Stalin in 1945," he snarls. " Fucking double-crossing Commie bastard!"

"I always knew there was a reason behind your tough trade deals with the Russians. How every unprofessional of you." The amusement in her voice is unmistakeable.
"My mother was Sicilian and my father's Greek," he replies with grin. "Never let it be said I don't know how to carry a grudge." He changes track faster than the wind, "How's the boy?"

"Thinking of him as such would be a mistake," as she sips her coffee, Epiphany thinks on the youth showering upstairs. "All things considered he's taking things pretty well, although he really has no idea what's going on."

She cocks her head thoughtfully and stares out over manicured floodlit lawns, "I've seen calmer hurricanes, but not by much."

"He's not what I expected," Stavros reluctantly admits.

"Has any Ori of Life ever been? They are not what we want, my dear Bashuron. They are what we NEED."

***

Xander's stayed under the shower so long he's fogged up the entire bathroom. Considering the gleaming white on white room is about as big as his parents basement, he's pretty happy about that. The swirling steam offers a false place to hide.

A towel wrapped about his waist, Xander grips the vanity with both hands and asks himself. "What the HELL is going on?"

With sudden violent movement he wipes condensation away from the mirror, "Fuck!" His eyes are still black on black.

He'd never noticed until he walked into the bathroom. Copter sure hadn't said anything....snort. Of course not, he'd been too busy worrying if Xander was going to kill anyone else tonight.

His thoughts skip to Epiphany's words in the limo, 'Everything you've ever read, everything you've seen or heard'.
Sounds peachy, doesn't it? Except sheer volume made it impossible for him to distinguish one from the other. It was like watching every home movie of every second of his life overlaid on top of each other simultaneously.

And the migraines had been killing him slowly a day at a time, in turn, his temper had shortened to non-existent resulting in Xander isolating himself at The Zoo. In truth, he'd only allowed Copter near 'cause he knew the big guy could squash him like a bug.

Only when he'd met Leeta had the migraines stopped, he winces. That emotional wound is much to raw right now.

"Okay, everything I've ever read? Let's see then. God knows I've read plenty of books..."

He tries to think of a book, any book, and the floodgates open...mouth open in a silent scream, Xander drops to the floor.

He writhes on the tiles with both hands clutching at his head. His brain bludgeoned by a million images. Swept away in this tidal wave of written word, Xander flounders, a drowning man in search of rock to cling to. He tries thinking of back home, Buffy, Willow and Giles. No, No, No. Too many memories and Xander can feel himself start to go under.

And then he finds it.

The hyenas. Their presence stretches out to him, all glowing and warm. If it had a colour he'd call it ochre, that rich red ochre of volcanic soil, Xander stretches out a hand....

He's flat on his back staring up at a white ceiling. His breath comes it short, sharp pants and his body covered in sweat.

{{ Oh, that was VERY good. }}

What?

"Willow?"
Xander levers up on one elbow to scan the empty bathroom. "Great! Now I'm hearing things."

Dressing quickly, he tugs roughly on borrowed clothes with little care and goes back to the mirror. "Huh," his eyes are back to normal. Despite what just happened he's no closer to the riddle, "But I know who has the answer."

And *they* are going to tell him.

"Right, now."

As Stavros enters the security code, Epiphany stands to one side and says, "Did you know that in the Christian Bible, Noah rejected the hyenas and refused to take them on the Ark?"

"Yes."

Copter's head whips sideways, "You knew that? How'd you know that, X-Ray?"

"A friend told me." He's prepared to make polite conversation if it will get him to where he wants to go.

Which at the moment, is a cramped passage hidden behind a wall in the wine cellar.

Basements! Xander has had more than enough of those in his life, hell, basements had even featured in his dream with the First Slayer.

The Iyalode notices his discomfort, "Are you claustrophobic?"

"No," waves his hand around in disgust. "It's just this place. Why do I always finish up back in basements? And let's not talk about the Vamps, Slayers and Vengeance demons that all ended up in MY basement. I hope yours isn't the same," he grumbles. "This door had better lead to a way out."
And he thought he saw a *spark* of something in her expression, "Hyenas quiet like basements, we find the idea of all that earth surrounding us rather comforting."

Copter gulps in alarm, "Is this why you wanted me to come along, X-Ray? So's you didn't get buried alone?" And actually succeeds in eliciting a half-smile from Xander.

"I insisted you come because I needed a friend, Copter."

The big youth blinks and finds it hard to swallow, "Thanks, man."

There's a beeping noise and the steel door silently glides open, "You might want to hold that thought, big guy."

***

As she enters, Epiphany is actually nervous. The honour and responsibility she's about to take on will make her the envy of every werehyena on the planet. What if she gets this wrong? What if she succeeds in accomplishing nothing other than terrifying him to death?

Stavros clears his throat, thereby bringing her back to reality. Epiphany chastises herself for her foolishness and sends him her silent thanks by way of a wobbly smile.

"You'll do fine," he mutters as he walks and further into the room.

Xander and Copter hang by the door, giving the impression that neither are moving until they're assured everything is safe.

Copter lets out a slow whistle, "Whoah, big room."

Xander sniffs, "Climate controlled too by the smell of it." Glances around and taps a small electronic display on the wall, "See this? Perfect temperature for keeping delicate stuff."

The room itself is white, like some art galleries and museums he's seen. A plain background to
highlight the impact of the displays, of which there are quiet a few. Glass cabinets of every shape and size, Xander's fears eased down a notch. Heck, this is a Giles place. How dangerous could it be?

"My husband was wealthy," Epiphany says. "I was lucky in that it afforded me an opportunity to acquire certain objects of importance to us that would otherwise have ended up in places where they would not have been appreciated."

"Oh, sure," Xander drawls. "I can see people dropping in here all the time."

"They can and do," Stavros corrects him. "We have visitors from all over the world come to see this."

"Why?"

Stavros's dark eyes skate across to Epiphany.

Who straightens up and answers Xander's question with one of her own. "Would you like to look around while I explain?"

"Sure."

"Hyenas have been maligned throughout history..."

Copter, currently dogging Xander's heels, nods knowingly. "Bad press, huh?"

Her smile holds no humour. "Something like that."

Xander halts in front of a uniform, Roman by the looks of it. Wow, people were really small back then. There's a card fixed to the glass and he starts to read: Soterides. Ori of Life. A Roman Centurion. Executed in 39 CE by Emperor Caligula for freeing lycanthropes from the Arena.

"They used shifters in the Arena?"
Copter does a double take. He thought everyone knew that, even *he’s* seen Ben Hur.

"Shifters were used extensively by the Romans in the Games," Stavros growls. "Loved their blood sports did the Romans. They used hyenas quiet a bit, and the ones they didn't kill they starved so they’d consume the remains."

Xander rears back from the cabinet, "Ewww, gross. And this guy let them loose?"

"Yes."

"People must have thrown a fit with all those lycanthropes running around Rome."

"Oh, yes."

There was definite satisfaction in Epiphany's reply.

Nothing much left to comment on *that* subject, so Xander moves on. There was a large number of battered books; they look like diaries. Some scrolls, frail and yellow with age. All hand written and in languages he doesn't understand. With the episode up in the bathroom still fresh in his memory, Xander quickly skims past and barely spares them a glance.

His expression lightens as he spies another display, "A pirate?"

"The majority of werehyenas were brought to the United States via the slave trade."

Xander deflates like a balloon and his pace slows. "Oh." It is only then that he notices shackles around the boots.

"This was worn by a man called Ijanti. He was an escaped slave himself who dedicated his life to the freeing of slaves, and lycanthropes. He was hanged."

Epiphany eyes the display with sadness before she continues.
"It also accounts for why there is a large werehyena population in such countries as Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, the West Indies...and in some parts of the United States."

"I heard about him in school," Copter says solemnly.

After viewing the display with the respect it deserves, Xander again reads the card and moves on.

More cabinets, a sword here, a gun there. Even some priest's robes and a Russian uniform.

Cards all the same. Name. That title: Ori of Life. Death (insert unpleasantness here)

Okay, he's noticing a pattern.

"What's an Ori of Life? No disrespect intended, but none of these guys had what I'd call an extended one."

Epiphany seems alarmed, "Oh, no. A vast majority of the Babalawo were apparently scholars of impressive standing who died of natural causes. Free thinkers and astute politicians who thought 'outside the box' to resolve problems the Clans could not."

Had he missed anything? "Those books and scrolls I skipped past?"

"Yes."

"I'll take your word on it, not up to book reading at the moment," which brings Xander back to the reason he's here. "And fast running out of what little patience I have."

"Of course," Epiphany understood. Xander's scent indicated he was afraid, although that fear appears to be held in check by his anger. A combustible combination she has no wish to get out of hand.
She doesn't know where to start. In her eyes, Xander is hardly a boy, yet not quiet a man, she has no idea how he's going to react. "I have to explain some history concerning hyenas for you to understand, will you bear with me?"

"Five minutes. Then I'm out the door and you won't be seeing me again."

Stavros opens his mouth to protest but Epiphany bids him be silent with a shake of her head. "All forms of lycanthropes have been persecuted throughout history, even now a shifter can be fired from their job if discovered, in some parts of the U.S they can even be shot."

Xander pretty much knows this already and it must have shown as Epiphany pushes forward quickly, "Hyenas are pretty much loathed, due in most part," she smiles at Copter. "To quote your friend, 'bad press' that has carried across from the true hyenas," her movements become more hostile, her words more heated. "Hyenas are the most numerous predator on the savannah, arguably the best hunters yet it is the lion who is called King of beasts."

Whoa! Bitter much?

"They call us eaters of the dead, yet Sandhurst-Smith proved we are not so much eaters of the dead-as eaters of the undead. We are...."

"WHAT?" Xander signals for a time-out. "Back up a little, you guys eat vampires?"

"And it hasn't made things easy," Stavros growls savagely. "It dates back to Africa, from earliest times the dead would be left out or buried by the villagers. Turns out our ancestors had a knack for discovering which ones were dead and which ones were just..."

"Not so dead?"

"Yes."

Xander winces at the implications, the vamps here have a lot more juice than the ones back home, "That would have made things difficult," classic understatement.

"You have no idea. Not only were we on the humans shitlist, we had the vamps gunning for us as well."

"Go on," Xander encourages the werehyenas. This is actually getting interesting.

Epiphany takes heart. "Werehyenas believe that Obdumare- The Creator, heard our plea for help and sent us the Ori of Life: Babalawo. Since before recorded time they have given us the strength and direction we need to continue to survive in a hostile world."

"That Russian uniform," Stavros nods towards the display. "Belonged to an Ori of Life called Ivan Verkuta, during WWII he worked behind enemy lines to spirit thousands of hyenas to safety away from the Nazi death camps. After the war was over, he told Russian officers in Berlin what he'd been doing; apparently he was worried because he was AWOL. Word came back that everything would be fine." His face twists with hatred. "Stalin lied. When Verkuta stepped off the train he was arrested and shot two days later."

"Jesus."

Taking advantage of the situation, Epiphany expands on what Stavros has said. "Those politicians and 'free thinkers' I was telling you about earlier?" Xander nods. "They proved vital in handling dangerous and volatile situations with the Masters of the City."

Even Copter is impressed; these Ori guys must have balls the size of watermelons. "So their like, what? Super werehyenas?"

"No."

"Huh?"

"These men, and they are always men," Xander's skin starts to crawl under Epiphany's burning gaze. "These men are not shifters, they are human. Very, very special humans," her smile turns smug. "From a galaxy, far, far, away."

No. Nononononononono.
Copter starts sniggering, turns to share the joke with X-Ray only to find his friend backing up slowly shaking his head. "X-Ray?"

"You're wrong," Xander snarls at her.

"Occasionally, yes. But Obdumare is never wrong, you are here for a reason, Xander."

"This is BULLSHIT!" Xander flings his arms in every direction. "I don't have anything special, I'm just a guy! Hell, Copter here can break me in half with one hand tied behind his back."

"Although an Ori of Life can draw on the power of the Clan, their true strength lies not in the preternatural, Xander. In fact, they go undetected amongst all vampires and weres, with the exception of the Clans. Their power lies within their mind," she stresses. "In the knowledge they bring with them and their ability to see things we cannot. The Ori of Life is not called Father of Secrets for nothing. It is their gift to see through deception and lies to the true heart of all things that makes them unique."

He's outta here. These people are friggin' nuts!

Stavros steps into his path, Xander growls through clenched teeth, "Get out of my way."

"I can't. Sometimes years can pass before the reason for an Ori of Life being called is known," the werehyena explains. "We have to know what you know in order to prepare, and judging from tonight's exhibition with the Rats, I'm saying your skills don't rest in the political arena."

"My skills?"

Xander's half-crazed laugh has Copter shuffling nervously.

The werehyena appears unmoved, "We have to know."

"I'M A CARPENTER FOR CHRISTS SAKE! WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?"
ANOTHER ARK WITH A WELCOME MAT THIS TIME?"

The vitriol in Xander's words stuns the hyenas into silence.

Copter, having only understood about, oh, three words of this entire conversation, eyes the top of Xander's head as if he's expecting tentacles to pop out any minute now. "Errr, X-Ray?"

"WHAT?" Xander rounds on him and Copter backs up a couple of steps before his curiosity gets the better of him.

"So..... you're like an Alien or somethin'?"

Xander blinks, he laughs softly and sends his friend a weary smile. "Copter?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't ever change."
St Louis:

The lookout is set amongst a parklike environment, one of those reclaimed landfill projects local politicians use for good press come re-election time. Tonight a lone figure stands with his arms resting against the railing, two werehyenas maintain a discreet twenty foot distance.

Xander lazily tracks a riverboat done up like some bizarre floating Christmas tree as it steams up the inky blackness of the Mississippi. Music and booze laden laughter carries up the riverbank curtesy of a cool breeze, "Sunnydale didn't have a river," he comments solemnly and his companion nods at the statement of fact.

"Which is probably just as well," he continues quickly. "Cause I'm thinking the whole river of blood deal-have Hellmouth have weirdness-would have put a whole new spin on my childhood Huckleberry Finn aspirations."

"Are you getting to the point soon or shall I make myself comfortable?"

"Have you ever heard of 'Don't shoot the messenger'?"

"Of course I've heard of it," faux-Willow responds with an impatient snap.

"Well let me point out the obvious," Xander snarls venomously. "Messenger of doom and gloom here with an appointment to see Master of the City with his own personal itchy trigger finger executioner. Pardon me if I'm feeling a bit edgy!"

Why is it the greater the Power the denser they become?

"I HEARD that!"

***

Bacchus watches the silent figure of Xander with increasing trepidation, "Do you see anything?"
"No," Narcissus is rigid, his entire focus on Babalawo.

Power crackles around the Ori of Life like ozone before a summer storm, standing every hair of the werehyena's body on end. "Is he all right?"

"We could get no closer even if we tried, he is with Obdumare," the Oba explains distantly and his nostrils flare. "Can you not smell it? FEEL it?" And Bacchus can.

Closing his eyes Bacchus is immediately transported to another place, another time. Damp earth and savannah grass uncontaminated by the scent of man. A full moon hangs heavy in the sky and beneath it stretches semi-arid grassland with no end. A clan could run forever and still not hope to cover it all and this...this is each Ori of Life's gift to the hyenas.

A place where nothing can ever touch them. Here, beast and man merge into truly one being; and you just *are*.

Freedom.

And with a playful yip, Bacchus runs.

****

"Do you know why rivers always appear so pretty at night?" And without waiting for a reply Xander answers his own question.

"It's because you can't see all the pollution and crap in the dark. Kinda like vampires really."

Faux-Willow now has some semblance of a clue, "We need Jean-Claude and his people. This is not the time for your prejudice and fear, we can't afford it."

