Cause and Effect

by elizashaw

Summary

In the aftermath of his encounter with a psychotic slayer, Spike gets a sickbed visit from Xander. Both men get pulled more deeply into the world of slayers in the wake of Willow's spell to awaken slayers around the world, and a visit to an ailing vampire opens new possibilities amid the unforseen effects.
The drone of the jet engines worsened Xander's headache, and he grimaced as he looked at his watch and calculated that three hours remained before arriving in Los Angeles. He considered flagging down a flight attendant and asking for several of those little bottles of booze, a handful of any of them to knock him out so he could avoid both the pain and the thoughts. He sighed. Another fight against the Harris genes that told him to seek oblivion when the going got tough, or even when the going got just a bit uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat and adjusted the pillow behind his head, not that he expected to be able to sleep. The descriptions that Andrew had given of Spike's mutilation at the hands of an emotionally unstable slayer kept playing through his mind. Thankfully, the images themselves were distorted at best. He couldn't imagine Spike without those strong, skilled hands attached to his muscled arms.

Xander yanked the airline headset out of the seat pocket in front of him and jammed the prongs into the armrest, punching buttons to get music, any music, playing at a level that could drown out his thoughts. He wasn't supposed to be going to L.A. He was scheduled to fly to Chicago, but after getting Andrew's call, he had changed the tickets at Heathrow and phoned Council Headquarters to say he was taking some time off. Fortunately, he had only had to talk to Thomasina, the receptionist, and not to Willow or Giles. He expected that he had several messages from either one or both of them on his cell phone already. But he hadn't taken any time off in the months since they started the work of rebuilding the Council and tracking down the newly activated slayers, and he knew that they wouldn't object to the time. It was the reason behind his decision to abandon his assignments that they would question. Andrew had been told not to call him with the news of Spike's return and current mutilated state, and this was one time that Xander had reason to bless rather than curse the younger man's fawning devotion. Not even witchy Willow had been able to keep Andrew from surreptitiously making the call that had Xander suddenly headed for Los Angeles.

He glanced at his watch again. Two hours fifty minutes. Maybe he would call for that drink after all.

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The nurse peeked in on her single patient for the third time that night. The wounded vampire hadn't appeared to have moved in all the hours she had been on shift. He sat up in the bed, staring at his reattached arms with a blank expression. She doubted his mind reflected that same blankness, however. When she had first popped in on him at the start of the evening to check his progress, he had shrunk back from her, and she caught the look of desolation in those blue eyes before he turned away and closed them. He hadn't spoken a word, even when she carefully examined each arm and declared them healing nicely. She turned from the door, wondering again why the CEO of Wolfram and Hart had insisted that a nurse be devoted full time to this single patient who seemed neither to need nor want such attention.

Inside the room, Spike listened to the woman come and go from the doorway. He knew that Angel had commanded 'round the clock attention for him, and he tried to appreciate the concern that the order communicated, but he couldn't help resenting the constant attention when what he wanted more than anything was to disappear into the misery and guilt that threatened to overwhelm him. Not since first receiving his soul had he felt the pain of his victims so keenly, and somehow it felt only right that he suffer rather than become the object of such solicitous care. As the hours passed and he felt his wounds heal, he considered what he would do after the demon docs of Wolfram and Hart declared him fit to leave. He didn't fit in with Angel's legal empire, and he couldn't go back to the Sunnydale Scoobies who no longer existed—at least not in any form that would welcome him back. He had done his bit as a team player saving the world, and he had tried his hand at being the lone
champion. Neither won him any peace.

He stared at the red lines encircling each forearm and tried not to think about what was left for him to become.
Chapter 2

Despite the Council's adamant disapproval of the Wolfram and Hart and all it stood for, Xander couldn't help but be impressed with the facility as he walked in. The massive structure clearly used state of the art construction materials and planning, and the open lobby managed to convey power and wealth without being overly intimidating.

"Xander? Oh my god, Xander!"

"Oof." Xander nearly had the wind knocked out of him as Harmony launched herself over her desk and hugged him.

"How are you?! I haven't seen you since…" Her brow wrinkled as she attempted to recall.

"Since pummeling me in Buffy's foyer?" He joked while carefully stepping away from the vacuous vampire.

"I so could have kicked your ass that night," she flipped her hair haughtily. "And hey! What's up with the pirate look?"

"Long story. Big evil." He shrugged. Discussing Caleb and the First was not a conversation he wanted to get dragged into. Fortunately Harmony's attention span worked in his favor.

"Are you here to see Angel? He's in a meeting right now with a couple of guys from contracts, but I'm sure he won't be that long." Her voice sunk to a conspiring whisper. "He only called them in to fire them over some whole thing about agreements between warlocks and Bogoni demons or something."

"Right," Xander nodded as if he had any idea what she was talking about. "Actually I'm not so much here to see Deadboy. In fact, not at all. I'm looking for Spike."

"Oh my poor blondie bear is still in the infirmary." Xander cringed at the volume of her voice and followed her glance to the security camera as she punched the "Door Open" button.

"He's not supposed to have any visitors." Harmony pouted.

"C'mon, you're evil, just sneak me in. I won't tell a soul you showed me the way," he assured her as her glance slid toward the office behind them.

"The cafeteria's just this way," she spoke loudly as she steered Xander toward the elevator. "I'll show you." She man-handled Xander into the elevator and after the doors closed, hissed in his ear.

"Get off at B7 and go right. My little boo-boo's room is the first door on the left past the nurses station."

Xander nodded.

"Oops, forgot to have someone cover my phones. You just get off at B2 and go left. Can't miss it." Xander cringed at the volume of her voice and followed her glance to the security camera as she punched the "Door Open" button. She flounced out of the elevator without a backward glance.

Xander couldn't help but grin to himself as he wondered how long it would take security to read
through Harmony's act. If Spike really was forbidden visitors, he doubted that little subterfuge would be enough to get him past whatever burly guards would be waiting for him. He pressed B7 and hoped for the best.

The doors opened on an empty hospital-like corridor. He suppressed a shudder. God, he hated hospitals, and his life just seemed to keep bringing him back to their antiseptic halls. He glanced around. No guards. Xander began to suspect that perhaps the no-visitors order might apply only to a certain histrionic blonde vamp. He flexed his fingers, trying to relieve the nervous tension that escalated now that he was so close. Throughout his journey, he had half-expected to find that this was all a dream. Spike wasn't really back, and he was asleep on his way to Chicago to check up on the slayer household that had been set up there.

"Can I help you?" The quiet voice spoke from behind the counter of the nurses' station.

"Just here visiting a friend," Xander put on his best non-threatening demeanor. He moved toward the doorway that Harmony had indicated.

"He's resting, but he might be glad of the company." The nurse smiled indulgently. "He hasn't had many visitors."

"Thanks." Xander didn't want to prolong the conversation. It didn't necessarily surprise him that Spike didn't have visitors, but he was confused by the silence coming from the room. The hyperactive vampire he had known would hardly take to being bedridden without complaint—loud and constant complaint. Xander's concern suddenly increased a hundred-fold. Perhaps Spike had been hurt worse than Andrew indicated.

He slowly opened the door, taking in the silent figure on the bed. He felt his heart break at the blank look on Spike's face. He began to wonder if coming here was the right decision after all. That expression reminded him of times he had come upon the vampire unexpectedly in the days following his move from the school basement to Xander's apartment. He quietly closed the door behind him and moved to the seat next to the bed.

"Hey, Spike." Xander kept his voice low.

The blank look faded into a soft confusion as the vampire turned to take in his visitor. Dull eyes traveled over the dark hair, the drawn face with the black eye patch, and the worn denim shirt before settling back on the tender concern shining from the single brown eye.

"Xander?"

"Yeah, man. How're you feeling?"

Spike turned away. Of all the visitors to show up, the Slayer's donut boy was the last person he wanted to see. He had disbelieved his senses when he heard and smelled the man's approach. Now there was no denying his presence. He had heard what happened with Andrew and the Watcher's Council goon squad after they found him and bundled him off to mojo surgery, and he doubted that anything good could come of Xander's appearance at his bedside. Andrew might have been a little overly enthusiastic at his return, but he doubted Xander would be. But he found he didn't have the strength to put on a snarky front and tell the boy to piss off.

"Spike?" A cautious hand reached out to stroke the vampire's cheek. Xander would have sworn he could feel the pain and misery radiating off the body underneath the thin sheets. He felt a shudder run through the cool skin at his touch, but Spike didn't pull away.
"Why are you here?"

Xander removed his fingers at the wary sadness in his tone. He should have known the question he most didn't want to answer would be the first question that Spike would ask. Not when he didn't have all the answers himself. He sighed.

"Andrew called me."

Silence.

"He said you were back, and he told me about your help hunting down Dana."

A snort greeted that comment.

"Spike, you did a good thing in helping Andrew find her." Xander's tone was insistent. He knew first-hand how dangerous tracking down and confronting these powerful girls could be. "He couldn't have brought her back by himself, and we both know how much we can trust Deadboy these days."

"Angel's alright."

"Wow. Never thought I'd live to hear you defend the broodmeister. Must be time for another apocalypse."

Shit. Xander berated his mouth's tendency to move faster than his brain as he saw Spike curl in on himself further. Way to go, Harris. Mention apocalypse to a guy who died in one. At the same time, he could feel familiar anger rising as a little voice whispered that Spike may have died, but he got to come back. He clamped down on the anger that had been building since he heard from Andrew. So life was unfair, that was hardly news.

Spike remained silent. He sensed the turmoil in the man sitting next to him. He half hoped that Xander would strike out, give him the pain that he deserved. But what he expected was that Xander would simply leave, go back to England and report in on Spike's condition or whatever else had brought him on this little mission.

The door opened, and the nurse who had greeted Xander entered the room briskly, carrying a tray with a decanter of blood and a cup.

"Time for dinner."

Xander scrambled out of the way, grateful for the interruption.

"Is there a vending machine or something around here? I've kinda been on a plane for the last ten hours, and you know what they say about airplane food. Of course they say the same thing about hospital food, but I'm sure that what you've got there is good, I mean, for being blood and all."

The nurse chuckled as she slid the bedside table with the tray within Spike's reach.

"Out the door and down the hall. But a word of warning—don't feed the machine any dollar bills. It eats them without giving you anything in return."

"Back in a few, Spike. Uh, enjoy your dinner." Xander back-pedaled out of the room. Spike didn't move, and the nurse sighed as she prepared to coax and threaten her patient to eat once more.

Down the hall, Xander rested his head against the cool front of the machine. Seeing Spike so defeated was not what he expected when he walked through the doors of Wolfram and Hart. It left
him confused. When Andrew first called, Xander had reacted with pure anger at the injustice that would bring a century old vampire back into the world and leave the slayers and Anya dead. No amount of convincing himself that Anya was in heaven, that bringing her back would be tantamount to the blasphemy of dragging Buffy back into the world, could stop the pain and anger. But after hearing Andrew's account of events in LA, no doubt embellished in that special Andrew way, he had moved beyond anger to curiosity and an inexplicable need to see the resurrected vampire. Reading between the lines of Andrew's hero-worship—and so not feeling jealousy at the fact that Spike now appeared to be the focus of admiration that had once been reserved for him—Xander could sense the isolation that the vampire endured amid Angel's team. It was an isolation he recognized in his own current working arrangement with the new Council, and that recognition pulled him to LA.

Xander sighed and rummaged in the pocket of his jeans for spare change. He wasn't particularly hungry, but he had needed the space to get a handle on his feelings. Shoving coins in the machine, he selected a bottle of water. He glanced at the candy machine and debated whether chocolate would help. All milk chocolate. Not that he didn't enjoy the lighter chocolate, but emotional turmoil on this scale called for the comfort only dark, bittersweet chocolate could give. He gulped down the water and leaned against the wall. He could leave now, and he knew Spike wouldn't hold it against him. That much was clear from the vampire's demeanor. He didn't expect anyone to visit, much less stay. That factor alone made the decision easier. He chucked the empty water bottle into a garbage can and headed back down the hall to Spike's room.

The nurse came out bearing the tray with an empty decanter in her hands and a smug smile on her face. She nodded at Xander as he passed by.

Spike sat up in the bed, pouting. Xander couldn't help but grin at the blood that dripped down his hospital gown.

"I take it dinner went well?"


"At least she wiped your face."

"Sod off." But the curse held more amusement than anger.

"Feeling better?" Xander took his seat next to the bed once more.

Spike looked at him, shrugged.

"Jeez, Spike, you sure how to make conversation difficult. That hasn't changed."

"Didn't know we were having a conversation."

"Apparently we aren't."

They stared at each other.

"I'm not sure why I'm here. I…Andrew called me. Seems Giles and Willow told him not to. But sometimes there's no shutting him up."

"Great help if he gets caught by some nasty." Spike smirked.

"Nah, we keep a pretty tight leash on him. Not much different from his guestage days." Xander grinned back. "Anyway, when he called, I called in some vacation time, got on a plane, came here."
"Uh huh. Doesn't answer the why part." Spike pinned him with a gaze that sought past the glib explanation.

"Do you want me to go?" Xander challenged.

Spike closed his eyes against the question. He knew that he didn't want the boy to leave, but he couldn't think of any reason that he should stay. Truth was that Spike was tired of being alone. His time in the hospital only highlighted the isolation he felt at Wolfram and Hart, an isolation that he had tried to convince himself was rooted in his ghostly state. But suddenly returning to the land of the three-dimensional hadn't alleviated that loneliness much. Angel fought with him, Harmony tried to pull him into janitor's closets for a quickie, and the others were too busy to pay much attention to him.

Xander watched the twitch of muscles across Spike's sharp features. He wanted to snatch back the question for fear of the vampire's answer. The connection he felt when he heard that Spike was alive sparked brighter with each word the vampire spoke to him. He berated himself as a total idiot for letting himself begin to care after all the effort to hold himself aloof and apart from the people who made up his strange world.

"No."

"Huh?"

Spike opened his eyes, letting the despair shine through.

"I don't want you to go."

"Okay then." Xander patted his arm well above the reddened skin. They shared a small grin.
The crash of the IV stand jolted Xander from his uneasy doze. *What the hell?* He instinctively reached out to grab the flailing vampire, ducking a punch that he was afraid would hurt Spike's hands more than his face. Grabbing the pale arms well above the reconnection wounds, he pressed his full weight down and struggled to hold the dreaming vampire still.

"Spike, c'mon buddy, it's okay. Wake up now." Xander struggled to speak soothingly, but the jerking body beneath him left him gasping more than whispering. It was like riding a bucking bronco, or maybe a mechanical bull, not that Xander had ever done either. He shook the babble away and decided that gentle was getting him nowhere and in fact might actually get him thrown across the room and earn him yet another concussion.

"Spike! Wake the fuck up you undead moron!"

"Get off!" Spike snarled into game-face and lunged forward to smash his face into Xander's.

"Ow!" Xander lost his grip as one hand instinctively flew to the blood that flowed into his only eye.

The scent of blood seemed to bring Spike back to himself, and suddenly he lay as still as the corpse he was. Xander wiped the blood from his eye and glared down.

"I know you're not exactly a morning person, but was that really necessary?"

"Harris?"

Xander released Spike's other arm and slowly climbed off the bed. He looked around for something to press against the wound. So much for the avoid-the-concussion theory, he groused internally. He grabbed a towel from the sink and pressed it to his eyebrow before he turned to survey the still figure in the bed.

"So, nightmares much?"

Spike closed his eyes and turned away. Xander studied him for a long moment. Then, checking briefly to make sure the bleeding had stopped, he put down the towel and moved around to the side of the bed to right the IV stand. Fortunately the bag of whatever liquid mojo stuff the docs were pumping into the healing vampire hadn't burst. He turned the knob on the drip to stop the slowly leaking fluid that slicked the floor from the needle that had been torn from Spike's arm.

"I'm gonna get the nurse. Get you hooked back up, okay?" No response registered on the still face. "Back in just a minute."

Xander walked quickly to the nurses' station, but no one was in evidence.

"Hello?" He wandered down the hall toward the vending machines, hoping to find someone, but the corridor was eerily silent. With no windows and an abundance of fluorescent lighting, Xander had no idea what time it was, but this was a hospital, right? Okay, so an evil underground lawyer hospital, but, still, somebody should be around.

His footsteps echoed against the white walls, and his Hellmouth-bred paranoia began to kick in. Something wasn't right. Fear pricked at the back of his neck, and he suddenly decided that the IV could wait. He needed to get back to Spike, although he wasn't sure if the intensity of that need came from wanting to protect or be protected.
"Come to finish off the job, have you, luv?"

Xander's pace picked up from a quick walk to an all out run as he heard the cocky voice float down the hall. He burst through the door, adrenaline pumping.

Spike crouched in the corner of the room, apparently talking to the air in front of him.

"Set me up, didn't you? Send me off to rescue a barmy slayer? Let her take revenge?"

"Spike," Xander cautiously moved toward the hunched figure.

The vampire gave an eerie laugh, and Xander felt himself suddenly back in the school basement. Please God, not the First, not here, not now, not again.

"Spike can you hear me?" Xander knelt in front of him, trying to make eye-contact, but not reaching out to touch.

"Serves me right, getting offed by a slayer. Took out two," blue eyes filled with tears, "killed 'em. Got off on it, too. My turn now."

"Spike, there's no one here. C'mon buddy, just you and me, and we need to get you back into bed."

"My turn. S'okay. I'm ready. You can have me." His hoarse voice dropped to a whisper. "No one else wants me." He sat up and flopped useless hands against his chest as though to move the flimsy gown away from his heart.

Xander bit back a curse, deciding that getting Spike back from whatever crazy place he was in was more important than worrying about another smack to the head. He reached out and gently held onto both shoulders, giving the vampire a small shake.

"C'mon man, let's leave the invisible people alone and stay in the real world, 'k?"

Spike looked right at him, and Xander breathed a sigh of relief.

"Kill me?"

The plea frightened Xander, and suddenly his anger flared back to life. The bastard got to live again, and now he wanted to be staked? Not fucking likely. Not if Xander had anything to say about it.

He shoved the vampire back against the wall, heedless of the wounded arms. He stood and paced away, then came back to tower over the compact figure.

"Fuck you, Spike." He glared down, but the vampire wouldn't meet his gaze. Again the misery seemed to swell around him, and for a moment he thought he heard laughter. He spun around looking for the source, but they were alone in the room. He shuddered. Memories of the First playing with them flooded his mind, and he knew that this was more than depression or loneliness that ate away at the wounded vampire before him. His anger receded somewhat, and he set his jaw. Gently he scooped up the still figure, cringing at his slightness before depositing him back in the bed. Spike immediately curled up on his side, facing away from the door. Shivering overtook his frame, and Xander couldn't help but have compassion, seeing this powerful creature reduced to such a lost state. He pulled the blankets up and tucked them around the thin shoulders, trying not to react when Spike flinched away.

Wanker. Spike berated himself for flinching. He struggled to control the shivering, but his body didn't respond to his commands. Out of control. Again. Sodding plaything for whatever the hell that
dread-locked war-painted bitch was. Fear gripped his unbeating heart. She sent the slayer after him, and it had to be the First—back again and pissed off that Spike had burned out his army. Only now he had the slayers somehow. It had to be, and you deserve it, his mind whispered traitorously.

_Couldn't be evil, didn't belong to the heroes. An enemy of everyone._ There was no place for him. He belonged trapped in that bloody amulet.

A warm hand stroked his back. To his horror, tears of misery began to slide down his cheeks, and he bit back sobs that threatened to escape.

Xander felt the shivers change to hitching shudders. Spike was crying? He stilled his hand briefly, then made up his mind. He lowered himself to the bed, leaning back against the headboard, and gathered the unresisting vampire into his lap.

Spike gave up the fight and let the tears come silent and harsh as he buried his head against Xander's warm chest. It no longer mattered that he was the Big Bad, that this was the Slayer's donut boy who hated him for existing. All that mattered was the strong arms holding him together and the warm breath that murmured comfort into his hair.

After a final shuddering sob, Spike lay still. Exhaustion saved him from the impending awkwardness of his position, and he slid into sleep.