Xander pushes away from the railing with an almost feral snarl, "WE? There is no WE! Don't kid yourself I'm doing this for you. As for Jean-Claude and Anita," his laughter is forced. "What does it
say about me that I chose a Master vampire and his caring but slightly sociopathic Executioner? What does it say about the person I've become? 'Cause I didn't choose them for their winning personalities, shit no. I chose them because they get the job DONE!

"Yes, you chose." She gestures contemptuously towards the river, the city of St Louis has faded and there is only an endless plain. "So why are we still here?"

Xander has a deer in the headlights moment. Because I'm shit scared I'm going to fuck it all up!

Although his verbal response is quite different and just as close to the truth, "Maybe I need to remind myself I'm not the person I was, okay?. And whether that's an improvement or not I haven't a god damned clue," he states darkly. "And maybe sometimes I need to think about the people I love and hope they're all still alive, and if they are then they will be doing exactly what they've always do...so all I can do is the same."

Faux-Willow inclines her head, "And NOW you speak as an Ori of Life."

"No, now I sound like a pompous ass. But thanks anyway."

As she starts to fade, faux-Willow has one last piece of advice. "There is nothing about tonight you have not dealt with before."

Back into the reality of a balmy St. Louis night, Xander glares into darkness. "Oh, and that's a LOT of help. Knock yourself out with the cryptic why don't you."

****

Half an hour later, Bacchus discreetly checks his watch, oh hell. In twenty minutes they go before the Master of the City and Anita, the last thing they need is for the Ori of Life to attend as he is; the words 'utter disaster' come strongly to mind.

"Relax, Bacchus. I'm just getting it out of my system," Xander still has his back turned but can sense the hyena's agitation.
There is still one outstanding matter the Ori of Life has to deal with; Narcissus and he have an unspoken agreement.

To stay as far away from each other as possible.

Xander's realistic enough to acknowledge that this tension between them must go before they enter the Circus. The Oba will not make the first move, typical Alpha show-no-weakness-bullshit, so he closes the distance between them.

"May I?"

Xander nods towards the gently curved stomach of the hermaphrodite.

Narcissus hesitates, Babalawo could crush the life within him like a bug, draw the energy out of his unborn child with nothing more than a thought.

"I would never do that," genuine hurt.

The Oba is beset by an eerie image of thoughts being picked right out of his head.

At times, Narcissus honestly believes Xander is unaware of exactly how much power he has, and yet there are moments when Babalawo seems perfectly aware.

The Ori of Life is an enigma bound tightly together by a mass of contradictions.

After a brief nod, Narcissus holds his breath as Xander lays a palm against his stomach, "I went for a scan yesterday, Dr Lillian says everything is going well?" Narcissus turns the statement into a question.

Within Narcissus, Xander finds the hermaphrodite's beast, a leviathan defiant in her conviction she has done right by her clan even as she brushes against him for another mental scratch behind the ears.

As always, Xander is silently awed by his ability, and humbled beyond words by the acceptance and kinship projected back. 'Never alone when with the Clan. We are yours and you are ours.'

A tiny kernel stirs, all fuzzy and confused. Xander finds himself grinning, Awww, she's so cute.
He withdraws carefully, "Your daughter says hello."

Joy blazes from usually reserved eyes, a true daughter to rule the clan.

"I will do everything I can to keep her safe for you, Narcissus."

The Oba blinks; Babalawo's fierce determination succeeds in taking him by surprise.

"We will never be friends," Xander says, showing that uncanny ability to know what the werehyena is thinking. "Frankly," tight smile. "You and I, we're just too different. But I know you care for your Clan, and I know how much this pregnancy means to you. If anyone tries for your daughter, they will have to come through me first."

This is more than Narcissus ever dreamt possible, his vulnerability has been a heavy weight pressing down with ever increasing suffocation. The Ori of Life waves aside choked out thanks.

Bacchus is close to beaming; his Oba and the Ori of Life will at least stand before the Master of the City united. "Ready to go?"

"Yes." With a sharp nod, Xander heads towards the waiting cars and sends a sly grin at the Oba. "So, wanna freak out the Master of the City and his cronies?"

"Is that wise?"

"Wise? Possibly not," Xander rubs his neck absently. "But I'm looking for a little payback and no-one said tonight couldn't be fun."

"What do you mean?"

"The rest of the Clan still back at the club?"

Narcissus grimaces, "I had a nightmare keeping this group down to six. If anything happens to you...."
Xander grabs a cell phone from his pocket, "I want you to make a call..."

Because he's sick and tired of shadow boxing and copping hits like a pathetically grateful little human. Jean-Claude's going to be as shitty as hell and therein lies Xander's problem. He needs to deflate the arrogant son-of-a-bitch and convince Jean-Claude to take him seriously.

Trouble is he can't hurt Frenchie, 'cause if he does then Anita will blow a hole through him big enough to drive a truck through.

He's finally worked out faux-Willow's clue.

Jean-Claude is a vampire in love with a woman whose job it is to destroy his kind, and whilst Xander will never figure out why, Anita loves Jean-Claude. Deja-vu anyone? More importantly, he understands women who love vampires.

To get to the vampire, you have to get to the woman.

To quote a wonderful simpleton, Xander has a cunning plan.

****

There're more here than Anita expected, maybe she should have had Micah bring a picnic basket. Nothing like a good shoot out the night before to bring in the crowd.

Richard stands apart, flanked by Shang-Da, Jamil and Sylvie. She's not altogether sure if they're here for Richard's protection or to protect Richard from himself. And yeah, she's getting sick and tired of asking that question.

"Did you know Xander had some deal with the hyenas?" Anita probes. From what Jason has told her, Jean-Claude had been incensed upon hearing Narcissus' demands.

"Non."
"For a carpenter he sure gets around."

"Oui," he absently straightens a sleeve. "Alexander and I will have much to discuss this night."

Oh, oh.

"Jean-Claude," her warning fades as the hyenas sweep into the room.

Narcissus has out done himself, a flowing dress of black and gold. Bacchus and five others forming a phalanx behind their Oba; yet all stand *behind* Xander.

A ripple of surprise flickers through the room.

"Nice suit," and she's not lying. The black suit has to be hand made; emphasising broad shoulders and lends an air of maturity to its youthful wearer.

"Thanks," Xander flashes a smile. "Woulda been happy just wearing my own stuff but Narcissus and Bacchus got all huffy."

"I know the feeling."

Both grin.

Their shared moment is interrupted by Jean-Claude, "If you are quite finished, ma petite. I believe Alexander has something to share."

*That* definitely gets her attention. Directness? From Mr Protocol himself? Anita looks, really looks at Jean-Claude, pushes gently against their marks.

He's blocking her out, Richard too, judging by the werewolf's frown.

Jean-Claude ignores their silent request, statue-still he seethes with rage. This human has played him for a fool; he knows it. "I too have been busy, Alexander. Time has a way of loosening lips. Tell me, why did the Ogun allow a human to lead them in their war against the Maravilla? Or better yet, tell me why Angelus ordered his rats to let you live after you killed their Alpha? If you have forgotten then let me refresh your memory, almost two years ago just before you came here, was it not?"
Every shifter in the room, other than the hyenas, become deathly still, viewing Xander as if he's just grown a second head.

A little over 2 years ago the story was national front-page news. The streets of L.A ran with blood as the Ogun and Maravilla fought a pitched battle smack bang in the middle of L.A. Hell, they'd even called out the National Guard to restore order.

Holy shit! Anita shifts to the balls of her feet, Xander's threat quotient has just rocketed up the charts in her book. Jamil and Shang-Da do the same. The only ones who seem unaffected are Xander and the hyenas.

"Why?" Xander responds a tight smile and his head held high. "Because it was my RIGHT!"

And his eyes go black.

No surge of power, no tingle along Anita's senses. Nothing.

She isn't alone, not a single creature in the room outside of the hyenas sense a god damned thing.

The Browning is in her hand, aimed and ready. Micah moves silently away to give her room to move; she's gotta thank him for that -later.

Narcissus and his clan react immediately and block her aim.

"It is best not to mention L.A.,” Narcissus calmly censures Jean-Claude. "The Ori of Life finds that memory rather painful."

And Xander thinks the ensuing silence is a thing of beauty, like shattered stained glass. All pretty colours that cut through the bullshit.
"Father of Secrets indeed," Jean-Claude's accent is thickened by his anger.

"Still kinda young for the father thing. Currently it's more like Uncle of Secrets-without the bad breath and tobacco stains."

Jason loses it, his laughter bubbling out hysterically. "You're kidding me, right?"

Over the Browning, Anita focuses entirely on Xander; he catches her staring and merely dips his head in silent acknowledgement.

Well crap.

"No wonder I never sensed anything off you," she says in disgust.

An Ori of Life is akin to the ultimate silencer to the preternatural. According to myth and legend anyways, guess she knows for a fact now.

Xander sighs, already the change is obvious, the bodyguards hang close to their respective Alphas. The Alphas in turn measure him as if trying to separate fact from fiction. Now that the initial shock has worn off, curiosity and doubt starts to surface; well tough. He's not a friggin' sideshow here for their amusement.

"Okay," he grabs hold of a chair and straddles it so he's facing the rest of the room. "Let's get this show on the road. I've got a seven o'clock start tomorrow on that new backroom at the Isaac place and the design is a total bitch. So, who wants to know about demons?"

Anita was getting a headache. "That's it? Hi, I'm the Ori of Life, who wants to know about demons, pass the jam?"

Narcissus sighs, he knew this would happen. "They would like to know more about you, Babalawo." Although why he bothers is beyond him as the expected stubborn expression appears.
"Why? I'm just the information guy here." A straight out lie, but who's gonna know, right?

"Exactly," Asher replies sharply. "There is much to be discussed. Such as why you chose not to reveal yourself or why you did not to intervene in matters that were clearly within your jurisdiction."

This last comment is clearly a reference to Chim-era. The mood in the room darkens considerably as recent memories re-surface, Xander's response is swift.

"I don't answer to you, vampire."

Anita sucks in a breath at Xander's outright insolence. Jean-Claude looks almost amused, "And yet you are here."

"In times of war, the enemy of mine enemy is my friend."

Oh, for heavens sake! Anita rolls her eyes, and here she was thinking Jean-Claude was the only drama queen she had to deal with. "Did I miss a Presidential announcement? Because one sword wielding monster isn't so much a blip on the scale these days."

Jason snickers outright.

And Xander blows them right out of the water.

"One?" A frown as he pretends to think about it. "Nope. I'd say one isn't too much trouble. What about a hundred," Xander snaps his fingers casually. "A bit of a pain but I'm sure you guys got it covered. How about a thousand, ten thousand..."

No one is amused any longer.

Jean-Claude steps in, "Enough! You speak in riddles and issue dire warnings like that of a charlatan, my little carpenter." With scathing ridicule he mocks the hyenas. "Narcissus has already proven how untrustworthy he is and your deceit is acknowledged by your own lips. Be you the Ori of Life or not I will not be insulted within my domain or played for a fool any longer."
"Stavros warned us your diplomatic skills needed polishing," Bacchus glares at Xander with a mixture of exasperation and horror. "Haven't you been practising at ALL?!!"

"Diplomacy is boring, Bacchus. Chill," Xander rises slowly to his feet. "I've got it covered."

So has Anita, "You so much as TWITCH and I'll shoot."

"Okaaay, no twitching. Got it."

As he smiles, Xander taps into the power of two hundred hyenas currently surrounding the Circus. Anita's lips are moving, yet he hears no sound.

Xander blinks.

Anita fires.

CLICK.

Nothing.

And they're not standing within the Circus of the Damned anymore.

**********

Open space as far as the eye can see, gently swaying grass, Anita can even feel a slight breeze against her cheek, she holds a hand over her eyes to block out dazzling sunlight.

Her stomach heaves, "Jean-Claude..."

Stands with Asher, and the only way to describe their expressions is one of utter disbelief and pure joy.
Xander chortles, "Welcome to Xander's halfway home for troubled vamps, guaranteed to shut the bastards up for at least two or three minutes."

Anita recalls she still has the Browning, click. He looks almost offended and just rolls his eyes, "Oh, c'mon! You're here, unharmed and you STILL want to shoot me?" His arms fly up in exasperation, "What is it with small women and one tracked minds!" He points, "Your wolves and kitty cats look happy enough. Listen to that pussycat inside, Anita. LISTEN."

She doesn't have much choice, the leviathan within stretches out and rolls onto its back; the sun is so nice and warm. If Anita happens to hear or smell anything of interest, perhaps an antelope? Please wake me up.

Xander snickers, with a nod towards the other shifters who stand silent and dazed he says, "It always gets them like that. They go all funny and cuddly," Narcissus sidles up beside and nudges his leg.

"Why have the hyenas changed and the others...?"

"Haven't?" Xander shrugs. "Because this is their place. I think that's how it works anyways."

"You don't KNOW?!"

Any reply is drowned out by Jean-Claude and Asher's sudden outburst of rapid-fire French.

Xander mutters darkly. "Yep, right on time."

"English, Jean-Claude. English."

Both vampires are visibly shaken, Jean-Claude's hand unsteadily caresses her cheek. "I thought you beautiful under the glow of a moon, ma petite. Yet I find sunlight enhances tenfold that which I knew already."

And she's not crying...she's *not*!
Asher seemingly glows golden, his hair lit with beams of sunlight. And his face, is perfect. "The scars...."

"Are gone as long as we stay here," Xander supplies briskly.

Oh, god! "Where...where the hell are we?

"The hyenas call Orun, the Otherworld." Xander shifts uncomfortably, "You do realise you're not actually here, don't you?"

"Oui," Asher finally speaks, his voice hoarse and devastated.

Silence reigns for a moment as the two vampires and Anita attempt to absorb their circumstances. Xander breaks their reverly; "I can't hold this for much longer without harming the hyenas."

Jean-Claude seeks clarification, "Explain."

"The energy is theirs," Xander waves an arm to encompass the horizon. "Call me a conduit, call it whatever you will, but I can't do it without them. And I've never taken so many people here before but I couldn't risk anyone left behind in the room interfering."

A trickle of blood escapes from his nose, Anita steps forward in concern.

"Xander?"

He waves her away as he addresses Jean-Claude. "Do you doubt my veracity now, Master of the City?"

"Non."

"Good," Xander eyes Anita warily. "Try not to shoot me when we get back, okay?"

Shaky nod, "Okay."
It was like sliding between the space of one breath and another. Yet still finding time to gain and lose something most precious.

***

It's bizarre, the gun is still in her hand, still solid and real but feels like its not. Her perspective is shot to shit, everyone else's too by the looks of things.

Richard is on his knees, his handsome face marred by tears. Whether they're of joy or sadness she doesn't know.

Micah blinks somewhat dazedly, "That was different."

Laughter bubbles up only to dry in her throat as Anita spies Xander slumped on the floor like some puppet whose strings have been cut. "Oh, hell."

Narcissus is at his side in an instant, silently praying as he feels for a pulse. Relief floods through when he finds one. He turns to Bacchus, "His pulse is weak. Go get the others, NOW!"

The utter panic on Bacchus' face as he leaves the room concerns them all. Jean-Claude most of all, if the Ori of Life dies within his domain....

"What is wrong with him?"

Micah moves to assist, the Oba's deep threatening snarl stops him short.

The care with which Narcissus gathers Xander is completely out of character and something to behold.

"It was too much, he drew too many of you into Orun." With Xander's head now cradled in his lap, all he can do is wait for the others.
There is still too much they don't understand, Asher puts it into words. "But he said the power is not his, n'est pas?" And the Oba nods.

"He is the conduit through which it passes."

"So," Anita tries to make sense of it all. "He's like an electrical wire suddenly hooked up to the city grid? Too much power and he blows a fuse?"