Xander felt the vampire go slack against him and knew that Spike finally slept. He shifted slightly to relieve a cramping leg, but he didn't want to give up his hold on the smaller man just yet. For the first time in a long time, he felt relevant, needed. Useful in more than a settling 'who got what room' way that characterized most of his evaluations of slayer groups. Despite Giles and Willow's assurances that his gift for reading people played a vital role in helping the homes in the various countries run smoothly, he doubted it was much more than a way to keep him occupied and feeling useful in a world of super-girls and watchers and witches.

He continued to run a hand lightly up and down Spike's back, offering comfort even in sleep. Now that Spike was conked out, Xander found himself thinking back over the last hour. One, Spike had nightmares, apparently screaming-rip-out-your-guts nightmares. Two, no nurse, no nurse or doctor anywhere, and that couldn't be right, but he couldn't do much more than note that at the moment. Three, Spike was talking to invisible people again. Xander's empty eye-socket pinched, and he stomped down on the fear that the whole last year and a half had been for naught. _Right moving on._ Four. Four, Spike was scared, miserable and alone, and Xander was a comfortador. Miserable and alone he understood all too well. God knew what would happen when Spike woke up, and Xander wasn't anticipating gratitude and smoochies. Not that he wanted vampire smoochies, he told himself firmly. Not thinking about smoochies.

He sighed and rubbed a hand across his stubbled face. He never felt more alive, more connected, than when he could absorb the pain of another, feel it, hold it with them, for them. It was that capacity that allowed him to stop Willow up on Kingman's Bluff. Unfortunately that connection could have unpleasant affects on his libido. Being that close to someone through misery wasn't entirely different from being intimate in other ways, and he knew that his casual observation of Spike's muscular compactness hadn't been purely innocent. But he knew Spike had had no use for him at that time, as lost as he was in his obsession for Buffy, and anyway, Xander had Anya. At least he had had her then. Now was an entirely different story, and he was afraid it was about to become a messy one.
Chapter 4

This time a rough shaking of his shoulder woke Xander.

"Want to tell me exactly what you're doing?"

Xander shook off the cool hand and shifted out of the bed.

"Rough night." His short response only darkened the look on Angel's face.

Angel shoved him against the wall, and Xander saw the flicker of amber in dark eyes. "What are you doing here, and why are you Spike's bed?"

Xander glared back. "I didn't know it was any of your business who was in Spike's bed." The usual unspecified anger and dislike for Angel surged to the surface at the first touch. Any chance that he was going to just bow to Angel's demands had flown out the window with the vampire's manhandling.

"Oh dear."

The low voice garnered the attention of the struggling men. A figure Xander hadn't noticed in all the violent awakening was leaning over the bed, shining a small penlight into Spike's eyes. Xander made a move to get closer, but Angel slammed him into the wall again.

"What's wrong with him?" Angel growled out.

The doctor hurried around the bed to check the IV, and finding it unhooked from Spike's arm, he looked up sharply.

"How long has this been out?"

"Um, most of the night?" Xander offered, confused.

"Idiot boy," Angel shook him once more before shoving him into a chair and turning his back to talk to the doctor.

"Will he be alright?"

"He has gone into a coma," the doctor sighed. "We had hoped to avoid this, but with an injury this bad, it is not unusual. The IV was to aid in the healing and prevent this."

"But he'll be alright?" Xander's question echoed Angel's.

"No thanks to you," Angel's voice was low and deadly.

"Hey, not the guy who pulled it out here! And if your state of the art hospital here," Xander sneered, "had a single fucking nurse or doctor on duty, maybe somebody could have put it back in!"

"No one was here?" Angel's concerned look settled Xander down a bit.

"I looked," Xander shrugged. "No dice. Didn't want to wander too far, leave him alone too long." His hooded gaze slipped over to consider the small form on the bed as he remembered why he didn't want to leave Spike.
Angel stalked out of the room.

"He's scheduled to have twenty-four hour care." The doctor became nervous. "This never should have happened. Mr. Angel is not going to be pleased."

Xander rolled his eyes. Another lackey that Angel clearly had under his thumb.

"There's a pile of dust on the floor of the nurses' station."

Angel's return caused Xander to jump. *Damn undead sneaky guys. Wait. Dust?!!*

"The nurse was a vampire?" He couldn't help the incredulous tone.

"I want two nurses on duty at all times," Angel snapped the order at the doctor. "And I'm holding you responsible for making that happen." The doctor nodded and hurried out of the room, pulling a cell phone out of his coat pocket and dialing as he went. Angel pulled out his phone and hit a button. "Harmony, get security down to the medical floor. Now." He flipped the phone shut.

"Let's try this again," he turned to Xander, and flashbacks of Angelus in another hospital many years ago screened in Xander's mind. "What happened last night?"

Xander rubbed his face and let out a sigh.

"Spike had a nightmare. He pulled out the IV. I woke him up. He went back to sleep."

"And you crawled into bed with him?"

"More comfortable than this chair." He tapped his hand against the metal arm.

"You didn't hear anything?"

"Not until the IV stand went crashing," Xander admitted, pushing away the familiar sense of failure that taunted him.

Angel looked at him skeptically, but accepted the less than forthcoming answer. The ding of the elevator saved Xander from further questioning as Angel moved into the hallway with an impressive display of vampiric speed.

Alone with Spike once more, Xander moved to the side of the bed and stroked the cool cheek. *Spike is in a coma. Sure it's a healing vampire coma, but shit. That wasn't supposed to happen, and he had let it. The doctor had reinserted the IV, and Xander hoped that the damage would soon be reversed. Fuck. Like things hadn't been confusing enough. Now instead of providing comfort, he realized that his refusal to leave Spike's side had instead threatened his life.*

"I'll do better," he vowed quietly. "I won't let you down again." Silently, he continued to brush a gentle hand over the soft hair, willing strength into the still figure.

Several minutes later, Angel returned with two people following him. The large man stood taller and wider than the vampire while the slight woman seemed to glide along behind him.

"This is Xander." Angel pointed. "He's allowed to be here. Wesley, Fred, Gunn, Lorne, and me. These are the only other people who get into this room." The pair nodded and moved to stand outside the door.

"You think this is deliberate, don't you." Xander spoke quietly. "That someone's after Spike."
"We're just taking precautions. It could very well be that someone had a gripe against Julia. It's not entirely unusual for vampire employees to turn up dust." Angel moved to stand on the other side of the bed.

"But you think someone's after Spike."

Angel stared down at his comatose grand-childe. His chest tightened, and he thought involuntarily of the comatose Cordelia in the human wing of the medical floor.

"What happened with Dana?"

"What?" Angel shook himself out of his pending brood.

"Andrew couldn't tell me much about what happened between Spike and Dana. And Spike didn't say much either. But that's what got him in here, and then there's the whole dusted vamp thing. Kinda a slayer-type clue."

"I don't know it all," Angel admitted. "She saw him as someone who tortured her, but she also saw what he did to the two slayers he killed."

"She's a psychic psychotic?"

"Somehow I doubt it."

"So how did she…?"

"I'll get Wes on it." Angel turned to leave. "Will you…will you stay with him?"

Xander gave a lop-sided smile. "Not much of anywhere else to go. Came straight here from the airport."

Angel looked at him, nodded. "I'll have them bring another bed in." He left.

"Some food would be nice, too." Xander called after the retreating back. Shaking his head over the nearly civil conversation that they had managed, he returned to his post beside Spike's bed.

Within ten minutes another bed had been rolled in, and another nurse showed up to check Spike's injuries, all of his injuries, which involved nakedness. Not wanting to invade the vampire's privacy—or to feed his own temptations—he opted to take that time to slip into the shower, using the coldest water he could stand. No jerking off in the vampire's room. 'Cause wouldn't that lead to some fun conversations. Chilled but clean, he enjoyed trading the travel clothes that he had spent the night in for clean jeans and a t-shirt. When he got out of the small bathroom, the nurse had gone, but a tray of food sat next to the empty bed.

Xander tucked in to the steak, mentally thanking Angel for sending him not only something to eat, but something that clearly exceeded any hospital standards he had had the pleasure of in the past.

"Anyone'd think you're still a growing boy."

The weak voice caused Xander to drop his fork and his jaw.

"Don't need to see the evidence, mate." Spike chuckled low. Xander snapped his mouth shut, swallowed quickly and moved over to the vampire's bed.

"How ya feeling?"
"Peachy." Spike closed his eyes, clearly already weary.

Xander reached out to stroke the tousled head, but pulled back. He wasn't sure how the gesture would be received in the light of day. He fisted his hands together in his lap instead.

"Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?" Spike opened his eyes to meet a sorrowful brown one.

"I'm really sorry."

Spike's brow furrowed in confusion. "For what?"

Xander took a deep breath.

"It's my fault you ended up, you know, all coma-like. I tried to find a doctor or a nurse or somebody, but the place was deserted, and not in the happy, everyone's gone home for the night kinda way. And I'm not much for the needles myself, even though I've been in the hospital enough to earn a frequent flyer kidney transplant or something." He looked up when he heard Spike choking.

Suppressed laughter quickly became a cough, and Xander rolled his eye as he offered a glass of water from the table beside the bed. Spike sipped and then lay back.

"S'not your fault. Didn't pull the bloody thing out, did you?"

"Do you," Xander paused, "do you remember what happened?"

Spike visibly shuddered and turned away.

"Never mind, you just woke up and all. You should get some rest. I'll just, uh, be over there."

Xander got up.

"Xan."

"Yeah." Xander didn't turn around, half-afraid to see the look that went with that sad voice.

"I remember."

At that Xander moved back to the side of the bed and sat down.

"Some nightmare, eh?"

"Yeah."

Silence was marked only by the sound of squeaking footsteps from the hall outside.

"It was more than that, though. Wasn't it." Xander spoke quietly.

Spike shrugged, then grimaced as the movement jostled his healing arms.

"Jeez, Spike, give me something to work with here." Xander ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation.

"What? Gonna save poor Spike from the big nasty dreams?"

"You were talking to invisible people or to one invisible person at least. And that's so a part of my life I don't want to revisit. You…you asked me to kill you." Xander looked at his hands, hands that
at one time would have gladly pressed a stake through the vamp's heart. "That's not just a bad dream."

"Why didn't you?"

"What?"

"Kill me," the vampire spoke at barely a whisper.