Even as he winces at the crudity of the comparison, the werehyena agrees.

"Babalawo is human, he is not as strong as us. Although," Narcissus gives Anita a tight smile, "Do not tell him I told you this, he would disagree."

"Can we help?"

Narcissus is torn, how much does he want to reveal? Babalawo may or may not be dying in his arms, a decision is made. Now is not the time for games.

"No. The Ori of Life has an inbuilt natural immunity to your powers that works both ways. You can neither harm nor help him."

Shit. She hates being helpless, not to mention feeling just a tad guilty for being a doubting Thomas.

"Jean-Claude?"

The vampire sighs, "We can try, ma petite. Richard?"

"I'm here," the Ulfric stands to his feet. Richard's face is set in steely determination, "I'll help."

Richard takes hold of her hand, Anita grabs Jean-Claude's and the power of their Triumvirate flares.
Only then do they see Xander's aura, Anita gasps, she's never seen anything like it. "Jesus, how the hell did we miss this? And I STILL can't feel a damn thing!"

Through new eyes they see a room bathed in Xander's colourful aura, an ochre so deep and rich you could almost reach out and touch it. Yet when they try....after a minute or two Anita gives voice to her frustration. "God dammit! It's like skipping a stone across a lake."

Jean-Claude concludes, "More like an ocean. But the surface is impenetrable, I fear Narcissus is correct. It would seem Alexander's abilities are both a boon and a curse."

They break contact, "I'm sorry," Anita's apology is tinged with deep regret.

Narcissus barely hears, her apology drowned out by overwhelming emotions of menace and fear from the approaching hyenas.

"The Clan will be here soon."

Whether they make it or not remains to be seen.

And he's not just thinking about Babalowo.
Departing the banquet room, Bacchus immediately pulls out his cell phone, "C'mon, c'mon ..." climbing stairs three at a time while he waits for an answer.

Surrounding the Circus are some two hundreds hyenas split into ten groups, one group for each entrance. Front, staff, and assorted fire exits; the Ori of Life knew them all and had passed on the blueprints long ago.

One group leader with nineteen of the clan to a group.

Each group with a designated job, depending on the message.

All they needed was the signal.

And if no signal was received after one hour? Well, they had a plan for that too.

***

Inside the Circus up in the bleachers, Apollo answers his phone knowing it can mean only one thing, "Yes?"

"Babalawo is injured, we need you. NOW. The banquet room as suspected. He took too many into Orun. Hurry."

"We're there."

Even as he snaps the cell phone shut, Apollo's other hand reaches into his jacket to pull out a walkie-talkie, "This is Apollo. The banquet room. I repeat, the banquet room. Code Blue. I repeat, Code Blue. GO."

Short sharp and chillingly to the point each team acknowledges, "We come."
By utilising a pre-disposed phrase the Clan know to injure rather than kill.

The hyenas have neither the time nor inclination to explain their urgency to Jean-Claude's people. Apollo is unconcerned; vampires are notoriously difficult to kill anyway, more's the pity.

With a cold stare he looks down upon the arena below wondering if they have enough sawdust to soak up the blood. Somehow he doubts it.

***

"The Clan will be here soon," Narcissus had said, causing Jean-Claude to curse at the implications.

"Merde. My people will not let them pass. Asher.."

Narcissus interjects, "I suggest you hurry. The Clan's concern will outweigh their reason, your people must stand aside otherwise there will be bloodshed."

Asher exits, Richard bids Sylvie go as well and she departs with enough speed to leave Anita dizzy, "Exactly how 'unreasonable' are they likely to be?"

Her question has Jean-Claude wincing. "In the 16th century a certain Master in Madrid sought to rid himself of an Ori of Life causing problems in negotiations over access to some trade routes."

"He killed him," she said flatly. That figures, Master vamps have this whole 'Lord of all they survey-I'm untouchable' ego going for them.

"Oui. This Master assumed his close ties with the Council would protect him. It ended badly."

"The hyenas killed the Master?"
He hesitates; Anita is unlikely to take the news well. "At first, there were no reprisals and the Master rejoiced at his success. The hyenas did not have sufficient numbers to cause him any concern."

"Arrogant bastard."

Jean-Claude shrugs, "He was a fool. It was true; the hyenas did not have sufficient numbers...in Madrid. He had not taken into account their entire population in Spain. Not only did the Master die, but every other vampire in Madrid the hyenas could find joined him."

Anita stifles an urge to pout and scream 'unfair', "Xander did this to himself!"

"Do you really expect them to believe us?" Richard's jibe hits home. "Your reputation precedes you."

Shit! Once again her gaze falls on Xander, there's not much visible actually. He's pretty much covered by a hyena huddle - and if they get out of this alive she's gonna save that pun for a more appreciative audience.

The impact of their short visit into Orun still lingers, leaving Anita torn between wanting to protect Xander; or shoot him for doing something so stupid and endangering them all.

Either way, she's downright mournful about leaving the Uzi in her car.

Jean-Claude watches. "Ma petite?" Once he has her attention he says "I have not seen the sun in centuries. I have not seen Asher as he was...," words fail him and he is left with nothing but his emotions as he allows them to flow through their bond.

His ache and loss draw her to him, wrapped within his arms; Anita rests her head on Jean-Claude's chest, understanding fully how much the brief visit to Orun affected him.

"I would give anything to walk in the sun with you again, Anita. Please, do not do anything foolish when the hyenas arrive."

She draws away, his perfect face stares back down as she asks, "Is it worth dying over?"
"If Xander dies the point is moot, for even you cannot save us from their wrath. If they can help him live then oui, I would take that chance."

****

At the main entrance, Faust thought he had things in hand. Thanks in no small part, to the large contingent of humans waiting in line. As a result the hyenas seem content to argue not fight. But they are nothing if not persistent.

"Jean-Claude said six of you, and six have already entered," he repeats for the fifth time just as one of the wolves come skittering round a corner.

Blood. The wolf reeks of it, a crimson flow staining one side that creeps like some slow moving tide over the wolf's shirt.

Tumbled words of fire exits and attack has the vampire's head snapping back towards the hyenas.

Feral smiles of triumph, Faust knows he's been had.

That their arguments and request for entry were nothing, *meant* nothing. Except in the context for which they were intended.

Diversion.

****

Attack.

Meng Die guts another slab of meat, her mouth twisted into a inhuman snarl as she flings it through the air with casual ease, a hyena hits the wall with enough force to pulverise bone.
Another takes his place.

She is a whirlwind, because she has to be.

To avoid toxic holy water they spray with abandon; acid rain via super-soakers and her disdain for such a paltry weapon had almost been her undoing.

The wolves fight beside her, she tracks their progress by sounds of ripping flesh and grinding bone.

For every two hyenas they halt another three slip through.

Arms encircle her from behind, pinning her own against her body. As she twists in an effort to escape, Meng Die's high pitched scream of frustration is met by a cool tone.

"Let them pass."

NOOOOOO.

Still trapped within his arms she sneers, "You have no animal to call, Asher. You cannot hope to hold this city."

Asher freezes for but a moment, shakes her violently, "Stupid woman. Do you think I betray Jean-Claude? Below us the Ori of Life himself lies injured, if he dies it will be the death of us all."

As if to re-enforce his words, Bacchus and Sylvie arrive and begin to wade into the fighting lycanthropes, flinging them apart with in a bid to restore order.

They hyenas merely right themselves and back off, their job is done. Enough have passed through to provide the assistance needed.

They are content to watch and wait.
For now.

*******

You can hear them. A rumbling, tumbling landslide consisting of flesh and fur.

The butt of her gun fits so neatly within her hand.

If she'd grown up the proper lady her stepmother had wanted her to become, Anita thinks she could feign a certain amount of indifference to impending doom by a casual examination of painted fingernails.

Clean cuticles mock her with their absence of colour.

Sigh.

Backs to the wall, as far from Xander as Narcissus can push them; and any other time she might savour the air of panic currently swirling around the Oba. It's a kind of perverse pleasure sure, that kind of pleasure the grubby kid has when little Lord Fauntleroy of the playground falls into a puddle of mud.

S'not so funny when you're all ass deep in it though.

Two clips and another fifteen rounds in her gun against two hundred hyenas won't work no matter how much you twist the math.

"I can't even threaten to shoot Narcissus can I?"

"Non. They will not care."

She's never seen an Alpha so terrified of his own people. It's as if Narcissus misplaced the keys to
Heaven knowing that an "Oops, it's not my fault," just isn't gonna fly.

"How did this happen under our very noses?"

Jean-Claude's been dwelling on this one as well. "No one ever notices the worker bee. We are all too busy looking for the queen."

"The sting's a bitch all the same," she succeeds in making him smile.

"Oui."

"Let's just hope Xander lives up to his moniker."

"Let us hope."

And the hyenas arrive, tumbling through the doorway like living corks being spat out of a bottle at sixty miles an hour.

Anita decides painted fingernails be damned, her stepmother can get stuffed.

This is one girl who's a slave to living, not fashion.

******

"I'm glad you're awake."

Narcissus imitates a torpid rattlesnake way too easily for Xander to oblige with anything other than a measured reply.

"How long?"
"Two days."

"The Clan?"

"One dead, twenty five injured enough to require varying degrees of surgery."

Xander won't ask how he ended across town and in the Oba's black-on-black bedroom wrapped up tightly in black (of course) silk sheets; with six hyenas keeping him company in bed. Nor will he apologise for what happened at the Circus, his words will only be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

"Jean-Claude and Anita?"

A dark glimmer of *something* moves behind the Oba's eyes, "Will live. We'll have some trouble with the scarred one though, our use of holy water brought back unpleasant memories."

"Asher's a big boy," slides his legs out straight, and Xander grunts as limbs unused to movement twinge. "He'll just have to deal like the rest of us."

"Exactly what was it you hoped to achieve by taking them into Orun?"

Xander narrows his eyes at the barely concealed censure. Narcissus stands at the foot of the bed with an expression studiously devoid of emotion.

It occurs about then that the Clan might hold Narcissus in some way responsible for his collapse. Not that Narcissus is in danger of being challenged, ever since the Chimera debacle the Oba is the only Alpha in the Clan.

In Xander's opinion, Narcissus has made a mistake, allowing his own paranoia to weaken his Clan by actively discouraging other Alpha's to join. It's insane!

Lack of Alpha's was a prime factor in why Chimera was able to do so much damage in the first place!
Although, Xander can’t say he’s actually gone so far as to point this error out, yet. The power vacuum works in his favour. One he intends to exploit when needed.

"Have your boys been misbehaving?" Like telephoning other Alpha's in the state perhaps?

Hyenas shift restlessly around him on the bed; Xander knows he's scored, "Have they?"

Narcissus responds slowly. "I believe they wanted to see if you would live before rushing into things," toothy smile. "Perhaps Bacchus let slip your promise of protection and they are not entirely stupid after all."

Xander's feral grin matches the Oba's. "Then we'll have no trouble."

"No, I don't think we will."

"Good," stretching with the grace of loose-limbed cat, Xander absently scratches itching stubble and COUGH. "Christ almighty, I smell rank."

"You have no idea how pleased I am that you've finally noticed."

"Funny."

"Hardly," Narcissus relaxes enough to reveal his exhaustion. "My humour dried up about the same time you hit the floor at the Circus."

Ouch. Acknowledging the reprimand with a nod, Xander crawls to the edge of the bed, silk sheet dragged along for the ride and finally tied into place around his hips in a display of elan old Xander Harris of Sunnydale could never have managed.

Narcissus maintains his silence as Babalawo tests his strength, breathes a sigh of relief as Xander finally stands on his own two feet and heads unsteadily towards the bathroom. With detached curiosity he runs his eyes over Xander's lean muscled torso, "Interesting."
Xander wheels around causing the figures to almost writhe.

Narcissus inhales a sharp breathe of wonder at the almost hypnotic effect.

"Interesting isn't exactly the word I would use," Xander peers down to view his own body. "I was in a bad, dark place for a while," and sometimes he's not entirely sure he ever climbed out of it.

Narcissus nods to the stylised five inch band of ochre and black symbols encircling Xander's upper left and right forearms. "Ogun, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"And this," Narcissus ghosts his hand across shoulder blades marred with tribal scarification. "Every Iyalode and Oba knows these marks."

"Hurt like a son-of-a-bitch," Xander confesses with a reminiscent wince. "You guys should get with times, ever hear of embossed introduction cards?"

Scarification marks the skin by cutting alone; no pigment is used as in a tattoo. Each fine line is precisely cut to leave a scar. Xander's shoulders are marked such as this; hundreds of fine lines carved into elaborate patterns passed down from before the Bronze Age.

Smart ladies those ancient Iyalode. Such scarring would never last on a werehyena or shifter of any kind, only a human. Each Ori of Life is so marked, and only someone contemplating suicide would try to fake it.

"But the tattoo, I don't recognise," the hyena circles slowly around Xander. "This work was done by a master. Who was it?"

"Non of your business," that night is pretty much lost in a blur of good hash and cheap whiskey anyways. His shiny nickel plated moment of 'I am Xander, feel my pain.'
One night. One friggin' night was all it took to turn his body in to some psycho's homage to The Illustrated Man. And it's not that he doesn't have a great big whopping suspect, 'She Of the See-Through Body', who conveniently changes the conversation every fucking time he brings it up.

No way in hell is he sharing; patented Xander babble of old has long gone.

Besides, Dear Abby moments with Narcissus are akin to throwing blood into water for a shark. All it does is whet the predator's appetite for a juicy main course.

"Hmmmm." Narcissus circles Xander in much the same manner as connoisseur of art examines Michelangelo's David.

Beginning low on his hips and the small of his back, it's as if Xander's torso is on fire. Flames stretch upward in a seemingly chaotic fashion.

Red, orange, yellow, a touch of indigo. Colours too vibrant to be real, inked into flesh that almost *flickers*.

But what lies within flames is what Narcissus can't tear his eyes away from.

Things.

"Fascinating," things that draw the eye. Yet so infinitesimal and vague as to tease the imagination.

Dancing in fire, twisted ephemeral nightmares, "Oh, my -"

"- Don't."

Pause. With hand outstretched, Narcissus calculates the risk.

"I find them quite beautiful."
"That's because you're a sick bastard with a fetish for pain and the grotesque."

"Says the boy all painted up and pretty."

"Don't piss in my sandbox, Narcissus." Xander's face merges into the darkness of the room, "Or I will hurt you in ways you can't even begin to dream."

Something more consuming than hunger swims through the Oba's eyes. "Promise?"

Xander curses under his breath. "Be careful what you wish for, Narcissus." His head snaps towards the bed, "Leave us."

Scurrying to obey, the six hyena's suddenly recall their Oba is in the room, eyes silently beg for permission to leave, "Go," and they can't move fast enough.

A half smile playing across his lips, Xander changes tactics, threatening Narcissus physically isn't going to get him anywhere. "Got an email from Stavros the other day." Ha!

"L.A's such a distance, it's nice to keep in touch."

Oooh. Nice. Remind uppity Babalawo exactly who's territory he's in.

"Yeah, modern communication is a wonderful thing. Lets you keep your finger on the pulse and organise just about anything," Xander practically beams as he lobs the first verbal grenade. "He tells me that the Ilari have finished their training."

Please watch out for flying shrapnel.

"The Ilari?" Narcissus' face tightens with a mixture of disbelief and anger. "I would have heard."
"Would you? My but you sound confident. Why is that I wonder?"

Xander's question hangs like a double bladed knife, suspicion takes form as the Oba finally realises he may not have been as clever as he thought.

I am the Father of Secrets, asshole. Welcome to MY world. MY rules. Time you learnt them.