"Dammit Spike, you saved the world." Xander nearly shouted before bringing his voice under control. "Makes it hard to wanna just stake you. Besides, it's a little bit hard to see you as dangerous with your ass hanging out of a hospital gown."

"My arse does not…" Spike's glare turned into an embarrassed grin as Xander smirked knowingly at him. "Git."

"So now we know why I didn't stake you. Gonna tell me why you want me to?"

"Just crazy talk."

"Nuh uh. We're not gonna just brush this off. Something was here last night. Even plain old human me could tell that much, and if I'm gonna be bunking here, then I'd like to know what invisible visitors might pop in."

"You're staying?" Spike grasped onto the words.

"Way to focus on the most important part of all that, but yes," Xander gestured to the other bed, "Angel set me up with a bed and everything."

"You should go. S'not safe here."

"Well, duh. Empire of evil lawyers. I knew that when I walked in the door."

"No, you stupid wanker, it's not safe here, with me."

"Let's see. Do you want to bite me?"

"No!" Spike looked appalled at the suggestion.

"Then so far, it looks like the only danger here is falling under your evil spell and staking you." He waggled his eyebrows, then blushed furiously as he considered what he just said.

"Thought about staking me, have you?" Spike raised an eyebrow. The wave of pheromones startled him, and he filed that bit of information away to consider another time.

"With a piece of wood, I mean, er a wooden stake." Xander's flush deepened.

"Sorry, pet. Just having a bit of fun." Spike took pity as the arousal he sensed was overpowered by embarrassment.

"And now it's my turn to change the subject. Why won't you tell me what happened last night?"

"'Cause it's not like I like being crazy again, alright? Spent the last year being the puppet for some ghosty evil. Not really up for a round of here we go again." Spike fumed.

"Then tell me about it and let's get with the research, make for some evil ass-kicking." Xander
offered reasonably.

"You're not gonna let up on this, are you." The vampire nearly growled at him.

"Nope." Xander answered cheerfully. Angry Spike meant that he was here, not despairing, and that meant that maybe they could get to discovering what was going on.

"Fine."

Silence stretched.

Xander sighed, "You're afraid it's The First again, aren't you?"

The First. The name lingered in the air between them, enveloping them with memories, wounds, friends lost.

"Never should have come out of that bloody amulet." Spike grumbled.

Xander ignored the comment. "We don't know that's what it is."

"Crazy dreams, talking to invisible beasties? Sounds bloody familiar." Spike shuddered. "In the dreams—and yeah, they've been going on for a while now—in the dreams, there's this black bint, all dreadlocks and crazy war paint, wearing bandages or some such thing."

A hitch in Xander's breath caused the vampire to look up sharply.

"What"

"Nothing, go on."

Spike narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but continued. "Crazy warrior-bitch stalks me, tells me I shouldn't be here, that I'm an aberration who should have been destroyed. She says I've killed her and I have to be punished. But I've never seen her before, don't remember killing anyone like her. Then she stakes me. Sometimes in Buffy's basement, sometimes in me crypt. Sometimes she burns me in the sunlight, in the desert somewhere. Always in my dreams. But last night, I saw her here. After you woke me up." Spike stopped abruptly as the terror of being out of control once again flooded him. He fought it off and continued. Best to get this all out and over with. "She was here, showing me the slayers I killed, all the victims that they would have saved if it hadn't been for me." Guilt replaced the fear. "And she's right. Killing a slayer isn't just about killing a single girl. It means killing everybody she coulda saved."

Xander considered the vampire before him. His heart clenched as he heard the truth in Spike's words. Slayers lived to protect, and without that protection, people died. He had seen the guilt that Spike carried for the victims he had killed directly, and he couldn't imagine what it would feel like to add the nameless, numberless guilt on top of that already heavy burden. He reached out to grip the slim shoulder.

"Spike, listen to me. Those things happened, yeah. But what about the fact that you being here now means that people are getting saved. What happens to them when you're not here?"

A slow tear tracked down the vampire's pale cheek.

"Not sure I can do it again, Xan."

"Do what again?"
"Fight it off. Took everything I had last time, even got dusted. Not sure I can do that again." Sorrow colored the words.

"Spike," Xander shook him urgently, "This is not The First. Well, it's a First, just not that First."

Spike squinted at him as he tried to work through the babble.

"It's not the First Evil. It's the First Slayer."
"Right." Spike smirked. "Sure you're not the one hallucinating, mate? First Slayer's long gone."

"Gone but not forgotten, apparently," Xander groused, "and she seems to have a thing for killing people in their dreams."

"You're serious."

"If you'll excuse the pun, deadly serious." Xander stared at the vampire.

"And how exactly do you know that this is her?" Spike asked, half-afraid he could predict the answer.

Xander leaned back in the chair. "Remember the Initiative?" At Spike's shudder, he hurried on. "Okay, dumb question. Remember the night we took Adam down? The whole super-slayer spell mergy-thing?"

Spike nodded. He had heard scraps of the story over the years.

"Well, it seems the First Slayer didn't like us mere mortals getting all cozy with the current Slayer's essence. She showed up in our dreams that night. Have to admit, she had quite the knack for poetic justice. She carved out Giles's brains, sucked Willow's spirit, attacked Buffy." His gaze turned inward as the terror of that night returned.

"And you?" Spike asked the question quietly. He could sense the fear that tugged at the man before him.

Xander looked directly at him. "She ripped out my heart."

"Jesus."

"You know, the funny thing is that that wasn't the worst part. I mean, you'd think having your heart ripped out by a crazy Neanderthal slayer would pretty much be as bad as it gets." Xander found he couldn't sit still as the images bombarded him. He walked over to his bed and straightened the covers, anything to keep his hands busy, or maybe to stop his mouth. This part of the dream he hadn't shared with his friends. They didn't need to know, and he didn't want them drawing conclusions, but the figure on the stairs, yelling at him, pounding down toward him wouldn't be banished.

"Xan? Xander! Hey, Harris!"

Spike's voice broke apart the images. Xander's attention snapped back to see worried blue eyes staring at him.

"Sorry. Guess I got distracted. You know, it was one of those dreams that kinda sticks with you. Hey, do you think if I started a dream journal and wrote it all out, it would go away?" Xander could feel the babble pouring out, but he couldn't stop. Somehow his mouth had led him to a conversation that he so did not want to be having. At the same time, he recognized that releasing the horror of the dream might give them clues to help Spike.

"Harris. Sit down." Spike growled and his eyes flashed yellow. Cursing his current weakness and struggling against the anger that urged him to lash out at what hurt Xander, he came close to losing
his patience.

Xander sat, eyes downcast. He took a deep breath.

"Sorry. It's just, that dream. Still gives me the wiggins."

"S'alright. Wanna tell me what the worst part was?" He watched Xander struggle to keep still, fists clenched.

"She was my dad. Right before she ripped out my heart. It was my dad who reached into my chest. Then she was there."

Silence filled the room. Spike could smell the misery and anger bleeding off the man.

"Fuck, man. My own dad hating me enough to rip out my heart." He shuddered and blinked tears away. This was not about him. Spike was the current target, and the dream of his father was long past.

The vampire stared thoughtfully at the hunched figure. He knew all was not right in the Harris house, but dreaming of being killed by your own father, well, that was beyond brutal. He could see Xander folding in on himself, trying to pull the pain back inward. After a moment's consideration, he decided not to press. It had to be hard enough to be facing the fact that his nightmare killer had returned. No need to force him to spill his guts to a former enemy.

"So, this slayer bint. How'd you take her out?"

"Buffy." Xander shrugged. "Seems the Buffster just told her to get over herself, and she disappeared. We all woke up."

Silence returned as they considered this.

"We could…" "I'm not…" they spoke over one another.

"I'm not calling in the bloody Slayer to rescue me." Spike ground out, cutting off what he knew Xander's suggestion would be.

"Spike, she may be the only one who can do this."

"Who can do what?" Angel's presence raised the tension in the room another notch. He stalked through the doorway, watching Xander closely.

The man shifted in his seat under the menacing scrutiny.

"Lay off, Peaches. The whelp's talking out of his arse."

"Maybe you'd care to let me know what's going on then?" Angel scowled at his Childe.

"Rally the troops, old man. Looks like the slayers aren't done with us yet, and I'm only going through this once." Spike snarled back.

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Xander leaned against the wall in the corner of the room watching Angel Investigations kick into gear in response to Spike's revelations about his dreams and the First Slayer stalking him. He had let the vampire tell the story, contributing only to answer questions directed at him, grateful that no one asked about the specifics of his dream.
"Wesley, I want everything Wolfram and Hart has on slayers," Angel directed.

"The Watcher's Journals in the Council Library…"

"We're not calling them." Angel cut him off. "They made it clear that they want nothing to do with us. I'm sure we can access everything we need from here."

Wesley nodded, clearly not pleased but disinclined to argue.

"Gunn, research past contracts, anything that has to do with slayers."

"I'm on it, boss." He nudged Wesley, "Looks like it's the books for you and me, English." A knowing look passed between them as they left, ostensibly to follow Angel's orders. Xander hid a smirk as he realized that Angel might not quite be as in charge as he thought he was. He wondered how deep in the paperwork Wes would bury the long-distance call to England.

"Fred, can you tell everything that's been in this room in the last 48 hours?"

"Sure, I just need to calibrate the spectrometer to pick up sentient traces, corporeal and non-corporeal. It's really just a matter of making sure that I record the known entities first, so we don't end up double-counting."

"Do it." Angel all but growled.

"Right, it'll take a few minutes to get the calibrations right, and then I'll be back." She hurried out of the room.

"Alright, muffin, you've cracked the whip and got the troops running, why don't you get back to steering this ship." Xander watched in amazement as Angel obeyed the green demon with barely a glare.

"That was one of the worst mixed metaphors I've heard in a while, mate." Spike grinned.

"Yeah, well, his aura's throwing out sparks that don't exactly make for poetic flow." Lorne gestured carelessly. "Now boys, let's see what sort of light Uncle Lorne can shed on the situation."

Spike's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Don't need anyone else in my head."

"And trust me, that's not a place I want to be either." Lorne held up a placating hand as he settled into the chair by Spike's bed. "No, sweet cheeks, I'm thinking a quick chorus of 'Dream a Little Dream' might be in order."