"Just out of curiosity," Xander feigns interest by way of a raised brow. "Exactly many favours have you managed to hoard from the other Clans due to my presence in St. Louis? Do you think it's enough?"

Narcissus doesn't even flinch.

"Not saying?" A shrug, Xander almost laughs. Almost. "I've heard you've been quite the busy beaver. S'kinda funny how everyone here thinks you stayed out of their business 'cause you wanted to 'stay neutral'. When in actual fact you've been far too busy pimping me to just about every Clan in the U.S to bother with this town's own petty struggles."

"You would have gone to their cities eventually," Narcissus breaks his silence. "All I did was organise the queue." Based on political gains and regardless of the urgency, but he's not going to admit that.

"ALL YOU DID!!??"

Turning away in disgust, Xander snarls, "I've seen others like you." They wore tweed and drank tea but he recognises the mindset.

Politics and Power.

There was never a sweeter blood or tender joint of meat amongst the preternatural community. Heh. Funny how he's lumped the Council of Watchers in there, he doubts they'd be as amused.

Glacial eyes reminiscent of black ice rake Narcissus.
Xander fully admits this is his own fault; he'd been so politically naive. He shudders to think how he might have wallowed blindly forever had not a few pointed questions from Stavros and Epiphany over a year ago given him cause to look more closely.

Can he really blame Narcissus for doing what the Oba does best?

Shit yeah.

"Get this through your head, Narcissus. You don't control me and you never will. I've. Made. Sure of it"

Yet still the Oba tries, "I will refuse...," a slashing motion from Xander's hand cuts him off.

"Nothing," the Ori of Life states emphatically. "I let you go to see how far you would stretch the rope, I hadn't even started recruiting the Ilari so it suited my purpose to watch." Xander laughs, "Congratulations. You taught me more about politics than any University ever could."

Narcissus blanches, his face pale upon recollection of past deeds. "What do you intend?"

"Things go on, as normal."

Which only heightens Narcissus' paranoia.

Xander rolls his eyes, "Your people know nothing about this conversation, why the hell did you think I dismissed them? Tell them we fought, tell them we fucked. I don't care. You stop your power plays now, or I'll let my people loose." Xander smiles without humour, "They'll be arriving in a couple of days, all keen to prove themselves no doubt. Wanna be first off the rank? No? Good, then it's settled and we won't speak of it again."

Narcissus has to ask, "How did you recruit them without my knowing?"

"A piece of bread will never buy a king, but it can win you a kingdom."
Realisation dawns, Narcissus hisses in admiration. "The Ogun. You recruited from the Ogun."

"A person with nothing will risk much to have something," Xander says. "I offered them an opportunity to have respect." A wry smile as he admits out loud, "Actually, I offered them a chance not be dead by the age of twenty and great deal of cash. Stavros tells me that the self-respect is starting to peek through but will take a bit more time."

It stands to reason. "You know how they think, what they want."

"Yeah."

After a moment, Narcissus throws back his head and laughs, "Ilari recruited from the Ogun. The Clans are going to be outraged. You've taken the highest honour we have and given it to the lowest."

"They're going to be MY bodyguards," Xander growls. "I'll take them from wherever I damned well like!"

"Have you really thought this through? What about experience?"

"They've had to fight every day just to stay alive," he remembers what that was like. Just as much as how he remembers what it was like to be on the outside. "I took my time, gained their trust. All their life they've been called losers in one way or another. I don't doubt they're going to make mistakes...."

"Their mistakes could get you killed."

"I didn't know you cared," and the Oba scowls.

"Everybody dies."

"It's a sure thing," delusions of invulnerability have never loomed large on Xander's horizon. "I never figured on living to fifty anyways, heck, it's a miracle I've made it this far. After a while though I realised I'm NEEDED here and you know what? I like helping."
And Xander might as well have been speaking in Mandarin by the way Narcissus' eyes glaze over.

With a sigh, the Ori of Life pats the hyena on the shoulder, "I'm gonna have that shower now. Maybe in a decade or two if I'm still alive we might try this conversation again."

Both of them know that's not going to happen.

As if by afterthought, Xander stops at the doorway, "Oh, and Narcissus?"

"Yes?"

"Your little hoard of favours are now mine," Xander smiles like a cat with bowl full of cream. "Don't use them up. I might just need them one day."

******

"So he's awake then?"

"You don't sound too pleased," Jason says with a frown, as if hoping she's have time to cool off 'cause he'd phoned her hours ago. He's looking casual in denim cut-offs and a rib hugging blue t-shirt, like he's working on his day off.

"Really?"

Standing in her living room with sunlight streaming through a window, Anita can't say her mood matches the golden beams of light.

Sarcasm to the fore. "No-one's started work on the kitchen because Jean-Claude seems to think it's a given I awarded Xander the job, and Dolph hung-up on me last night due to my inability to inform him on what went down at the Circus!"
"Hey! At least we're not dead. Or, in Jean-Claude's case," teasing grin. "Dead-er."

"Jason, did I mention how unhappy I was? Do you WANT to see me unhappier?"

"Err, no?"

"Then shut up."

It pisses her off that everyone seems to think Xander has some 'get out of jail card' just because he's the Ori of Life. It pisses her off they're no closer to finding out what he heck he knows about demons, and that the only way they *will* find out is if they have another meeting.

And it makes her trigger finger itch that Asher's been having flashbacks. She blinks back into focus to find Jason has his hand half-raised.

"WHAT?"

"Would it help to know Bacchus says Xander's really sorry about the other night?"

"No."

"Okay."

And just like that he waits for her hissy fit to subside; like they all do. Like it's okay to bear the brunt of her shitty mood because that's what Alphas do and it's her right.

"I'm sorry, things have been tense."

Jason's grin turns warmer than caramel fudge, "Want me to rub your back?"

Aforementioned guilt is wasted on werewolves in skimpy clothes.
"Did Bacchus say when Xander would be ready for another meeting?" Soon, she hopes. With Musette's visit drawing ever closer; Jean-Claude will want this business sorted out with Xander post haste.

"No verbal sparring?"

"You sound almost disappointed," and when he shrugs like a kicked puppy she knows something is wrong. "Jason?"

"I'll take what I can get, Anita."

Oh.

She sucks at emotional stuff, just ask Richard.

Her panic shows causing Jason snorts and shakes his head, "Don't worry, I've reconciled myself to watching from the wings. And I'm not stupid enough to think I stand a chance against Jean-Claude, Asher, Micah..."

"Jason!"

"I'm sorry, the last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable around me," he really didn't. "You seem to need that, to feel comfortable," stoic face to show this is no joke. "I'd like to think I could be that person for you sometimes."

"You are."

"I'm glad," he uses a smile to ease down her panic, receives a weak one in return. Some part of him is in love with her, he knows that. Just as another part knows she will never truly allow herself to wholly and completely love anyone.

Time to change the conversation before she bolts for the door, "So, where do you want to hold the
next meeting? After those news reports the Circus is out, can't say Richard is too enthusiastic about holding it at one of our places either."

Anita scowls, "I haven't seen any news reports yet, worse than usual?" Jason shuffles, looks around as if pleading for help but the pard are all upstairs catching up on sleep now they know that the danger is over and Bobby Lee is still guarding the front door.

"Jason?"

"The locals weren't too bad."

"But?"

He sighs, "There was this one report, from that Lacey guy? He's the one..."

"I know who he is." That low-life scum bucket."I know who he is." That low-life scum bucket..."What were we supposed to be doing? Sacrificing babies? Or just holding an orgy that got out of hand?"

"Actually," Jason appears perplexed. "He never said. Sort of hinted at all types of stuff and kept linking it back to other events and 'mysterious disappearances' like Dominga Salvador."

Shit. 

No wonder Dolph hung on her. Dominga Salvador, voodoo queen. May she rot in Hell.

Who'd drawn Anita into a graveyard by a spell to force her to raise a zombie; using human sacrifice. Anita had raised the zombies as ordered -- except the situation didn't turn out like Dominga planned.

The only thing sacrificed was one voodoo queen ripped to shreds by zombies at Anita's command.

Dolph hadn't asked to many questions at the time, Dominga Salvador was a dangerous woman and the police were glad to see the back of her after she 'skipped bail'.

Please God, don't let Dolph start asking now.

****

Xander's in his usual corner booth, comfortable in borrowed grey track pants and Illinois U t-shirt. Hair still wet from the shower he cradles with loving care his first espresso in two days, "Don't even think about it," he snarls as Bacchus slides in opposite with a disapproving stare at a cup now clutched protectively against Xander's chest.

"It's not good for you."

"Neither are taxes, go bitch to the IRS. I'll ask for the tape later on to find out what I missed."

One of the cleaners starts up an industrial vacuum cleaner with enough power to suck through to China, thereby drowning out any chance for Bacchus to reply. Xander grins at the hyena's low frustrated growl.

Twelve thirty in the afternoon and the final group of last night's customers have only just departed the club. It's Xander's favourite time here, with the club appearing almost benign.

And sometimes he'd like to introduce that old Xander Harris who gyrated like a loon at the Bronze to this new version who sits so casually in an S&M club sipping coffee.

But only sometimes.

Because while he may not be proud of some of his decisions since arriving here, Xander can't bring himself to actually regret them either.

"What's bothering you?" Bacchus takes advantage of the cleaners moving into the bar area.

Xander barely hesitates, "Nothing, just stray thoughts you get over coffee and donuts in the morning."
"It's after twelve."

"Yeah, I noticed."

Bacchus squirms uncomfortably, the way he always does when he has something nasty to do and Xander realises he's actually here for a reason. "What's up?"

"We've had a reporter poking round."

"About me?" Okay, not happy. Xander sits up straight with alarm; he's not ready to go 'public' yet. There's some relief when his concern is waved away.

"No. You're safe," Bacchus gives him a dry smile. "But Anita tends to attract them, the locals aren't too bad..."

"Nothing like that fear factor," Xander's snicker dies a lonely death as the hyena stays silent.

"As I was saying," with a stern glare, Bacchus dares Xander to interrupt. "This reporter's from out of state, he's poking around Jean-Claude's business. Our drama at the Circus the other night hasn't helped matters. Which means we have to be discreet about the next meeting."

"You want to know when I'll be up for it?"

"It would help," Bacchus tries not to sound pushy.

Xander thinks on it, he really does want this crap out of the way, the sooner the better. "What about the cops, any repercussions from the other night?" Bacchus looks like he's swallowed something sour. "I'm guessing that's a yes?"

"They're all over the Blood District like a bad smell," Bacchus can't remove the reproving tone in his voice. "They even have an unmarked car outside. It comes and goes."
"Right now?"

"Yes."

Great. So much for discretion. He's fucked this up royally. "Looks like I've got some fences to mend. Will they trust us enough to suggest a rendezvous for the next meet?"

"I doubt it."

"But they won't want it around one of their own places will they?"

Bacchus feels uneasy at the gleam in Xander's eye, "The last time you wanted to have some fun..."

"I'm all done with the dramatics, Bacchus. Chill." Xander falls silent wondering how he's going to get the hyenas to agree to his plan. Fuck it, he'll just pull rank. "Are you dealing with Jason?"

"Asher."

"Oooh, nasty."

Bacchus agrees. "He's being exceptionally formal and unpleasant."

Oh, well. Shit happens. "I have a suggestion," and the hyena visibly cringes. "Awww, don't be like that, Backy. You'll love it, I swear."

"Says the fox as he offers the chicken a ride," Bacchus mutters darkly to himself.

It's a strange, strange world.

Or at least, Xander Harris thinks it is anyways.

Thinks it's strange how he's never been carded. Lack of sweaty palms not withstanding as he waits his turn at the bar; he has to worry about why.

And maybe--maybe you can take the man away from the Hellmouth but you can't take the Hellmouth out of the man.

Pffft! Up himself much?

Or maybe the key is standing over brains and blood on an L.A. street with nothing else on your mind but overwhelming *satisfaction*.

Who's to say?

Still, he'd like to be carded at least *once*.

Like to skip back to something that smacks of old familiarity.

And when the barman asks for his order, Xander's rummaging through his mental closet to find the cause of this itch he can't scratch.

Old Xander has never been to St. Louis. Hell, he'd never got further than Oxnard!

So he's never really sure.

Never really *certain* how much this St Louis differs from his own Hellmouthy flavoured one.
Aside from an entrepreneurial Master Vampire, lycanthropes, and cops who actually know the pointy end of stake, that is. Picky, picky, picky.

And the devil is in the details.

Is that comfy booth upholstery green when it should be red? Are those bottle blonde strands dangling loose from the waitress's bun a reflection of another who wears a ponytail swinging down to her waist?

Oh.

"No ma'am, not staring. Just being friendly and I'm actually older than I look so feel free to return the favour any time." Someone upstairs is laughing he's sure.

As the Ori of Life comes within a hair's breadth of getting his face slapped.

Typical Harris luck.

Women are still the same no matter what dimension he's in.

****

Slightly weird and spooky how it's never the big things that bother him, yet the sight of his favourite game show hostess flashing fangs is capable of sending him into a panic attack.

Which sits nicely with his discovery that he can be just as obsessive as the next lunatic. Sir David Attenborough's documentary series 'To be Were is Human' is his current flavour of the month and Dear God!

Cue X-Files theme if you please maestro.
'Cause Xander's still struggling as to whether he should write to the guy and point out some salient facts Sir David missed or just plain out got wrong.

***********

Drink in his hand; Xander sips his beer replete with victory. Kinda chuffed he's outmanoeuvred two other guys for this booth at the back. It was nasty for moment, coming down to stares and puffed up chests at three paces. They backed down, he didn't.

Ha!

*****

For all that this New World has it's monsters they seem ....almost civilised. He can't understand this game of shadow puppets they play at, rules and protocol are just a waste of oxygen and effort, he'd even said as much once.

Epiphany had been duly appalled.

"You can't kill Angelus, Xander." Forest green eyes over the rim of a delicate white china cup, part of a set, he thinks, 'cause there's a matching milk jug and sugar thingie on the table as well.

"Sure I can. The practicalities are still a little vague," he tracks a peacock walking across manicured grass. "Decapitation or burning the fucker the death," tips his head sideways and grins at her with boyish charm. "I can even do it L.A style. Molotov cocktail party anyone?"

She hastily recommends a psychiatrist instead.

Which left him staring at the pretty blue and gold embossed card wondering if he wasn't some type of inter-dimensional Tarzan. A noble savage amongst the civilised monsters!
It had seriously creeped him out.

*****

There's a commotion by the front door of the bar, heads turn, Xander's own being one of them.

A genuine smile replaces his previously brooding expression as he rises from his seat to wave a hand. Xander had pulled rank on the hyenas' about his intention to attend the meeting alone tonight, only to find out that Bacchus is a canny little bastard who'd promptly blabbed to the one person whom Xander's status meant absolutely nothing to.

*****

"So," Copter's words roll out like a thundering summer storm, "Out of the closet at last hey?"

Xander fakes a choked splutter, Copter's answering guffaws of delight as he settles his huge frame into the booth well worth this small deception.

"Could you say that any louder," Xander raises his bottle to salute the rest of the bar currently favouring him with varying degrees of sympathy and amusement. "I think there's a farmer in Illinois who may not have heard."

Flash of pearly white teeth, "Don't get much of a chance to yank your chain, X-Ray." Copter breathes in deeply as if savouring the air. "I'm enjoyin' the moment."

"Enjoy it while you can," the brunette replies sourly. "We meet the Master of St. Louis in twenty minutes and believe me," he says fervently. "I'm on his people's shit list."

"Business as usual then." Why is he not surprised. "What is it with you and vamps? S'like mercury and water."