"Sod off."

"What and huh?" Xander looked from one to the other.

"Mr. Greenjeans here wants to tell my future."

"And he wants you to croon Sinatra why?"

"Simple, sugar plum, he sings, I can read his path. It's a psychic thing. Now, Angel-cakes there was throwing off the sparks of frustration and rage. Our wounded song-bird here, well, he's a bit more understated."

Xander snorted at the thought of anyone calling Spike understated.
"Oi!"

"C'mon blondie, you're hardly a wallflower." Xander rolled his eyes, but he smiled.

"Wanker."

Lorne surreptitiously watched the interaction. He had a feeling that Xander was much more closely tied into all this than Angel was willing to admit.

"Alright kids, as much fun as this is, I do have a 3 o'clock with Ben and Matt, so could we maybe get this show on the road." Lorne clapped his hands together and stood resolutely.

"I'm not singing." Spike made a move to cross his arms defiantly and grimaced as pain shot from elbows to wrists.

Anxious at this sign of suffering, Xander interjected, "Look, just let him do this, Spike. It's not like we have any better ideas on getting this figured out." He heard the bitterness as he finished his argument, but he couldn't help it. The vampires' outright dismissal of the Council rankled.

Spike heard the hurt beneath the anger. While he understood it, he refused to consider having anything more to do with slayers right now. He didn't want to argue anymore, but he refused to give in gracefully. He heaved an unnecessary breath and began to sing low, "Early one morning, just as the sun was rising, I heard a young maid sing in the valley below."

Xander started and stumbled backwards. Of all the songs to pick! Lorne's eyes widened as images and emotions flashed through him from both the vampire and human. Dimly, he noticed Xander stagger from the room as he rode out the visions.

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"Here."

Xander lifted his head from his hands to take in the bottle of water dangling from green fingers.

"Doesn't exactly have the same restorative kick as a sea breeze, but it's the best the vending machine has on offer." Lorne settled his long frame into the chair next to Xander. "What a different world it would be if you could get a decent sea breeze that way," he mused.

"Uh huh," Xander took a sip of water.

They sat in silence, Xander studying the bottle in his hands, Lorne studying Xander.

"So did you see what you needed to?" The question was tinged with bitterness, edged with despair.

"I saw enough."

At the noncommittal answer, Xander lunged to his feet and began pacing.

"Fucking asshole. He picked that song on purpose."

"I expect he did." Lorne watched carefully.

Xander suppressed a shudder. Hearing that song brought back the last year with an unexpected violence. Images of Spike slaughtering the populace again, the fight with Caleb, losing an eye, losing Anya.
"Asshole." He swore vehemently. Why the hell was he even still here? Clearly Spike hadn't changed, and whatever pull brought him to Wolfram and Hart to inquire after the resurrected vamp quickly faded in the face of his anger. *Let the First Slayer have him.* At that thought, he flinched guiltily over his own pettiness. As much as he hated Spike in the moment, he couldn't really wish that kind of violence on anyone.

Lorne watched the pacing man, debating how much to disclose about what he had seen. He had bent his confidentiality policy on more than one occasion, and in this case, what he saw applied as much to Xander as it did to Spike.

"Hate's an ugly color, muffin, especially when it's misguided."

"You don't know anything about me and Spike." Xander paused in his pacing to glare.

"Contrariwise, that little blast of insight back there told me quite a bit," Lorne uncrossed his legs and stood eye to eye with the tense man. "You're in deep here, and walking away won't be good for anyone."

"I can't save him from psychotic slayer numero uno, and I sure as hell don't want to hang around for the scintillating conversation and charming musical numbers."

Lorne laid his hand on Xander's chest, over his heart. He locked on the troubled brown eye. "Get this straight, cupcake. She's not forgotten you, even when you forget yourself. She knows where your strength is, and she'll try to take it again if you let her."

Xander swallowed thickly. "How do I stop her?" His hoarse whisper held as much hopelessness as it did determination.

"Stop letting her win." Lorne removed his hand and stepped back, winking charmingly.

"Thanks for the clarity, Obi Wan," Xander snorted.

"That's all I got for the moment…unless you wanna sing?"

"Uh, no thanks. Don't let her win, got it. I can work with that. You've been really helpful."

Lorne shook his head impatiently. "Not what I said, lambchop. Stop letting her win. Now. Before it's too late, and we're all too far gone."

Xander struggled with the distinction as he watched Lorne step into the elevator. He looked back at the two guards standing outside Spike's room. Ten minutes ago he had been ready to catch the next plane to anywhere but here. All that mattered was leaving LA and the jerk of a vampire laid out all vulnerable and snarky on the hospital bed. Ignoring the part of his brain that said Spike had struck out in frustration and fear, he continued to blame him for pressing buttons that would remind them both of The First with all the attendant pain. Another thought niggled at him, though, and he wondered if the choice of song also gave Spike a sense of control—that trigger had given him back the power that none of the Scoobies were inclined to help him regain.

Tossing the empty water bottle into the trashcan in the waiting room, he exhaled angrily. What the hell did that Lorne guy mean by stopping the slayer now? She wasn't here, and Xander hadn't thought of her in years. Okay, so that wasn't strictly true, but he wasn't seeing her in his sleep every night. So that had to be good, right? He stared at the open doorway for a moment longer before making his decision. As much as his brain told him to get out of Dodge, his heart still pulled him back to that sterile room and the vulnerable vampire inside.
Three days of daytime TV, and the Spike that Xander remembered had made a vocal reappearance. He griped at the doctors and nurses who continued to poke and prod at him. He complained of being bored and demanded exotic blood types and various snack foods to dip in them. Xander loved every minute of it, until one of the nurses handed over the duty of feeding Spike since his fingers still couldn't quite grip smaller items easily. Suddenly dipping corn chips in otter's blood lost its humor. But he suppressed the squick, and if a few drops of blood ended up on the hospital gown or trailing down Spike's chin, it was hardly Xander's fault.

Their conversation ranged from mocking the Jerry Springer guests—Spike insisting that Jerry would love to get a chance to go at Angel for his family dysfunction—to catching up on what the Scoobies had been up to since the fall of Sunnydale. The only topics they avoided were Spike's nightmare and Lorne's reading. Fred had swept the room and declared it entity free, apart from the expected, and Wesley and Gunn continued to research while Angel generally groused and spent time out of the office pummeling various demons.

On the fifth day of Xander's visit, the doctors declared Spike fit to leave the hospital. There had been no nightmares for the last several days, but Xander suspected that it was due to the fact that the vampire hardly slept.

"I'm not stayin' here." Spike faced off with Angel in the doorway to the room.

"Spike, we still don't know how to stop the First Slayer. I want you here where we can protect you." Angel growled back.

"Like you did the last time, you ruddy ponce! Droopy boy here was more help than you lot were."

"Hey!" Xander protested, then thought about it, "oh, thanks, I guess. Go on." He gestured.

"What're ya gonna do, tie me down?"

"I don't need a sodding babysitter," Spike growled from behind Xander's back.

Xander shot a glare at the blonde that clearly said 'shut up, I'm trying to get us out of here' and got glaring at in return. He fought the urge to roll his eye as he turned back to the hulking vampire blocking the exit.

"He's not going anywhere."

"Get a grip, Deadboy. Post guards wherever you want, but this place is enough to make anyone go over the edge. It's not helping. You're not helping." Xander poked Angel hard in the chest as he spoke. "Sitting in this fucking room for days on end is not going to fix this. So pull your head out of
Spike suppressed a smirk as his arrogant sire backed off before the raging human. He couldn't help but remember Angelus sounding off about Buffy's White Knight running him out of the hospital all those years ago. Seems Spike managed to acquire the White Knight for himself these days. As that thought passed, his smirk changed to a frown. Xander had been acting the White Knight the last few days, and he showed no signs of leaving after the initial response to Spike's singing. Question was what did the boy really want? The man had no reason to stay, especially after identifying the bitch stalking his dreams, yet Spike couldn't bring himself to ask. He refused to admit that the reluctance was because he didn't want Xander to leave.

"Xander's right, Angel, we can hardly do more for him here than could be done from his own home. The attacks are metaphysical. There is no physical space that affords safety from the realm of dreams."

"Thanks for the cheery words, Wes. Glad to know this place hasn't dulled your optimism." Xander offered sarcastically. Spike jabbed him in the back.

"Shut it. He's on our side, wanker."

With Xander, Wes, and Spike glaring at him, Angel growled low and stepped out of the doorway. He didn't uncross his arms or drop the menacing glare, however. Xander stepped back to sling his duffel bag over his shoulder while Spike strode merrily through the door, flipping his sire the two-fingered salute in thanks for his freedom. In contrast, Xander flashed an apologetic smile and hurried after his new roommate.

Angel watched them go, and when the elevator doors slid shut he scrubbed his face with his hands. Wes watched him sympathetically.

"I really hate this."

"We'll find a way to figure out what's happening. And how to stop it."


"No moral dilemmas?" Wes offered.

"No souls." Angel ground out.

"That's not what's really bothering you, is it?" Wes watched the tense figure, imagining he could see the strain of the muscles in the bowed neck.

"Find me some answers, Wes. Find them fast." Angel strode through the door to the stairwell, leaving the human to wonder if he even had all the questions that needed to be answered.

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Xander couldn't prevent the grin as he guided the Viper around another corner. Despite Spike's griping that a car of this caliber was wasted on a "tosser that drove like he was paralyzed from the waist down," Xander enjoyed the smooth feel of the car on the city streets. He never dreamed that Harmony telling them that Angel granted them a car from Wolfram and Hart's ample garage would result in him getting to drive such a gorgeous machine. But he didn't fool himself. The only reason he got to drive at all was that Spike had been forced to concede the position after not even being able to
maneuver the key into the ignition. The junctures where his hands had been reattached were healed, but the nerves took longer to regenerate.

"Left here."

Xander followed the subdued direction. Spike sulking and mocking him had faded to flat silence after the first few blocks. Xander couldn't tell if it was due to the growing distance from Wolfram and Hart or the increasing nearness of their destination.

"End of the block, on the right."

"Parking?"

"Leave it on the street. Gets lifted, we'll just get another."