"Ya got that right." Whilst taking a drink of his soda, Copter checks out his friend. As per usual in a situation like this, X-Ray has his back to wall while his gaze skims over everything and nothing in particular. Occasionally he'll stop, the corner of his eyes crinkle just a little as another vamp or Shifter is identified.

The hyenas may think they're the experts on the Ori of Life, Copter likes to think he's gone one better and become an expert on Xander. As much as anyone can.

Three years they've been friends, and oh how his life has changed. "My Prof in Preternatural Studies would shit a brick if he knew you'd been sittin' under his nose for the last two years."

"Tell him to join the queue."

"Frenchie pissed at you 'bout that? I told you man...."


Which evokes a reprimanding frown from Copter, just to show he's tempted to call X-Ray's bluff. Except he won't, and X-ray knows it. "Ready when ever you say the word," his face lights up with excitement. "Got some nifty graphics," pats the laptop lying between them on the table. "Man, you should see it."

As he launches into his spiel, Xander only half listens, intent on watching Copter's animated expression more than anything.

After Jesse, Xander can't say he ever really any male friends to speak of. Oz and Riley? 'Nuff said.

It's embarrassing how *hard* he'd tried to be their friend. All for nothing. The Hellmouth put paid to that, its darkness twisting everything until both men fled to preserve what sanity remained.

So where had that left him? Xander, last geek standing on the mouth of hell. Too dumb to run, too dumb to go find a gym or *anything* to improve his fighting abilities. Can't say he's especially proud of that short sightedness.... Looking back it was idiotic, suicidal, and just plain stupid!
Having said that, neither Giles or Buffy ever offered to help. Maybe they just never thought about it? What with the Watching and Slaying gigs being 24/7 deals and all.

Fault on both sides and hey, ain't that the way life goes? Clarity in hindsight.

And he's not angry or bitter, disappointed sure, but not angry. Perhaps he's just grown up enough to realise that imperfections aren't the sole property of Xander Harris.

Geez, and when did he become such a cynical bastard?

"X-Ray?"

Xander glances at his watch feigning surprise, "We gotta move. Otherwise we'll miss the boat."

Out of the booth it's easier to ignore Copter's wounded silence, although an apologetic flick of an eyebrow will only get Xander so far, "I'm sorry, had a little thought from home moment there."

Nod, apology accepted. "Figured as much. Not as if I'm not used to those by now." As they work their way towards the door Copter probes, "You ever wonder why thinking of home always makes you so depressed?"

Xander falters, ends up stuttering another apology to some girl he almost runs into as the words take effect. Then he's out the door under bright lights breathing in the night air as if trying to stave off suffocation.

"That wasn't a trick question," Copter rumbles, aware he's touched a nerve.

"No, just an honest one." Without further comment Xander sets off into the crowd.

East of downtown, Laclede's Landing is nine square blocks of recovered warehouse district, complete with cobblestones. A tourist brochure would have you believe it harks back to a celebration of St. Louis history with the river.
Exactly where brightly lit casinos and restaurants figure into it, Xander's never been exactly sure. 'Cause he's thinking those fur trappers of old wouldn't get past the front door these days; dress codes are strictly enforced and fur is so passe. Speaking of fur.

"Wolf at seven o'clock."

"Another one?!"

"Yep," expression bordering on annoyance, Xander muses. "I'm starting to feel like Mary's little lamb."

"Ta hell with that," shoulders slumping Copter mutters morosely. "We ALL know what happened to the black one!"

"You can back out any time y'know," the tone is casual. Deliberately so.

"I know it."

"Not going to though are you."

"Nope."

"Your call."

"Damned straight it is," his mutinous expression has Xander chuckling.

"Anita's gonna pitch a fit." She has a definite *thing* about non-combatants, one that he's very much aware of, and it's sad to say he's not above using Copter's presence to dull her suspicious nature.

So, he can add calculating *and* cynical to the 'when did I become' list. Damn.
Her first thought when the paddle steamer pulls up to the wharf is, 'Double-crossing little fink! He's brought a god damned Troll!'

Jamil states blandly, "Stephen said he's human."

Anita sucks in a breath. Good Lord.

Dolph is six eight and this guy manages to make him appear small, she catches a few of the wolves eyeing the gangplank nervously as if waiting for it to buckle as he gingerly makes his way on board close on the heels of Ori of Life.

Xander steps nimbly onto the deck and despite his companion's size, Anita wouldn't take a bet on who poses the more dangerous threat.

His black suit from the previous night is gone, replaced by that loose baggy gear kids seem to favour these days. Apparently, they think it looks cool, Anita thinks it just looks untidy.

Thick-hooped silver earrings in each ear; his black hair blown about by the river breeze. Khaki green bomber jacket hanging down to below his knees, camouflage pants with so many pockets as to make her downright uncomfortable, black boots complete his ensemble.

He could be hiding anything underneath; probably is.

The giant (for lack of a better term) wears blue jeans and a St. Louis U sweater—her swift once over reveals no visible signs of being armed. No energy to signify he's a shifter or anything else other than what Jamil had said, human. Albeit one large enough to stand in for the Colossus of Rhodes.

"Hi, my name's Copter." Wide, wide grin and the laptop dangles like a postage stamp from one hand as he holds the other out to be shaken.
As her hand disappears, "Anita Blake," glares accusingly at Xander. Not a Troll, oh no. It's a bloody St. Bernard. What the *hell* was he thinking bringing someone like this to their meeting?

Oh yeah. Xander smothers a smile, she's pissed.

He wonders off to one side while the gangplank is swiftly drawn back up, cranes his head sideways as the paddle churns water into white foam. Cool.

For some reason his imagination keeps inserting a wererat into the giant wheel; running.

He feels Anita approach from behind and waits.

"We need to talk."

Gosh, what a surprise. "What about?" Casual with the right amount of indifference to ratchet her attitude up to the next level; and ya gotta wonder why he enjoys doing this so much.

She turns to Copter, "Would you excuse us for a minute?"

"No."

Xander snickers outright as her lips *thin* at the unexpected refusal. "Copter's under the impression you want to talk about him. He's surprisingly nosey when the conversation is about himself. Go figure."

"Fine," she'd wanted to be nice, polite. Now she can go back to being herself, "Your friend doesn't belong ..."

"It's not your call."

Xander's response is so rapid and blunt as to force air from her lungs, "Nor is it mine," he adds.
Copter draws himself up to his full, very impressive height. "Is this 'cause there's a height requirement?"

Anita almost strains a muscle in her neck attempting to glare up at him, then she smiles, the smile she does when all emotion drains out of her face, and then holds it until Copter shuffles nervously.

Xander intervenes, "Don't get pissy, Anita. What exactly is it about Copter's being here that has you so shitty?" As if he doesn't know.

"Where does he figure into this?"

"He's my friend."

Her eyes widen in surprise.

Ah, didn't count on *that* did you? "A friend who was upset at my insistence of coming alone tonight. There's also this nasty habit of his of not taking no for an answer."

"Then you should have tried harder."

A quick smile in Copter's direction, Xander understands where she's coming from, he just doesn't agree. "You can fear FOR him, but you can't tell him not to CARE or act on that emotion to save you from the pain of your own guilt," she flinches as if struck.

"I beg your pardon!"

"A person chooses their fight, Anita. At one time or another everyone chooses their path in life and how they walk it. If you're lucky," he pauses to let himself look at Copter. "They choose you and all that it entails with their eyes open. Don't demean their intentions or intelligence by trying to save them from their choice. You don't have the right."

He's wrong. "Even if it could get them harmed or worse?"
"Even if."

Silence reigns.

"Wow," Jason stage whispers. "That was like Ghandi without the sub-titles."

Anita and Xander square off like two sides of a coin never destined to meet, their perspective and experiences are just too different.

"I'm not totally helpless ya know," Copter grumbles defensively, effective in breaking up their stand off if only to come under Anita's caustic stare. "X-Ray sent me on a camp thing for marine wanna be's," his chest puffs out in pride. "I'm in the National Guard and I know how to shoot." Poorly, but hey, if X-Ray comes up against something bigger than say, oh, a rhino then Copter's his man, 'cause even *he* couldn't miss something that big.

Xander sighs, all of sudden he's tired of the whole conversation. "Your people want assurance that I won't try anything. I think I've made that pretty clear," what he leaves unsaid causes Anita to nod brusquely. You don't bring someone like Copter to a meeting with a boat full of lycanthropes if you're going to cause trouble.

Unless you want your friend dead.

"Jean-Claude and Asher will be arriving shortly, we should go inside," she states. "After you," Anita steps to one side and Xander laughs outright.

"You are one suspicious lady, Ms Blake."

"It keeps me alive, I can't complain."

Copter trails behind as X-Ray enters the boat proper, catching up with the brunette he whispers, "That is one scary little lady." His jaw drops as Anita calls out, "Thank you."

Staring at a layout of the paddle steamer on a wall, Xander adds absently, "Shifter hearing is very good," his expression brightens. "Hey, they've got a gaming room!"
Copter jumps as if bitten, "God dammit, X-Ray! NO. Ya hear me? NO. You already got us banned from Las Vegas, man. LAS VEGAS! My showgirl dreams have been ruined 'cause of you."

Xander bats his eyelids, "And you would have looked so good in sequins and feathers."

Their continuing banter has Anita perplexed, Micah sidles up, "Interesting, isn't he?" She nods.

"He's so...it's like he's actually here for the boat ride."

"Maybe he is. There are a many stories about the hyenas' Ori of Life," his gaze rests on Xander with curiosity. "I never thought I would ever meet one. He's younger than I expected."

"Yeah, well, he was old enough to kill in L.A., and that was over two years ago."

Life amongst the Shifter gangs is usually short and brutal. That Xander had not only survived, but as a human held enough standing to organise an attack speaks volumes.

As she watches, he digs Copter in the ribs. "Hey. Remember that blonde?" Cups his hands to signify.....

Young or not, Xander is definitely male. Anita rolls her eyes at the sound of youthful guffaws. "If you two are finished," and Copter has the grace to look embarrassed.

"Sorry, Ms Blake."

Xander subsides with an unrepentant snicker.

"The meeting is taking place in the smaller dining room," she explains crisply. "I'm going outside to wait for Jean-Claude..."

Xander immediately turns to the staircase on his left, he's three steps up before he notices her flat
"Something wrong?"

"You memorised the map, didn't you?" And god damnit he just shrugs, "Tools of the trade."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means five, ten or twenty years from now that I will still remember the map, our conversation," he gives her the once over. "That you're wearing black pants, blue silk shirt, black jacket and your left shoelace is untied."

Anita refuses to drop her gaze.

"Damn," Xander scowls. "Everyone falls for the shoelace tag."

"I'm not everyone."

"No," Sombre in an instant, Xander recommences his journey. "If you were, I wouldn't be here."
Starched white linen tablecloth, crystal glasses so finely cut he swore each one contained its own rainbow. And the food? The Michelin Guide would weep as it bestowed four stars.

"Just one more spoonful, ma petite."

"Get stuffed, Jean-Claude." Anita brandishes the spoon much as she would a stake; coupled with a hefty desire to use it as one. "Four courses you said, FOUR! So why are we up to number six?"

The Master of St Louis licks his lips, eyes glued to the lemon sorbet in front of her. "Perhaps, Francois miscounted." Gallic shrug, "Let us not waste such a gift, hmmm?"

When Anita had said the small dining room, Xander was in no doubt he was to be the main course. Heck, he expected it!

He didn't count on Jean-Claude's ability to take any situation and wring it to his advantage.

"Hsst, X-Ray." Copter whispers. "What's goin' on?"

Without removing his gaze from the fight opposite, Xander inches closer. "Master vamps can only taste food through their human servants."

"Oh." Frown. "Any food?"

"Yep."

Copter views his own rather impressive pile of stacked plates with newfound respect. "Maaan, that's just plain freaky."

Anita breaks off her argument; "With an appetite like yours I'd be careful whom I call 'freaky' if I were you."
"Hey! It's all in proportion to my size, girl."

"Girl? GIRL?"

Xander feigns sudden interest in a chicken broth stain-coincidentally he's forced to slide his chair six inches away from Copter in order to examine it further.

Copter shrugs his indifference at the outraged Executioner, "You started it."

"WHAT? Listen here you stunted troll.." 

Jean-Claude turns to Richard, his expression one of bemusement, "I believe schoolyard fights are your expertise. I bow to your wider knowledge and request assistance before my sorbet is ruined."

"Must I?" Richard leans back in his chair, frankly, he's enjoying the show.

"....I've heard better 'dis' from a four year old!"

At which point, Anita smiles coldly, "Does the four year old in question carry a Berretta with a full clip?"

Jaw set to full on stubborn, Copter growls, "Of course not! Although I'm beginning to think *you* did. Probly used 'Barbie' for friggin' target practice," he mutters darkly.

Xander rolls his eyes, catches sight of a waiter hovering in the background and almost skips right on past when an intangible itch urges him to have another look.

Short, short black hair; so close to the scalp as to be almost like a pelt. Perspiration marks marring the crisp white shirt, there's insufficient humidity and heat to warrant it. And the eyes-- huge, brown, not human.
Not so strange that, but the guy is tense. Like piano wire tense.

With a nod at Copter's plates, Xander says, "Help yourself. Don't worry, he won't bite." And the waiter outright twitches.

It's not until the guy starts cleaning up that Xander thinks he has some glimmer of a clue.

The skin between each finger is webbed up to the first knuckle.

Oh.

A Selkie in a roomful of meat eating lycanthropes has due cause to be a tad nervous.

In that silent command all waiters seem to hear, more soon entered the room and efficiently set about clearing the table.

In his attempt to be helpful, one of those delicate glasses he so admires breaks in Xander's hand. A single drop of blood appears caused by a miniscule shard of glass.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes."

Conversation withers like that petunia plant his mom once had.

"Oh, very nice," Xander shoots Asher a dry smile. "Eloquent and dramatically creepy all at the same time."

Vamps! Frustrated actors the entire lot of 'em. Shakespeare probably had to beat the bastards off with stake.

"Now that Goldilocks has sucked the mood right out of the room. You Alphas need to decide."
"Decide?" Richard is cautious, Xander's motives are still unclear.

"Decide who you want to risk hearing what I have to say. I'd suggest your seconds only but," Xander shrugs. "It's your call."

"On one condition," Anita responds crisply. "You both get searched before Bobby Lee and Jamil leave."

Xander expected no less. "Agreed."

In less than a minute both he and Copter have hands planted against a wall, their legs spread. Jason is the last of the beta shifters to exit the room and as the door closes behind the young werewolf, Xander uses an elbow to nudge Copter in the ribs, "Just like old times."

Copter's snicker morphs into a frown as Bobby Lee starts patting him down and Anita starts on Xander. "Hey! How come you always get the pretty ones?"

"It's a gift young Padwan," comes the airy reply.

"What is this Padwan he speaks of?" Jean-Claude is sincere in his query.

Anita slaps Xander in the middle of the back. "Stay still." His guffaws of laughter mute but his body still shakes broken only by an occasional snicker.

She takes her time and other than a pocket full of dominoes comes up empty. Which cheers her up not at all, Xander may be a lot of things, a fool doesn't strike her as one of them. And only a fool would come to this meeting unarmed.

"You're clean," her doubts are clear.

Xander turns round to face her but stays in place with his back now against the wall, "I even brushed behind my ears, wanna check?"
"Don't tempt me."

"Of course not, that's Jean Claude's job. All he does is point you in the general direction and let you be yourself."

Asher hisses in alarm. Merde! That is too close to the bone for Anita to let pass.

Copter edges away. He can move damned fast when warranted; and a confrontation between Anita and Xander sure as hell warrants it in his book.

Jean-Claude rises from the table. "Anita!"

"Back off, Jean-Claude." She hasn't moved her gaze from Xander. "I make my own decisions."

"I never said you didn't," his calmness is surreal. "But you are what you are, Anita. You're incapable of standing back and he knows it. Others will use it against you. If they haven't already then they'll work it out soon enough. Realistically you know you can't save everyone, but you'll keep trying until it kills you. And one day it will."

"I think you know that already though," he states blandly. "I'm NOT saying you're wrong, hell, I'm not sure I wouldn't do the same damned thing. But you've got to start playing this smarter or it will bite you on the ass."

"Is this sermon over?"

"Ouch!" Xander runs a hand through his hair, the only visible sign of his frustration. "I had...a friend very much like you. She was beautiful, funny and hell on two legs when it came to taking down the bad guys."

"She died?"

"Yeah," he can't stop his voice from cracking.
He's seen Buffy die...twice. Never realised up till now that he is the only one who actually had.

And whoever said the 'second time round is easier' is full of shit!

"I'm sorry," and she is. It was obvious he'd cared deeply for this other woman. "But I'm not her and the choices I make are MINE. I do what I have to in order to protect the ones I care about and I'll be DAMNED if I'll apologise for it. To you or anyone else."

"And what happens when the problem becomes bigger than you can handle?"

"Then I'll find the necessary help I need," she can work with others....if they're competent enough and know the score. "What the hell is this? A job interview?"

Xander appears momentarily taken aback, then laughs self-consciously. "Sure as hell sounds like one doesn't it?"

"Thanks, but I've got enough on my plate already."

"And you don't trust me."

"I don't KNOW you."

"Fair call," he shrugs. "I admit to having an unfair advantage, I've spent a couple of years watching and listening from the sidelines. Just tell me this," and his manner is so casual Anita never saw it coming. "Your relationships are like a toolbox owned by carpenter with an obsessive compulsive disorder. What messed you up so badly that makes you keep your life so rigidly compartmented?"

All sound fades into white noise as Anita struggles to breathe.

He sees too damned much! Of her, of her relationship with Jean Claude. Christ! The Ori of Life goes through her protective shells like shredded tissue paper.

She is exposed. And Anita fears that more than death.
There's nothing behind her eyes, nothing.

Xander moves not an inch, but his voice drops to become something harder than steel. "You don't want to dance with me, Anita. Believe me, you really don't."

"You'll lose."

His half smile full of bitter memory, "I'm used to it. I've lost a lot of things, more than you can possibly imagine. Don't shoot the messenger, Anita. Especially when you know I'm right."

And the truth—in Anita's opinion—doesn't set you free. It just embeds like a hook in the guts to leave you twisting; open mouthed in a silent scream wishing for it would end.

******

Jean-Claude makes a poor show of hiding his relief when she backs down. Jamil and Bobby Lee are even less inclined to leave and only do so reluctantly under protest.

And Xander?

Is seated back at the table, playing with his dominoes as if nothing ever happened.

Anita wants to kick him.

"It's hard to trust someone who didn't exist until three years ago." And goddammit! He doesn't even have the decency to act surprised.

"Ah. Been doing a bit of digging have we?"

"I like to know who I'm dealing with, your record smells like some shonky evangelist who changes his name to avoid the lawsuits."
"We all have our secrets," Xander outright laughs. "I still can't believe the Vampire Council think Jean-Claude killed Mr Oliver. But hey, who am I to judge."

If Jean-Claude could have turned any paler, he would have. Merde! His automatic denial fades under the Ori of Life's steady smirk.

Anita glares at Xander, this Father of Secrets bullshit is getting old. Fast.

And she's in deeper shit than she first thought.

Because the death of Mr Oliver is just the tip of the iceberg as far as she's concerned.

Mr Oliver; the Earthmover.

A member of Vampire Council.

A vampire so old he'd been an actual Neanderthal, and his power had been earthquakes. Earthquakes! Anita also knew she'd gotten lucky. If not for Mr Oliver's agreement to restrict his powers before entering St. Louis she'd have never been able to kill him.

If the Council ever find out it was she and not Jean-Claude who killed Mr Oliver, she's dead meat.

"So," Xander asks in mock innocence. "Still wanna trade secrets? Or shall we get down to business?"

****

"The Universe is at war. And it's a no quarter, no holds barred, dirty tricks campaign," Xander didn't look up as he lay the dominoes out. Doesn't need the distraction and God! He *really* misses Giles.
Who would no doubt be able to do this in his sleep and make it sound impressively dire; albeit with a tweed undertone.

"This war crosses time, space and dimensions. In other words," he flashes a grim smile. "Every nook and cranny of existence."

There's nothing here Anita hasn't heard before. "You've just explained what every religion and cult have expounded since man could talk."

"Oh, good," Xander matches her sarcasm with some of his own. "Then it won't be a surprise to you all when the Big Bads come knocking, will it?"

Anita opens her mouth to reply, Xander cuts her off. "You think I'm full of shit, Executioner? Of course you do," his hard gaze takes in the entire group. "You all do. Right up until you see it for yourselves everything I say here tonight is circumstantial. I can deal with that. But you need to know. So shut the fuck up and let me finish."

Copter's eyebrows soar skywards, oh shit, looks like the gloves are about to come off. "X-ray? Can I have a warning next time you do this insulting all you survey deal? Just so's I got the heart attack pills close."

X-Ray's glare is icy cold. Copter holds his hands up in surrender. "I'm just asking."

Xander returns to the matter at hand, "This Three/Four domino represents a dimension," he joins it to a Four/Blank domino. "The Four on this one represents another dimension, I'll state the obvious and say they are joined. By what? Call them doorways, call them portals, I don't really care. But with the correct knowledge all manner of things use them to travel from one to another."

Anita eyes the dominoes carefully, "The concept is something we're familiar with. Like the Fey?"

It's a good question. "Actually, no. From what I know the Fey here are bound to THIS dimension. This dimension has had some pretty secure locks on it." And for good reason!

"It would appear that something has picked our lock, n'est pas?" Asher drawls.
"Who the hell has the key and why would our dimension be locked?" Anita demands.

And Xander is absolutely, positively NOT discussing Keys. Ever.

To a certain extent he thinks he knows the answers, his last discussion with FauxWillow in his apartment had got him thinking and it had been a gut-wrenching discovery. "Like I said, the Universe is at war and here's the kicker.... it's sorta meant to be."

"I can't believe that!"

"Ridiculous!"

"Are you insane!"

Xander waits them out in silence, "I'm a visual guy so I used the dominoes to explain multiple dimensions, but perhaps for the Universe...a symbol such as Ouroboros explains it better."

"Ah," Asher nods. "The snake which consumes itself?"

"Yeah. In some depictions it is half-light, half-dark." Xander raises a brow, "Do you see? Life, Death, conflict, peace. The Universe is a never-ending cycle. There aren't many rules but there is one overriding all else. Balance. Something happened to upset the balance, it may not seem much in the context of the Universe, but it was enough. And the first cracks are starting to appear. I think this dimension is still damned near impossible to get to, but sometimes a crack is all you need."

And he's not gonna put his hand up and say 'Mea Culpa!' But the timing is right, ripping a Slayer out of Heaven is serious business and it has to come at a price. As near as Xander can figure being sent here is punishment for his crime. Sort of like a 'You've fucked up now you get to man the trenches,' deal.

Maybe he's wrong but the pieces fit, four of them participated in resurrecting Buffy. Tara's dead, he's in another dimension surrounded by monsters with enough juice to squash him with one hand while using another to dial take out.
Which left Willow and Anya. God, he hopes they're okay.

As focus for the spell Willow loses the woman she loves, and then Xander goes into the portal. If Willow isn't dead he has a horrible feeling there's a reason behind it, he gets chills just thinking about it. Someone with that much power? Maybe one side in this battle wants her alive; he just hopes it's the right one.

And Anya. Gloriously straight forward and beautiful. A survivor if he ever he saw one, still he feared for her.

They were all guilty.

An honest mistake some would say but they buried a corpse; Buffy didn't disappear into some portal like Angelus or himself. She was dead. Was it really concern for her well being or was it their own insecurities that made them bring her back?

He'll never know.

Which, considering everything he's got crammed into his head? Is funny in a slash your wrists kinda way. Father of Secrets? What a crock of shit!

Jean-Claude studies the Ori of Life intently. "You know what this occurrence is? Can it not be corrected? And how do you know of these dimensions you speak of? Asher and I have seen much, we have seen demons and demi-gods. We have spent decades at Court, yet not once have we heard of which you speak. So I ask you again, human. How do you know?!"

"Y'know, those frilly clothes of yours are deceiving," Xander's smile is fake.

He's never thought of the Master of St Louis as anything else than a perceptive, smart bastard who's still around when others much stronger and older are gone. "Let's take it from the bottom, shall we?

"Oui. From the bottom or the side, I care not. So long as you answer."

Externally in control, Xander is playing dodgeball inside his head. "I'll answer as best I can. As
"What does that mean?" Sylvie breaks her silence. Ori of Life or not she doesn't trust him and her animosity leaks out, Xander appears unperturbed.

"It means some things are a secret for a reason. And I won't tell you."

"I notice you didn't say can't."

"Chalk one up for perceptive girl," he's not going to budge on this one. "I am first and foremost the Ori of Life. I answer to the Clans, some of the secrets I hold are theirs and I repeat, I will NOT divulge those. They are mine to hold, not mine to tell."

Clan law is the same as Pack or Pard. It takes precedence over all else. *This* is something Sylvie and the other Shifters can understand.

As she settles, Xander explains further, "I can promise what I leave out will not endanger any of you. There are some things that can't be changed, the telling of it would do no good."

"No-one can judge what you withhold isn't dangerous to us except yourself," Anita says dryly.

"Oh, I've already been judged."

"How'd that go for you?"

"Guilty as charged," and there's a heavy weight in his reply. Like he actually believes it.

Anita's eyes widen at the confession. Well shoot, that was unexpected.

Jean-Claude clears his throat, "If we could return to the matter at hand?"
"Of course," Xander concurs. "I know about the other dimensions because every Ori of Life has known. It comes with the job. HOW we know is something I can't tell you."

Micah just has to ask, "I've never heard or read about how an Ori of Life is chosen...."

"And you never will." Chosen isn't a word Xander would use, shanghaied or kidnapped are two that spring to mind.

As to how? On reflection he'd say every Ori of Life came from his own dimension, and every single one of them had been a Primal. Thereby providing a necessary link of familiarity with the Hyena shifters.

"I won't tell you what caused our dimension to suddenly become accessible to others, but I can tell you where it happened."

Clack.

A six/six domino holds their attention.

Xander's finger reaches out to the domino, slides over it as if he's somehow touching home. "I think that in this war there is a battleground. THE battleground. And while most dimensions get caught up in the crossfire it is here that they put their best and their worst. You might say other dimensions are like the reserves, called up when needed. Something happened in this battleground, and it tipped the Balance."

Richard eyes the domino carefully, "Why this place," he points to the domino. "What makes this place so special?"

"This place," Xander sighs. "I don't know. Maybe they flipped some cosmic coin. Maybe they tripped over it one night drunk on a Milky Way cocktail and thought 'Hey, this one looks pretty good. This'll do.' Stop thinking in straight lines people," Xander chides them gently. "It's not the centre of the Universe because there isn't one, yet in the context of what matters it's damned important."

Damned Important?! Anita struggles to visualise what she's heard. Dear God! What must this world be like? An image of an apocalyptic battlefield comes to mind.
Almost regretting his earlier curiosity, Richard fights an overwhelming desire to be ill. Once glance at the rest and most seem to be in agreement. After clearing his throat he asks much more tentatively, "Who are 'They'?"

"Honestly?"

Richard nods.

"I can tell you what I think," because Xander suspects that what he knows wouldn't fill a shot glass. "I call them the Three Amigos..." Anita gapes at him.

"You're joking."

"No, really," Copter interjects fervently. "He does."

"Hey! I said that's what *I* call them," Xander protests weakly. Dammit! Sunnydale humour just isn't appreciated like it used to be. "Okay, first off the rank and in no particular order is something coincidentally called The First."

"First what?" And like Richard before her, Anita comes to regret the question.

"Evil. It's the ultimate Big Bad, numero uno of the badness. It exists. There is nothing, and I mean NOTHING to compare. Every fear, every hate, every weakness is at it's disposal, The First thrives on them. Like the other two it has no corporeal form per se, although rumour is that when it chooses to show its face it can only take the form of the dead."

Hearing Xander makes Anita want to heave, "You're awfully casual about this. The thought of such a concept actually existing is terrifying belong belief."

Was he? Xander turns to Copter, "Am I?"

The big man visibly shudders, "I couldn't sleep for two weeks after you told me, man. Spent most of
that time trying to wrap my head around it and going to church."

Oh.

"Maybe I'm just used to it."

"I doubt anyone could get *used* to it as you say," Asher intones darkly.

Which begs the question. What else is Xander used to?

"And the others?" Richard interjects with a growl. "You said there are three."

"Yeah," Xander scratches his chin. "This part is kinda vague believe it or not. Don't know if it's 'cause the First is such a 'scare the living crap outta you' hands on type of entity or whether it's deliberate. This next lot are referred to as The Powers...," he frowns. "They seem more a coalition than anything else and I've gotta tell you sometimes their actions have been a bit suspect. There was this one time in Persia...think it was about 120 AD when ..."

"But these are the good guys, right?" Sylvie holds her breathe.


"Apparently?!"

"Well, they're not the First. So I suppose that's gotta be in their favour." After that? Who knew? It sure wasn't him.

"Don't get me wrong," he tries to make sense of it, to himself as well as the others. "These guys have done some pretty good stuff. Maybe it's just their methods that leave a bit to be desired. Or perhaps they're not as 'coalitioned' as everyone I've read thinks they are." At that moment, something inside Xander sort of 'tings'. Ooh. Why hasn't he noticed this before?
Anita watches, as Xander seems to wonder off into some little room inside his head. "Which leaves us with number three," she prompts.

"This is where I get confused," Micah comments. "I understand the other two as opposites, the representation of Good and Evil if you will. But a third?"

Micah has Xander's sympathies, "Yeah, I know. Been there, done that. Look, most modern cultures are conditioned to a black/white scenario. The ancients were somewhat more open-minded. Three is a number that dominates many of them, to the point that it's been adopted by more recent beliefs; even Christianity has the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Another example is Hindu mythology, Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva."

At this point he nods towards Jean-Claude, Anita and Richard, "Each of you are more powerful through your Triumvirate. You each gain something from the other and if one of you goes all of you go."

Without allowing them time to comment, Xander lays it out. "Three is the magic number because Balance is NOT a measure of some middle ground between Good and Evil. Balance is an Entity within itself."

Xander abruptly stands up, "I'll let you guys think on that." He heads towards a window, the break is as much for his benefit as theirs. With an inaudible sigh, Xander presses his forehead against glass.

Three.

Three entities more powerful than anything he could possibly imagine involved in an eternal struggle.

And one of them, has tapped Xander on the shoulder and called him up to the plate.

He just doesn't know which.
part 14

He'll never be a genius; but Jason's smart enough to know trouble when he sees it.

"What are you...?"

Plucks ineffectually at the darts embedded in his chest; thinking how idiocy stalks him like some winter cold.

Stupid. Useless question.

As if black cables trailing out behind like an obscene tadpole aren't clues.

Waiter-not-waiter smiles as he sends a 50,000 volt charge Jason's way.

And to think, he came up to the wheelhouse for some peace and quiet.

Down for seven of the longest seconds in his life, the stench of ozone sears the lining of his nose. By which time the two humans have also gone down- caused by what Jason doesn't know or particularly care.

And finding out all too late that he should as he's hit again.

One in his throat another in the chest, mosquito type sting feel to it.

Limbs still jerking spasmodically Jason struggles for balance, the start of a menacing growl reduced to a pitiful whimper as liquid fire replaces blood in his veins.