The neighborhood offered primarily apartment buildings with the scattered home in between. Concrete jungle, Xander thought as he maneuvered the Viper into an open space at the curb. Where does that come from, anyway? It's not like there are concrete trees or vines all over the place. Just a distinct lack of greenery beyond the few looming palm trees. Great inner babble, he thought as he put the car in park and set the emergency brake. Never a good sign. He sighed, unbuckled the seat belt and turned to his passenger.

Spike slumped in the seat, arms crossed, staring out the window and the run-down building. He tried, unsuccessfully, once more to beat back the resentment that he still didn't rate a place in the Wolfram and Hart towers. Telling himself once more that at least he was his own vamp, he struggled to shake off the self-pity that gripped him since leaving the garage.

Xander bit his lip, hating to ask, "Need me to open the door?"

Spike shot him a glare, then looked away and nodded.

Xander reached across and pulled on the handle, releasing the catch. Spike shoved himself out of the car without looking back. Scrambling out of the car and reaching back for his duffle, Xander hurriedly locked the doors and walked up the sidewalk after the flapping duster.

The main entrance didn't require a key, and Spike shoved it open without waiting for his companion. Xander stifled a curse as he shuffled the bag on his shoulder to open the door and maneuver through it. He followed the disappearing blond down a short flight of stairs and felt his heart lurch as he saw Spike standing in front of a dented metal door with key in hand, staring at the keyhole. This time he remained silent as he watched the vampire struggle with himself.

Spike contemplated the keys in his hand. He could feel his demon visage struggling to the fore in impotent rage. The frustration over his incapacitated hands brought back the helplessness of his wheelchair days. He could hear Xander's breathing, the man quietly waiting for him to make a move. Hitching an unneeded breath, he squared his shoulders and took a cocky stance. He turned and tossed the keys at Xander, who caught them on reflex.

"Let's go bellhop."

"Sir, yes, sir." Xander tossed back, not sure whether to be pleased or worried by this show of snark. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, allowing the vampire to lead the way into the studio apartment.

One room, no windows, a bed, a couch, and the requisite TV. Xander debated whether this marked an improvement from Spike's crypt-dwelling days. Somehow the starkness of the place felt even less
homey than that. At least the crypt had personality. He dropped his duffle on the floor and closed the door.

"So," he started, but then realized he had nothing.

"So." Spike threw back at him from his slumped position on the couch.

"Okay, what's the attitude, bleach boy? I thought you were glad to get out of that place."

"Fuck off, Harris." Spike shot out as he struggled out of his duster.

Xander strode over to the couch and stood directly in the vampire's line of sight.

"Can't do that. The deal was I gotta stay with you, remember? Conditions of release and all that. Now you wanna tell me what crawled up your ass and died on the way over here?" He let the anger wrest control from the sympathy that had guided earlier actions.

Spike stood and stared into the angry brown eye, seeing the hurt that lurked underneath and choosing to ignore it.

"So you got me out. Fine. Good deed done. Now I don't need you, and I don't want you, so just bugger off." He pushed past Xander and stomped into the kitchen. He yanked at the refrigerator door gracelessly and grabbed a bottle of beer from off the shelf. Holding the bottle with one hand, he braced the cap against the edge of the counter and slammed the other hand down to pop off the top. He studiously ignored the fuming human.

Xander watched the Big Bad reassert himself, slamming around the kitchen and guzzling beer. He began to wonder if all the camaraderie in the hospital had been nothing more than playing him to get released. Then he saw the hand holding the beer bottle shake, and he recognized the act. It was a familiar one. One that he had seen Spike play with Angel, and one that Xander had played more than once himself since losing an eye. The act said I don't need anyone, but it came from the fear that I'm too damaged for anyone to want around. His anger wilted in the face of it.

Casually, he walked into the kitchen and liberated a beer for himself. Rather than relying on the Spike-method of removing the cap, he reached for the bottle opener magnet on the fridge and popped the top. He watched Spike stalk back to the couch and flip on the television. Programs flipped by as Spike pressed his thumb on the remote control, stopping periodically only to start up once again. Xander watched. He could feel the anger and despair filling the one-room apartment. Sipping at his beer, he waited, unsure of what might come next.

Spike sat tense on the couch. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed, hide from his life. But sleep meant letting go of control, and he couldn't afford to do that. In lieu of that, the next most appealing choice was a quick stroll through the mid-day sunshine, but he couldn't even bring himself to manage that. Full of self-disgust, he drained the last of his beer in a single go and threw the bottle full-force against the wall, causing shards of glass to fly every which way.

"Fuck!" Xander ducked automatically at the impact. When he stood again, ready to bawl out the tantrum-throwing vampire, he stopped short at the sight of a single tear tracing its way down the pale cheek. Other than that slight movement, Spike sat absolutely still, jaw clenched, staring unseeing at the television. Cautiously, Xander set his beer on the counter and made his way over to the couch. He eased the remote control from rigid fingers. Spike stared through him as if still watching Emeril's barbeque antics that blared out behind the human.

Xander eased himself to his knees, wanting nothing more than to take the unmoving figure in his
arms, feeling that same need to hold and protect that arose in the face of Spike's nightmare. Instead he used the remote to flick the TV off. In the ensuing silence, he reached out with a warm hand to catch the stray tear dangling from that sharp, cool chin.

"Not going anywhere, Spike," he assured softly. Pain flashed across blue eyes in response. "Talk to me." A blink and clench of the jaw were his only response.

"S'not forever, you know. Doc said your hands will be good as new in a couple days." Suddenly the sharp gaze looked at him, and he flinched under the anger that raged there.

"Fuck you, Harris. You don't know anything." Spike shoved him backwards and began to pace. "I don't give a toss about the sodding hands. Been hurt worse than this and took longer to heal. Or did you forget the wheelchair days back in Sunnyhell?"

"Then what is it?" Xander asked, honestly bewildered. He propped himself up on his elbows and watched the vampire warily.

Spike shook his head and growled. "Look at this place. Bloody saved the world, didn't I? And what do I get? Hated by the slayers for still being a vamp. Hated by my sire for still existing. Stalked by some dead slayer when I'm asleep? What the bloody hell is it all for?!" He roared out his rage.

Xander scooted back against the couch, unsure what to say. With Willow, it had been easy to know what to do when the pain was so great. He loved her. All he had to do was love her. With Spike, it was more complicated, and he struggled for words. Before he could speak, the vampire ranted on.

"Why did you bring me back?! What buggering good could it possibly be!" Spike raged at the unseen forces that controlled his life. His demon visage surged to the fore.

Fear tingled through Xander as he watched the formerly chipped vampire. But fear translated quickly to the anger that he had worked so hard to suppress since hearing of Spike's miraculous return from the Sunnydale battle.

"I don't want to be here! I didn't ask for it! It was my bloody time, and you stole it!"

Xander surged to his feet, and without speaking a word, he slammed a fist into Spike's face. Spike reeled back under the force of the unexpected blow. Xander stood, panting with the anger flowing through him.

"You ungrateful prick," he ground out.

Spike lunged back, unthinkingly attacking a foe he could finally touch. His momentum sprawled Xander over the bed, landing his own body on top of the one that struggled beneath him.

"Get off me, you undead freak," Xander pressed up, staring at the cruel yellow eyes that flashed at him.

"Mmm, been a long time since I took a human—well, not counting Buffy, of course," Spike drawled. He ground his swelling erection against the warm human beneath him, enjoying having the power for once.

Xander stared at the smirking vampire, knowing that Spike fought because he needed to feel in control. He recognized that the anger wasn't directed at him, but fear surged through him nonetheless. His own anger hadn't diminished, however, and he felt no compulsion to be gentle with the creature grinding his pelvis against him. At the same time, he needed to escape the situation before it went further than either of them could come back from. As much as he had desired the lithe,
muscular body rubbing against him, he refused to let anger and pain be the means.

With only a small regret, he grasped Spike's arms at the point of reattachment and twisted hard, praying he wasn't doing irrevocable damage.

Spike reared back, crying out in pain. Xander scrambled off the bed. He waited, adrenalin flowing, for Spike to make the next move.

Demon visage slid back to human as Spike took in the shaking human before him. Xander. He had tried to hurt Xander, the one person who reached out to him without expectations since his return. Shame flooded him, and he turned away, unable to look at the wary face.

Xander tried to shake off his fury as he watched the vampire regain control, but found he couldn't. The best choice he could make for both of them was to leave, at least for a while. He concentrated on unclenching his fists as he made his way over to the door.

"I gotta get out of here." He didn't trust himself to turn back and see the state Spike was in, but he didn't want to leave without saying anything.

The cold words burned the vampire's ears. Big surprise. Spike drives another person away. Everyone leaves in the end, and Xander had lasted longer than expected already. He listened for the click of the door closing before he could bring himself to look after the human. As he did, he noticed the duffle bag still sitting by the door. His brow furrowed. Xander left. Xander left his bag. His brain refused to fit the puzzle pieces together for a long moment.

Outside, Xander stood at the end of the walk. Now that he was free from the stifling atmosphere in the apartment, he realized he had no place else to go. Los Angeles wasn't exactly Sunnydale, and while he had plenty of experience touring unknown cities, he didn't feature the idea of wandering through LA on foot in the middle of the night without even a stake on him. He stiffened as he heard footsteps on the walk behind him. He turned suddenly and found himself face to face with the man he had just walked out on.

Spike didn't speak. He looked Xander in the eye and held out his hand. Xander glanced down. Keys.

Spike pointed to one key, then another. "Viper. Apartment."

Xander nodded and accepted the keys. Spike turned and walked back toward the building. Xander got into the Viper and drove off into the LA night.
Chapter 7

Xander managed to drive to the end of the block before the shaking in his hands forced him to pull over. With the anger fading, guilt kicked in. No wonder he still dreamed about his father beating on him; he was no different. If Spike hadn't wanted him gone before, he should now. Xander ground his palm into his closed eye, trying to wipe away the vision of punching the wounded vampire in rage. Striking someone he purported to care about. Fucking Harris genes. Looks like there really is no escape. With that thought, he slammed the car back into gear and decided to settle in at the first bar he came across.