"Don't fuss so lad." Cold comfort delivered via a soft Irish burr. "Silver nitrate and uncut heroin, I'm told it'll paralyse ye first, ye might even survive," and there's a hint of disappointment.
His whole perspective reduced to floor level, Jason's all for making with the nervous. In his line of sight the Captain and a crewman are twitching convulsively. The Selkie follows his gaze.

"Humans don't take to well ta it though. To bad for them, eh?"

Yeah. Too bad.

The humans are frothing at the mouth now, twitches lessening.

There's a brief, unpleasant discovery that closing his eyes won't halt sounds of people choking on their own vomit.

Despite the pain, Jason's almost glad he's not dead yet, because life is an education and he's suddenly in the mood to be educated. Like, he wants to ask Anita how much pain a Selkie can stand before they die.

And he really hopes she'll be alive to show him.

********

Anita leaves the table with a sigh of disappointment; some part of her still loves Richard-although at this point she's damned if she knows why.

"Good God, Jean-Claude. I can't believe you're on the verge of believing this tripe!"

"I did not say I believed him, Ulfric."

"You haven't said you don't either."

Richard takes to instability about as well as a yacht without a keel.
Whilst she gained her perspective on reality at the age of nine, the day her mother died in a pile of twisted metal courtesy of a drunk driver.

After which Anita always knew life is pretty much designed to give you pain, and you can't trust anyone or anything not to give it a helping hand along the way.

She drifts closer to the Ori of Life.

Hugging his spot near the window, Xander's face is turned blissfully into a river breeze like some six-month-old cocker spaniel; eyes closed, head titled slightly upward.

As if demonic invasion is an every day occurrence and one shouldn't allow such things to trifle with life's little pleasures.

Anita's inclined to be nervous when people don't have the decency to act like expected.

And it's so easy to understand now, how he snuck under their guard.

Because there's not a singular remarkable thing about him.

Like Edward.

Now there's a thought guaranteed to keep her sleepless.

"How long have you been the Ori of Life?"

His head turns, eyes opening lazily, all brown and lost puppy looking "Since I was seventeen. Why?"

"It must have been difficult. I was just wondering how you handled it."
"I didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Handle it," he confesses. "You could say I screamed like a girlie man and went running the deepest darkest hole I could find."

"Did you find one?"

His profile hardens, "Wasn't deep enough."

They never are.

On the verge of another question, "Here," Copter startles her by swivelling the laptop. Anita feigns interest at the colourful screen, moving towards him she wonders if he's designated 'diversion guy' tonight.

Halting beside Copter, Anita fights not to scowl. Even seated he's almost taller than her.

She's gotta start wearing heels more often.

"What is this?"

"X-Ray's got all types of shit stuck in his head. We've been workin' on this for about eighteen months. Sort of a reference library, it's not on line yet but...."

Curiosity roused she scans the front page, "You're only up to D."

Copter rolls his head on those massive shoulders accompanied by a bland stare, which she meets with one of her own. "Pick a letter," he growls.
She hits 'C'. A click here, an open up document there, typical browsing until the scope of what she's looking at starts to sink in.

Sweet Jesus! Pages and pages of tightly compacted data more with sub-text and attachments available should she so choose.

"Where's the rest?"

"Still in X-Ray's head."

No hesitation in his reply, no lie in his scent, Anita wants to press a button and rewind. Hell, she'll even settle for a time out.

Because she's beginning to get a clue about the Ori of Life and it scares her to the point of Pandora's Box analogies.

"Tell me your kidding."

"Girl, does it look like I'm laughing?"

No.

There are pictures too, hand drawn, Xander's most likely touched up by computer graphics, doesn't matter.

Only up to D.

It's like that sucker punch you never see coming.

Anita treads water while her mind clinically informs her that 'D' is for Demons.
That 'D' is for a breathing dictionary--- known as the Ori of Life.

She feels ill, a single person retaining this amount and type of information is impossible; retain it and stay sane anyways.

***

Anita is staring; he can feel it.

All sharp and stiletto pointy - at a guess he'd say somewhere between his fourth and fifth vertebrae.

"How can you stand it, all these monsters inside your head?"

His vision smears to a recollection of eyes the colour of midnight spitting grief and rage on a Californian cliff top.

"How do you?"

"I'm still here and they aren't," she fires back. "Seriously though, how do you cope?"

"They're just words and pictures."

She swivels the laptop, on screen some creature she can't even begin to describe. And it's not the grey, slightly mucous skin or even the over abundance of eyes she finds disturbing. Oh no.

It's the fact that a cockroach like breeding habit is only kept under check by....god forbid, *another* type of demon.

Xander reaches over and gently closes the laptop, well aware of what she's just read and wonders if she truly understands the implications.
"Some days are better than others," he says.

Anita drops the subject. Call her selfish but she's not about to ask about Xander's nightmares; she has more than enough of her own.

Cooke hisses as another shred of skin flies off his knuckle.

Modern engineering can only compensate so much, the engine room of a paddle steamer is still an engine room; hot, noisy. He should have taken that fucking job offer in the Congo, at least that way he wouldn't be working with this....

"If you skin a werewolf does it stay furry?"

.....moron.

"Shut-up, Jackson."

"Sorry."

"Not half as much as I am boy." There's a bet going round the rest of the team that one of the wolves will do them all a favour and kill the little shit.

If Cooke were a betting man (and he might be) he'd put a grand down on that wererat, Jimmy-Bob or something. A professional bastard if ever he saw one and Cooke's seen more than his fair share.

Possibly because he's one himself.

As expected the diesel and oil fumes worked in their favour when the shifters came through for their security checks, the lycanthropes turning green and retching while trying to cover their noses. Still, Cooke wasn't taking any chances and ensured that his own wiry torso was buried shoulder deep in some pipes and let shit-face do the talking.
Which wasn't that hard seeing that's all Jackson seems to live for.

"Pressure's good, everything good your end? Damned smart using the engine room to hide the guns. Did you think of it?"

And dear God! Maybe one of the monsters is still peckish upstairs and he can feed Jackson to them.

Jackson is sallow skin and brown oily hair wrapped around a nervous disposition that makes a March fly downright torpid by comparison.

A mechanical genius with the emotional control of a five year old, he irritates the older mercenary beyond belief.

"Are you clear on our instructions? Do I have to go through them again?"

"No, I'm fine. Clear as clear can be," Jackson replies with enough vague élan as to be truly frightening.

"Because if you shoot the wrong guy, the boss is gonna take weeks skinning you alive. And we won't get paid," Cooke smiles coldly. "I can't stress how much I will hurt you if my bank account is empty tomorrow."

There's a huff of indignant protest, "Geez! Ease up, man. I got it. Everyone can go except for the Harvey guy."

"It's HARRIS, you dumb fuck. HARRIS. Black hair. About twenty. Got it?" And so help him, Jackson actually pouts.

"S'not like I'm gonna have much of a chance once the rest of the team get on board."

And Cooke wonders if Vicharif knows him better than he thought, because the big Russian has two large on Jackson getting off’d by 'friendly fire'.

His watch bleeps twice, "It's time. Go get your wrench."

Ten minutes later and now clad in combat black, Cooke initiates contact.

"Alpha One this is Bird Dog. Alpha One this is Bird Dog. Do you copy?"

{{Bird Dog this is Alpha One, loud and clear. Confirm your position and situation.}}

"Bird Dog is off the leash and on mark, awaiting confirmation of Alpha Three. Copy."

{{Alpha Three on mark. You are green to go. Repeat. You are green to go. Copy}}

"Roger that Alpha One. Bird Dog beginning second phase now. Copy."

{{Happy hunting, Bird Dog. This is Alpha One out.}}

Unlike one of his predecessors, Xander missed the Spanish Inquisition by a few centuries.

"How many demons?"

"I don't know."

Unfortunately, he now has his own slightly more cordial St. Louis version to deal with.

"Are all of them as easily killed as that Mora..Moray," Micah turns to Anita. "What did you say it was called again?"

"Mohra," Xander inserts. "And I wouldn't call killing a Mohra demon easy. I got lucky."
"Bull," Anita's chin jerks upwards as if daring him to counter. She starts again. "Where are they likely to appear?"

"I don't know."

"WHEN?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know how many, where or when. Is that right?"

"Yes."

Her flat stare is longer than a Jerry Springer guest list.

"Not quiet the fount of information you were expecting?"

"Not exactly."

From the other unhappy faces pointed his way, Anita's not the only one pissed at him.

"You could have gone to anyone, why us?"

Xander shoots Jean-Claude a glare and receives a bland fangy smile, signaling the vampire's contentment to let Anita run with this.

Bastard.

"I'm a twenty year old kid with a," shrugs haphazardly, "Shady and mysterious past. I could have
gone to the government.....and been locked up in a nice white padded cell. Or I could have gone to the Vampire Council," his laugh is abrasive. "I DON'T think so."

"You have trust issues," Anita scowls as Xander does a double take and raises her finger in warning. "Don't go there if you want to walk without a limp."

He grins, "Fine. I have SURVIVAL issues. And no real proof to give if they'd demanded it."

"You still don't."

God! She's picky.

"Would you have preferred I let the Mohra demon kill you?"

There isn't any part of Anita that can say, 'Yes' without being called a liar and the tightness around her eyes says she knows it. "You have the Clan. Hell, you have all the Clans. Your own little tooth and claw army waiting for the call."

"Exactly," Xander replies. "I am the Ori of Life," sarcasm laces his words. "If the public have no one to blame when the demons start showing up then they'll soon find one. Why don't I just paint a big fucking sign on the back of every Clan member that says 'shoot me' and save us all a lot of bother!"

"Yet here we are," Micah drawls, looking up and down the table to emphasise his point.

"It is not us you want," Jean-Claude's finally decides to break his silence. "You want ma petite," after which Anita promptly states mulishly.

"Well he can't have me."

"I don't WANT Anita! But I need her contacts, and whether I like it or not she comes as a package deal."

And he could say he needs her to keep the world safe except Anita already understands life is never
safe; but most people are happy to bask in the illusion.

Something Richard has never come to grips with.

Xander sucks in a breath to calm down, "Look, let's get one thing straight here. I have information that with luck will stop some very, very bad things from happening. But I can't walk up to a crime scene and say 'Hey, you're looking for a demon with a penchant for livers and kidneys ya know?"

Anita nods, "The police are going to want details."

"And I can't tell them," Xander's wry smile says it all. "Say I DO go to the government? What guarantees do I have that I'm not going to spend the rest of my life spent in a 'secure environment'? Nothing."

"Information is power," Jean-Claude utters calmly. "You have it, mon frere. Yet you seem reluctant to use it."

"Oo contrare, mon vampire."

Copter starts as an elbow digs into his ribs, "Wha..?"

In game show host smarm, Xander croons. "Copter, let's welcome our new contestants to 'Apocalypse's are us', otherwise known as A.R.S. In which the object of the game is how to LIVE without being caught or torn apart by the demons we are going to kill OR the people we are trying to save."

Copter greets him with a cool stare. "Ya know, you spent waaay too much time with those showgirls in Vegas, man."

"Shut-up and do your thang, Big Guy."

Righteously proud of his group's accomplishment, Copter puffs up his chest, "Everything X-Ray knows about demons is in here," he pats the laptop.
"Up to D," Anita points out dryly.

Copter growls at her, "Look, we've got this stuff translated into TWENTY languages and all we need is X-Ray's word and the 'Word' goes live," he settles back with a wide grin.

Asher and Jean-Claude's expressions couldn't get any blanker.

"Sweet Mother and Mary. C'mon!! Have you two been livin' in a goddamned cave?!" Bereft, he turns to Xander for support.

"You get used it. If it don't bleed they ain't interested."

"Then perhaps you are fortunate the waiters have already taken the cutlery," Jean-Claude's fingers twitch, like he's missing his fork already.

"Fuck you."

Xander wishes... no. No wishing. This world's already screwed up beyond imagining, it doesn't need his input.

"Such crudeness from someone of your position is unseemly."

Oh great, here comes the lecture, like he cares. "Pucker up and admit it Fang-Boy, my potty mouth is something you couldn't care less about. It's my access to power you can't feel that bothers you."

Has to twist the knife a little further, "'Cause we both know my insolence is just a gummy bear you'll chew on a little longer until you can figure out whether you actually like the flavour or not."

"And if I find you to my taste?"

Jean-Claude's slow and frankly intrigued gaze, by sheer intensity alone, renders Xander speechless.
Verbal sparring with succubi vampires? So off his agenda from now on.

Xander's face flames into a reddish hue as Jean-Claude's smile grows wider. Dammit! Is this immunity thing still working? Time for plan B or this case, A.

"Anita would have your dick on a platter faster than I can scream 'sexual harassment'. Anyways," fakes nonchalance. "I don't do vampires."

A cold spot forms in the middle of Xander's forehead; it's Anita's Beretta.

"....not that I frown on those who say yes. Have I mentioned how much I admire and respect a woman's right to choose?!"

"Shut. Up."

She doesn't have to tell him twice.

And should a stranger walk into the room Xander thinks they'd have no trouble figuring out only he and Copter were human.

They're the only two who don't look -- hungry.

"What is it?" he asks.

"I told you to shut-up." Her face is a death mask, cavernous deep and empty.

All the monsters are on their feet now.

"Richard stop!"
Anita curses as the Ulfric continues to make for the door. She knows what drives him, a scent so strong as to overcome closed doors and the Mississippi.

Blood.

Thick, heavy and enticing.

Some part of Anita wants/savours it.

Xander is all wide eyed and confused, or pretending to be, she can't decide. And cocker-spaniel eyes or not; it takes every ounce of her control not to pull the trigger when the first sounds of gunfire bark.

"You win," Cooke snarls.

Jackson lies not three feet away, a black hole oozing blood where his right eye used to be.

"Da," Vicharif fires off another burst from his AK-47 but the wolves are too quick in returning fire, forcing him to duck back for cover, "Tank you."

"De nada. Shit!" Cooke hisses as a bullet 'phzzes' past his ear. "Think Blake will raise the little bastard so I can kill him again?"

"Nyet."

Cooke spits his disgust at the deck, "Figures."

As far as plans go it had been relatively simple. Stupid, - but simple.

He'd argued against it at the time, and been overruled. The only saving grace being he'd managed to garner a hefty increase in their fee with a chance to pit himself against Blake.
No one was more surprised than he that it had actually seemed to be working.

After receiving confirmation the wheelhouse was under control; Cooke and Jackson hit the three wolves aft so the two boats approaching from the bow would remain undetected.

Sixteen out of twenty on board and everything's golden; then Jackson gets sick and tired of stepping over wolves' bodies so what does he do?

Why kick them over the side of course.

Fucking moron.

Paddlewheels and bodies don't mix.

Cooke has the joy of finding himself standing next to the world's biggest blender as it whips up a Bloody Mary-or was it a Mark?

He's brought back to the present by a staccato burst from one of the boats. Each equipped with a Browning M2HB machine gun fixed to their bow and taking up flanking positions on starboard and port.

"Hinter?"

"Sir?"

"Tell the boats to keep an eye out for those vamps. If those flying bastards get out we're fucked."

"Yes, sir."

Cooke changes frequencies, "Alpha One this is Bird Dog."
"Wheelhouse and bottom deck are secured, targets are pinned upstairs. Over."

Cooke signs off, mutters darkly to no one in particular, "Yeah, sure. Acquire target," slams another magazine into his gun. "Nothing between us and Harris except monsters and the scariest bitch on the planet. What a prick!"
"They're getting ready for something," Anita announces as she comes back from the stairwell. Or some semblance of a shade that sounds like her anyways, he can't tell in the dark.