The search didn't take long. One turn and he saw the flickering "Cocktails" light outside a dingy cement-block building. Underneath the neon promise of booze, "Pete's Place" was painted on a wooden sign. Apparently this was a place that valued the promise of alcohol over name-recognition. Xander maneuvered the car to an open spot on the curb, figuring that Spike had spoken from experience when he said that they could always get another one. Besides, he doubted he'd be driving home if the evening went as planned.

None of the flannel-sporting, ball-cap wearing roughs looked up from the bar as Xander stalked in. He knew this kind of place. Dark wood paneling, a jukebox with choices that didn't range much beyond the metal and country genres, one pool table with hitches in the surface, and no little umbrellas in the drinks. He slid onto a stool at the end of the bar and caught the bartender's eye.

"What'll it be?" The guy looked like he doubled as a bouncer at well over six feet tall and probably three feet wide. He had a tattoo of Jesus tending bar that ran from shoulder to elbow on his left arm.

"Something strong." Xander didn't care much what. All alcohol tasted like paint stripper as far as he was concerned. And beer just wasn't gonna cut it tonight.

"Got this new one I came up with. Call it 'three drunk rednecks hunting.'" The bartender laughed, and for a moment Xander felt his mood lift.

"Works for me."

The guy sitting a couple stools down grimaced. "You inflictin' that mess on somebody else now, Bill?"

"Shut up, Mike. This drink's gonna get me into Zagat's for best new drink." The bartender tossed back good-naturedly. He pulled out a highball glass and started yanking bottles off the shelf, explaining to Xander as he went.

"Three drunk rednecks," he poured in generous amounts of Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, and Johnnie Walker. "Hunting." He dumped in Wild Turkey and finished the drink with a quick squirt of coke before sliding it in front of Xander expectantly.

"Here's to Zagat's." Xander took a swing and smothered his grimace as the drink burned down his throat. He coughed.

Bill laughed and slapped his hand down on the bar. "Let me know when you're ready for another." Xander held up the glass in response and downed another gulp. An argument broke out among a group of guys watching the football game showing on the TV over the bar, and Bill headed over to douse the fires, leaving Xander to slide into glum contemplation of his glass. He stared at his fingers wrapped around the cool surface. The knuckles on his right hand were reddened and beginning to...
swell. He had hit Spike hard. Shoving the memory away, he took another gulp of the drink, willing the booze to erase the night.

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An hour later, Xander still held the same drink, assuring Bill repeatedly that he was fine, didn't want something else. Halfway through downing it, Xander gave in to the self-disgust that replaced the need to escape. Instead of following his original plan to drink himself blind—a plan foiled in part by the drink in front of him—he opted for taking an honest look at his reactions that night. Ever since Lorne told him to stop letting the First Slayer win, he had been on edge. If he was letting her win, he had to be connected to Spike's dreams. But if he was going to be really honest with himself, guilt hadn't been the motivating factor behind the anger he loosed.

He played Spike's words over his head, the impotent rage at being brought back from the dead. Xander scowled. He accepted that people died. Hell, he had to. It wasn't like he was given an option when they lost Joyce or Jenny or Tara or Jesse or Larry. He stopped himself from reciting his litany any further. Even thinking Anya's name still hurt, not as much anymore, but hurt nonetheless. None of them got to come back. None of them were given that chance, and all Spike can do is bitch about it. He nearly growled and realized his fists were clenched once more. Fuck. How was he supposed to be Spike's roommate, let alone help him with this whole First Slayer thing if he couldn't even think about him without feeling the need to hit something?

Xander started as a body slid onto the stool next to him and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Looks like Bill's special ain't gettin' the job done," a dry voice observed. "Maybe I can help with that."

A large tanned hand slid two white tablets on the bar in front of him. Xander stared at the pills, then glanced over at the owner of the hand.

"No thanks," he managed not to growl at the leather-clad man, but he shook the hand off his shoulder.

"Just a little E, guy, and you look like you need it." The man offered an oily grin that matched the brown hair slicked back into a ponytail that couldn't hide the impending baldness. "We'll call it a taster for now." He wandered off, leaving the pills on the bar. Xander glared at the retreating back.

Just a little E….looks like Bill's special isn't getting the job done...

Xander could hardly disagree there. Two hours of staring at the same drink and stuffing down the anger and guilt weren't getting him anywhere. He knew he needed to get back to Spike, and he knew he couldn't face the vampire yet. Watching the pills, he swirled the drink around in his glass. Fuck. He was so tired. Tired of trying. Tired of hurting. Maybe just for a little while…

No more thinking. No more judging right and wrong, should and shouldn't. At least for tonight. He tossed back both pills and followed them with a long drink. Wiping his mouth, he rested his head on this arms on the bar and waiting for the "taster" to deliver. Across the room, Chet smirked. So fucking easy. Give it thirty minutes and getting payment from the one-eyed loser would be a snap.

**************

Spike refused to pace, but he couldn't keep from glancing at the duffle by the door every few minutes, reassuring himself that Xander would be back. Between glances, he called himself a git and a coward for needing the human to come back. He hated admitting being afraid to sleep alone. Hell,
he hated admitting that he hated being alone. Those times in the hospital, taking the piss, talking
about the Scooby family he never truly stopped missing, brought back that need to be wanted with a
fierceness that overwhelmed him. Now that Xander was gone, he couldn't stuff that need back into
the tiny lockbox in his heart as he had done since his return. Bloody pathetic. Vampire needing a
bunch of humans. Aside from times with Fred, that need didn't get fed at Wolfram and Hart. Even
his own sire had no time for him.

Giving in to the urge once more, Spike glanced at the clock. Three hours of mindless channel surfing
—and if part of the mindless aspect was due to being unable to make his fingers obey, Spike wasn't
going to admit it—and all he could think about was whether Xander would be back and when.

"Sod this." He snapped off the TV and shrugged on his duster. After a brief struggle peppered with
colorful swearing, he managed the knob and slammed the door behind him, not bothering to lock it.
Only thing worth taking was the telly, and if that happened, he would have another reason to pester
money out of his tight-wad sire, which always made for a good time.

Once he got outside, indecision set in. He glanced back at the building, debating whether his leaving
would invoke sod's law and have Xander walk in two minutes later. He growled and shook himself.

"Sod this," he repeated for good measure before stalking down the street. He might not be back up to
fighting form, but he'd proved that his hands could manage a beer bottle quite nicely. That meant
Pete's.

Spike pressed through the crowd smoking outside, ignoring the usual griping about shit-head
California laws. Not that he disagreed—it was a bloody crime to be denied a fag with a drink—but
the complaints bored him. He had more fun giving the law a metaphorical two-fingered salute by
lighting up whenever he pleased.

Inside, Bill spotted him immediately and had a beer ready by the time Spike reached the bar.

"Ta, mate." Spike drank deeply. See? Much better. Not thinking about Xander at all. He glanced
around the bar, noting the usual mix of patrons. Tipping back the bottle of beer once more, he leaned
back against the bar and contemplated attempting a game of pool on the decrepit table. He glanced
over toward the pool table and smirked at the couple in the corner. Looks like Lily found a willing
meal for the night. The leggy blonde straddled her companion, writhing over his crotch, her long hair
draped over the man's face as she sucked on his lips. Spike sauntered over, intent on a game of pool
and a quick bask in the pheromones that the succubus would be putting out to control her victim. So
call him a voyeur, at least it would keep his mind off the infuriating human who had walked out on
him.

Spike reached for a pool cue before remembering that with his weakened hands, he would never be
able to manage a decent shot. Buggering hell. He let out a growl that snagged Lily's attention. She
shot him a smoldering look.

"Want the next ride, baby?" She didn't slow her grinding lap dance, and the man beneath her let out
a moan of pleasure. She winked at the startled vampire and returned to her ministrations--
ministrations that lasted for less than a second as Spike grabbed her by the hair and threw her across
the room.

"Wuh?" Xander blinked into enraged yellow eyes, his pelvis still searching for the warm body that
had been giving him so much pleasure.

Spike glared into the dilated brown eye, trying to gauge how much damage the succubus had already
done. Xander stared at him blearily, but seemed more drugged than drained.
"Hey, pal, what's the idea throwing my girl around like that?" A heavy hand landed on Spike's shoulder only to be shrugged off with a menacing growl. The vampire turned to snarl at his confronter.

"This," he pointed at Xander, "is mine."

"Whoa, Spike, dude, didn't know. Guy didn't say nothing about you, and Lil was just showing him a good time." Chet backed off, hands raised. "No harm, no foul." He had seen the vampire in action before and had no desire to have those fists and fangs turned on him. He shot a glance at Lily, verifying that the succubus hadn't been hurt by the fall. She watched the men warily from her position on the floor, but said nothing.

"Hey," Xander registered what Spike had said. "'M not yers." He swayed to his feet, not an easy task with the floor moving in an entirely different direction than his brain anticipated. The raging hard-on didn't help matters any either.

"Shut it, Harris." Spike snapped at the man before turning back to watch Chet help Lily up. She glared at the vampire. Then she turned her sneer on Xander.

"Not like he would have been much of a meal anyway. Desperate has never been my favorite flavor." At Spike's growl she leaned closer to Chet, and the pair hurried to the other side of the bar. Spike contemplated following and beating the lesson in with fists, but one look at Xander changed his mind and dampened his possessive rage. Where he expected to see anger, he found only blurred hurt and confusion.

Attempting to gather his thoughts through the erotically-charged fog that still seemed to surround him, Xander could focus only on the need to get out of the bar as quickly as possible. He wasn't exactly sure when the night had gone from the standard Harris drowning of sorrows to the Hellmouth wigginess that permanently haunted him. Note to self: drugs lead to demons. He nodded decisively, then wished he hadn't as the room swayed. He felt a cool hand on his arm, steadying him.

Need surged through him straight to his cock, and he shook the dangerous arm away.

"Going home," he announced. He weaved his way toward the door through the on-lookers, not meeting anyone's gaze. Spike made to follow him, eyes still glittering between blue and gold.

"Spike." Bill halted his progress by planting his hulking form directly in the vampire's path. Can't have you treatin' the workin' folks that way, man. You know how it is here."

"The boy is mine," Spike snarled.