Glass shards and plaster cover them all, indoor snow transformed to sharp and slicing.

All Xander can detect are ghostly shadows, pale and spooky.

He is a mouse. Flat on his stomach, pinned by a disinterested- Oh please God let this be disinterested-kitty cat.

"Can I just...?"

"No."

Micah's careless tap pile-drives Xander so far into broadloom his face becomes one with carpet fibre.

"People like you are the reason I'm a dog person."

And this is the problem with lycanthropes; scale to size chew toys are so difficult to find that when a bouncy human comes along they find it hard to let go.


"You're not going anywhere," Richard growls.

Ah, Richard.

Who never made it out to the firestorm, thanks mainly to Merle dragging him to the floor as bullet
holes sprouted along the wall with the frequency of mushrooms after spring rain.

A cold hand curls through Xander's hair. "Perhaps I will not need the cutlery after all, Alexander."

"We need him alive, Jean-Claude."

"He has betrayed us, ma petite. Ori of Life or not, he will be punished."

"Then let the hyenas do it, we can't fight the Clans. If he dies they'll never believe us, we need him alive."

"Will you guys hurry up and make up your minds! My face is starting to get rug burn." Silence. "I can help," he wheedles.

Anita's frown isn't something he can see but he knows it's there.

"If you talk again .."

"Maybe you enjoy being a clay pigeon but this ain't my idea of fun. Jesus, Anita!" Sniff. "I'm insulted and I hafta wonder. Will you still talk to me in the morning after you've had your wicked way with me?"

"Do you ever shut-up?!"

"I don't suppose it's occurred to any of you brainiacs that I might be the target here? I mean, what the hell would I KNOW about anything!!"

And he's not enjoying the experience at all. But since what did he want ever matter in the grand scheme of things.

"Shit."
"I concur, ma petite."

Anita sucks on her bottom lip as the idea gathers force, "Can't say I blame them," she muses. "I've known him less than a week and I already want to kill him."

"Love you too."

"Shut-up," and he grins because the force behind the order is lacking this time.

"GOOD GOD! DON'T TELL ME YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE HIM?!!!!!"

Xander's smile switches into bland, "Am I the only one here deeply resenting the guys who missed when they had the chance?"

And Jesus fuck! There's blur and shadow with eyes that are in no way human.

Sounds of a struggle.

"Thanks, Asher."

"Do not thank me yet," the vampire replies distastefully. "If I find you have lied then the Clans be damned. You will die before the sun rises and I will hand you over to the wolves myself."

"Yeah, yeah. Always with the promises of pain and retribution, you guys never change. Can I get up now?"

Such unconcern bears warning, Jean-Claude muses, "I am undecided as to whether you are an imbecile or something far more dangerous."

"How about an imbecile who can't stay out of danger?"
"Works for me," Anita says. "Now, how exactly do you plan to help?"

The galley is gleaming stainless steel, with Jean-Claude's chef a calm centre amongst wide-eyed waiters brandishing frying pans like some sort of Teflon coated shields.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Down to one full clip for her Uzi; Anita's running out of time and patience as Xander disappears into the depths of the freezer.

"Copter? Need a hand here buddy."

Copter boosts Xander up, she hisses as the Ori of Life sweeps away a frozen side of beef while talking a mile a minute. "Shifters have beyond average senses, Anita."

A large packet of peas burst upon impact with his hand and it's hailing frozen vegetables, "But if you know that then you know how to use it against them," now clear the top shelf reveals two gym bags.

"I knew it! You sneaky little bastard!"

"Here," Xander throws the first to Micah who catches it without effort. The second drops at Copter's feet, it hits the floor with a resounding 'clunk'.

Anita's lips get thinner and tighter as Xander chides Copter to hurry up and put on the Kevlar vest, then quickly dons his own.

He catches her stare and shrugs, "Product of a tough neighbourhood," and she frowns.

Four MP5's, three Benelli shotguns all with enough ammo to start his own goddamned war. She's tempted to shoot him on principal alone.

And that's just out of the bag he threw at Micah.
Merle grabs three MP5's, ammo, and heads out to Bobby Lee and Jamil. Micah helps himself to a shotgun and soon follows.

"In case you haven't noticed they want me alive," Xander states rummaging through his bag. "That boat on our starboard should have turned us into confetti."

"I know," which is why she thinks he's right about them being here for him. They shot too high, just enough to keep them pinned down with silver bullets to prevent the vampires from leaving.

"We gotta take out those boats," Xander explains and gives a little, "Aha," sound of pleasure as the guns he's seeking come tumbling out of the bag.

"I'm liste...how the hell did you get a hold of that?!?"

Xander flashes another wide grin as the sound of gunfire trebles outside. "Less talk, more action. Copter?" He waves to where Anita is standing. "Blow a hole in that ceiling for me while I finish up here, will ya."

Anita doesn't waste any more time, she needs to tell Jean-Claude and Asher to get ready.

Cooke's jaw hardens as a burst of automatic fire takes out two of his men. "Vicharif?"

"Da?"

"Report."

The Russian swears bitterly in his native tongue before switching to English. "I just lost Houseman. Ricollo is down. Heavy fire and."

BOOM.
Cooke shields his eyes then turns his attention starboard praying he's wrong.

He's not.

Dying flame and floating debris where one of his boats sat.

Face colder than artic ice he barks, "Where is he?!!"

BOOM.

A plum of water signals a miss to port but he can't afford to worry about that now. "I want that bastard found and taken out and I want it NOW!!"

Xander is occasionally guilty of wallowing in the past, strange mundane recollections of Sunnydale that hit at the oddest time. Things such as:-

Research sessions in summer; caused more by habit than an actual 'big bad'.

Patrol on a quiet, star filled night; Hershey Bar in one hand, Anya on the other.

At the moment? Here and now?

It's the fact no one ever shot at him.

"Shit, shit, shit," rolls across the roof while mimicking some pancaked slinky wrapped in Kevlar, and there's no way he can avoid the bird shit.

Tracer fire whips overhead, venomous fireflies made to kill.
Jean-Claude and Asher nowhere to be seen.

"Bastards are probably still looking for a comb," flips over onto his stomach, uses elbows and knees for traction. "Egocentric, lazy, good for nothing..."

Tracer fire sputters then ceases.

Xander turns his head to port, "...and alllll of a sudden everyone's a concerned citizen," looks down at his guano-covered clothes.

"I hate my life."

Beneath him the rate of fire increases dramatically.

Cries of pain cut short, nothing down below but the dead and potentially dead and he knows how this goes.

Last man standing is the winner. Or last woman. 'Cause from what he's heard Anita isn't the type who'll go down easy, if at all.

He smiles grimly, "I know you wouldn't like her Buff but damn she reminds me of you sometimes. If, you know, you were slightly more-than-psychotic. Dyed your hair and," cough. "Spent less time at the mall."

At the ledge now, Xander carefully raises his head. Yeah, three guys at the bow providing cover fire. Tucked up nice and cozy they're gonna be a bitch to dig out.

The vampires are doing god-knows-what-to-who-knows-where, and while they're up flying around like Tinkerbell, Anita and her crew need someone to even things up a little.


Copter's guarding civilians in the kitchen. Check. From the sound of it, Anita and her Were's are still
upstairs, positioned somewhere in the middle.

Bad guys? All downstairs. Barring the wheelhouse, which they must have taken pretty early.

Vampires? Oooh, tricky question. Does he really care?

No. Check.

Xander swivels his neck, cracks a few bones. Takes a breath and bringing the grenade launcher to bear, there's a pang or twinge of something that might have once been his conscience, which he ruthlessly forces back into neutral.

"I didn't start this," and if he says it often enough he might actually get around to believing it.

Too easy. Killing people should be difficult he thinks, but sometimes it's just too fucking easy; and fires.

At this range a 40mm grenade shell will cause nothing less than destruction.

Rolling frantically down towards stern Xander's picked up and smacked down by an invisible crushing hand.

The paddle steamer shudders under the explosion and it's bow area?

Pretty much non-existent; metal, flesh and bone ripped apart and aflame.

And if Xander were listening really hard- which he isn't. Or if he had eyes that could see through walls- which he doesn't.

He'd have seen a certain Executioner pick herself up off the floor, draw a bloody hand away from her cheek and hiss at the sight, "MICAH?"
"Yes?"

"I don't care if he loses a limb. Get that bloody thing off him and do it NOW, before he sinks us all."

The galley smells of citrus, tangerines maybe? Except Xander can't remember seeing or eating any during dinner, go figure.

"You look like shit."

"Yeah," Xander puts a finger into an ear in a vain attempt to get it working again, tries to work up to a smile. "But you should see the other guy."

"Rather not, man. S'why I volunteered to keep this lot company."

He checks Xander out, up and down, nose wrinkling at the sight. "Geez, you're breaking like about a hundred health codes, X-Ray."

"Suppose I'd better get moving then," and picks up his gun.

"Hey," Copter shifts uneasily. "Micah said to stay here."

"He also said the last time Jamil saw Jason he was heading for the wheelhouse." Xander deftly hefts the HK Mk.23 in his hand and states grimly. "I'm going."

No point arguing, "Take care, bro."


"Have you seen the shit they got in that freezer? You gonna hafta pry me out of here man."
If the road to hell is paved by good intentions, then Xander figures he's building himself an eight-lane autobahn.

Complete with wreckage.

Standing at the wheelhouse door, Xander fights the sour taste of bile in his mouth. Losing the battle with his stomach he bolts and heaves over the side.

And when he's finished puking his guts up, wipes his mouth with a sleeve and turns back to his own personally made hell.

The Selkie must have been at the wheel when the windows imploded, no time to even raise an arm for pseudo protection.

A supposition on Xander's behalf to be sure, stands to reason the Selkie had a face, once.

Life ebbs before him in a dark, ever widening pool. Blood creeps without conscience across the floor yet he makes no gesture of avoidance.

Firefight seems to be dying down he notes absently, sporadic bursts of automatic fire keeping pace as the Selkie drifts in and out of consciousness.

"Cooke? ’at you?"

Parody of a sideshow clown with all paint stripped away. Mouth open, head moving back and forth, sightless eyes tracking....tracking him!

Last man standing is the winner. Those are the rules.

"No. Not Cooke."
Glass crunches underfoot as he checks the others. Picks up a dart to examine, his jaw hardens at the traces of silver. Jason's still breathing, short sharp gasps; forearm's ripped to pieces in a vain attempt to literally claw the poison out.

Xander weighs the dart in his hand, gaze flicking back and forth between Jason and the Selkie, makes up his mind.

"Hey."

The Selkie startles at that ominous trigger 'click' of the gun pressed against his temple.

"Two things:- a name. And what was in the darts. Talk."

Owen has no thought of keeping secrets. Father Patrick always said a man should go with his conscience clear. After he finishes there's silence followed by a sigh.

"I don't know much about Selkie, will you heal?"

Daft fool.

Owen's not a lycanthrope; even a trip into the big blue won't save him this time.

Fades in and out, little sleeps. Hears that voice yell at someone to go fetch the Ulfric and Blake.

Not as calm as he wants Owen to believe, the owner of that voice.

With a trip-hammer heartbeat, pounding away like a thoroughbred over the last ten furlongs at Ascot.

Doesn't matter. Owen won't be placing any bets soon.
For this voice knows what must be done.

"I can help. If you want."

Owen smiles.

Best thing about the Mississippi?

Tributaries leading to nowhere in particular.

Sitting low in the water the paddle steamer lilt to starboard; lights off. Pockmarked with bullet holes and her decks littered with debris and blood; nothing left of the fire except old smoke and an overpowering charred smell.

They tied her to a jetty, old and disused with most of its planks missing. Disembarking was an exercise in hopscotch and prayer.

Up on the bank, Anita is queen bee, hustling from group to group, ordering Merle and Jamil to the township glittering in the distance.

Xander stays on the creaking wood, just him and a hoard of mosquitos for company.

"Are you going to stay here all night?"

Anita moves from plank to plank without hesitation, a picture of impatience and crackling energy. Comes to a halt in front of him with eyes clear and challenging, "Well?"

He peers over her shoulder, frowning when a head count reveals he's missed something. It's stupid, but he starts searching the night sky.
"GQ duo flown the coop?"

"Yes."

"Handy trick that," back braced against a wooden pylon, Xander drags on a cigarette he's scrounged off Marcel.

"You'd have noticed sooner if you were paying attention. Must you do that?"

Smoking is a habit Anita abhors. Everyone knows it.

Executioner Bug spray courtesy of nicotine.

Except, the breeze has changed direction so he's standing downwind and now he's convinced.

This fucking river hates him.

That's cool.

He can hate right back without faking.

Another drag with eyes deliberately closed; blood and grime embedded under fingernails he doesn't need to see. There's a Lady MacBeth moment pending if he can get some friggin' alone time here.

"How long till the cops arrive?"

"I don't know. Soon I hope; Jason needs to get to a hospital. Question is what are we going to tell them?"

Nothing, if he had his way, funny how he always sides with monsters on this one. Xander straightens with a shrug, "It's your call."
"Is it?"

Spat out with enough venom to pierce his fog of self-pity; and focus.

On Bobby Lee standing on the embankment watching with a lazy, unblinking readiness. On Sylvie hovering close to an oblivious Copter, and finally, Xander returns to Anita.

"Night suits you," he notes absently, much to her surprise.

He isn't lying; night highlights her exotic beauty of pale skin and dark eyes to perfection.

And she will kill him in that space between breaths if she thinks he's double-crossed her.

"NO. I didn't set you up. Not for this," he flicks the cigarette into water and windmills an arm at the riverboat.

"You were expecting something," her lip curls. "Perhaps we aren't the only ones who were double-crossed tonight."

"I was hoping for another attack, alright! A demon, something, anything to convince you and Jean-Claude that I was on the up and up."

Her features sharpen, "We were bait?!"

"Yes. No," Xander winces. "I thought... I figured that who or what sent the Mohra demon wouldn't waste an opportunity like this-all of us together. I thought I'd be able to give you definite proof if they tried something but..."

"Some one else hit us first?"

"Yes!!"
"Who?"

Xander's excitement fades, "I don't know. The Selkie wasn't able to tell me."


"Maybe. 'Cept Angelus isn't this stupid and he usually prefers to play some games first."

Their heads turn skyward at the distant 'whup, whup' sounds of a helicopter approaching.

Xander thinks fast, "Tell the police who I am."

Anita blinks, "What happened to that anonymity you craved?"

He tracks the helicopter's spotlight, sweeping over the river, close and drawing closer by the minute. "Humans First have a standing contract out on the Ori of Life," he explains in a rush. "How are we to know it wasn't them?"

"How can they have contract out of you when even Jean-Claude didn't know who you were?"

Xander shrugs, "It's to come into effect as soon as proof of another Ori of Life is revealed."

"But you're human," she says, only to blanch at the implications. "A human who they think has betrayed his own kind. Damn."

"All the mercenaries were human," Xander yells over rotor blade noise. "We can say the Selkie was one of ours, they'll never know. Agreed?"

"Are you asking me to lie to the police?"
"It's not a lie," not technically anyways. "We don't KNOW for certain it wasn't Humans First," finite lines between truth and fiction are something he crossed long ago.

"I have a condition."

"Don't they have prescriptions for that now?"

Her lips curve, the first genuine smile she's ever directed at him and it's enough. Enough to make him careless, loosen up and forget how ruthless she can be.

"Okay, what?"

"You tell me about the Hellmouth, Xander. Tell me about your home."

White light as the spotlight hits, blinding and all consuming.

He can't see her, which goes hand in hand with this sensation of being removed from reality.

And he thinks it all comes down to two things.

Choice, except when you have none. And trust, that can't be built like a window frame, with straight lines and measuring tape.

"Agreed."

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