"Yeah, I'm sure we all get that now, but he didn't have a sign on him, and he seemed plenty eager for Lil's offer." Bill spoke reasonably. Spike glared. "Next time, warn him about the place, would ya? Save us all a lot of grief." Spike nodded shortly. As far as he was concerned there would be no next time. Pete's was forever off-limits to one Xander Harris. He stalked out of the bar.

Outside, Xander stood by the Viper. He had the key pressed into the door lock, but made no move to unlock the car. Instead he leaned over the top of the car, resting his head on his left arm. He was too far gone to drive. Hell, he might be too far gone to walk his sorry ass back to Spike's apartment. Plus, there was the whole Spike's apartment factor that pretty much assured the presence of the possessive bleached asshole. The boy is mine. What the fuck was that about? Not like Spike could actually want him, a broken wreck of an ex-carpenter who couldn't manage to stay out of harm's way for a single evening. Fuck, he was horny. That whatever the heck she was demon was right. He was desperate.
Desperate and pathetic.

Cool fingers slid over the hand that held the key in the car door.

"Neither of us is gonna be driving this heap home tonight, pet."

Xander let out a harsh laugh as he relinquished the keys and pressed closer to the car, away from the solid body at his back.

"Pet. Pet," he mumbled as if trying the word out. "Wonder if I'm a Labrador or a parakeet. Maybe a goldfish, swimming round and round and round. Short life."

"Xan?" Spike broke into the babble, starting to worry about what drugs the man had been given.

"Let's just go." Xander pushed off the car, knocking into Spike and barely keeping his balance. He ignored the vampire's outstretched hand and started off down the street toward the apartment. Spike yanked out a cigarette and lit up. He pulled in the smoke in frustration and blew it out before walking after the weaving figure. Within a few steps he came abreast of Xander, but didn't get so much as a glance. He could feel the arousal that continued to pour off the human. Wanker, he's not thinking about you. Spike shook his head to clear it of dark eyes and the remembered feeling of strong, warm arms holding him together in that hospital bed.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Xander raised the key to unlock the door, but Spike reached around and simply turned the knob. Between his hands and Xander's state of mind, it was a good thing he decided not to bother locking up, he thought.

Once inside, Xander went to the kitchen sink and turned on the cold water. He maneuvered himself to drink straight from the faucet. God, he was thirsty, and he wanted the taste of that—sycophant?—out of his mouth. The chlorinated tang of LA water did the trick on that front. He avoided looking at his vampire escort. His cock still hadn't quite gotten the memo that there was no sex to be had tonight, and staring at those blue eyes wasn't helping any. When he couldn't drink anymore, he shut off the water and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Need a shower," he mumbled.

"Xander"

"No, Spike." Xander finally looked at the vampire, taking in the concern in those expressive eyes. "Please, I can't. I can't talk about this. I got grabbed by some nasty. You saved me. Nothing new. End of story, ok?" He pleaded silently with the other man to drop the subject, let his shameful lapse into inebriation and meaningless sex, not to mention living up to his demon-magnet status, pass without comment.

"Fine, Harris. End of story." Damn, but rejection hurt no matter how many times it happened. Hadn't helped any that he went all possessive vamp in the bar. Spike wanted to reach out to the man who had helped him, to take away some of the pain and misery, not to mention lust, that radiated off of him. But clearly his help wasn't welcome.

Xander stumbled over to his duffle bag and pulled out clean boxers and t-shirt then closed himself into the safety of the bathroom. He turned the shower on, adjusting the temperature to the hottest level his skin could take. Avoiding looking at himself in the mirror, he clumsily peeled off his clothes and eye patch and stepped under the scalding spray.

Spike absently wandered to the couch, intent on blocking out the image of a naked Xander in his shower by watching whatever inane infomercial might be on order tonight. But he couldn't settle and
got back up without turning on the television. The adrenaline that kicked in when he saw his friend under that damned succubus hadn't really subsided, and the pheromones pouring off the boy during the short walk back had only exacerbated the arousal, even though he knew the sexual vibe resulted from Lily's attentions and whatever drugs Chet had slipped him rather than from the vampire's proximity. Even so, the sound of spray on skin drew him to the bathroom door. He raised his hand to the wood, hesitant to touch as he listened.

The slap of flesh on flesh reached his ears, as did the harsh, hitched breath of the man on the other side of the door. Seems the whelp decided to take care of that little problem himself. Spike smirked and adjusted his rapidly filling cock. The smirk faltered, however, as he listened. Sodding wanker's gonna pull it right off; he keeps that up. He knew that urge for punishment rather than pleasure. Despite his arousal, sadness clenched at his heart. Decision suddenly made, he disregarded all that Xander had said, disregarded his own sense of self-preservation, and opened the door quietly to slip through.

Behind the glass doors of the shower, Xander stood with his head down and eye squeezed shut, the muscles in his shoulders tense as one hand on the wall braced him upright and the other yanked viciously at his cock. Harsh, pained breaths panted out, on the verge of ragged sobs, but not quite there. He wanted release, needed to get past this desperate aching in his body and blank out his mind, if only for a few seconds.

Spike took in the hunched figure. His own arousal heightened, and he knew nothing beyond the need to be in there, holding this man, helping him find his way back from whatever dark place of pain he currently inhabited. He quickly stripped and silently slid the glass door open, stepping into the luxurious steam.

"Fuck!" Xander jumped as the cool body pressed against his back and a strong hand covered his own on his cock, stilling his motions.

"Shhh. Let me." Spike pressed his cheek against Xander's ear, molding himself to that gloriously heated body. His own erection pressed between them, twitching at the heat and pressure. With his right hand, he gently stroked Xander's nipples, feeling the shiver of arousal surge through the man.

"Relax. Let me make you feel good, Xan. Let go." Spike murmured low, willing his voice to soothe the despair that undercut any pleasure Xander brought to himself.

Xander shuddered. Fucking sexy undead bastard. He knew he should order the vampire out of his shower, but his body disagreed. Fine. Get off and get out. He could do that. He started to pull at himself again, only to have his hand firmly removed and placed against the tiles. Before he could protest, Spike's hand returned to its place on his cock and set up a slow, gentle rhythm. The cool palm slid up and down his aching shaft, and slim fingers ghosted clumsily over the slit at the tip with each stroke.

Xander's whimpers and struggles to get more pressure on his cock made it difficult to focus. Spike yearned to take the man hard and fast here in this wonderful heat, but this was about more than a moment's satisfaction. He recognized Xander's need for pain, the desperate need to punish himself for actions, thoughts, everything, and he refused to encourage that need. That meant gentle touches, slowly stoking the fire that raged in both their bodies. He rocked against the broad back in time with his strokes, providing the friction he needed on his own cock.

Spike continued to keep a measured pace, letting the climb to orgasm go slowly but steadily. Xander quit fighting him and simply held onto the wall, chin pressed to chest and eye determinedly held shut. He could feel the man's cock twitch in his hands and after several long minutes, he felt Xander's balls draw up, readying to empty their contents in a gush of release. Xander kept up a low whimper as he
felt himself draw closer and closer to orgasm. Nothing existed but that sure hand on his cock and the cool body pressed against him.

"Gonna," he panted out. Before he could finish the thought, his cock jumped and jetted his release over Spike's hand to drip down the shower tiles. Feeling Xander's viscous cum and scenting the essence of the man drove Spike over the edge in return, and Xander registered the cooler flow of Spike's cum down his back and thighs.

Panting, they stood under the water, letting it rinse away their release. Spike dropped a light kiss on the tense shoulder before him. He stifled a sigh. So much for the boneless afterglow. He ran his hands down the tanned arms braced against the shower wall, pulling Xander back and turning him around.

Too late, Xander realized that he had removed his patch, and he moved to turn away, but Spike grasped his chin and held him still.

"S'not that bad," he murmured, stroking his thumb over the cheek beneath the sunken eyelid.

"It's not good," Xander tossed back. He couldn't bring himself to look at the vampire.

"Xan."

"..."

"Xan, look at me."

The soft voice tugged at his innards, and he fought to disobey. Not gonna need, not gonna ask. Gotta stay separate. Part of his brain registered the utter ridiculousness of convincing himself that he wasn't laid bare before this vampire who not only stood in his shower but had jerked him off moments before. But that part of his brain had to do battle with a heart that refused to let anyone close, lest they be destroyed by the chasm of need and loneliness that threatened daily to suck him to the depths.

"Xander." Cool fingers stroked over his face. "Look at me, luv." Spike nearly shook with want. "Let me see you." He had risked this much, and he would not let Xander slide back into himself.

Xander took a gulping breath. He didn't want this. In his mind, it was him comforting Spike, him taking the vampire's pain and fear, not the other way around. He couldn't inflict that on his friend after all he had seen in the last few days. He shook his head slightly, refusing to look up.

Spike sighed and leaned to press his forehead against Xander's, stroking clenched neck muscles with strong fingers, willing the man to let go. He stomped ruthlessly on the thought that once again he wasn't enough, didn't have what was needed. Focus on Xander, you selfish git.

"Let it go. S'okay." He felt the man shudder under his massaging touch, and he smelled the salt of tears before he registered the start of shuddering sobs. Pulling the man closer, he ran comforting hands down the shaking back, letting the water wash over them with its soothing heat.

Pain rolled over Xander in waves, but he wasn't drowning. He clung to the vampire, feeling a very different safety than the one he had found in comforting the Spike after the nightmares. For once, he allowed himself to feel, knowing the wounded hands that held him up wouldn't let him fall.

Slowly, the tears tapered off, leaving him more drained than even the powerful orgasm could. Still, he clung to the shower-warmed vampire. Moving meant the return to the real world, and no matter how safe he felt for the moment, he knew it couldn't last.
Spike stroked his fingers over the dark hair, allowing Xander to keep his face buried in the crook of his neck, already dreading the moment of separation. But they couldn't stay in the shower all night, and he could sense the exhaustion that threatened to overtake both of them after the long last few days. With a sigh, he stepped back, lifting Xander's chin to gaze in the tear-reddened eye.

"Finish up in here and come to bed, luv." Taking in the burgeoning rejection in that weary face, he leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss on Xander's lips.

Xander closed his eye and accepted the kiss, immediately wanting more, but not able to ask for it. Spike was being kind, offering him comfort, nothing more. He could accept that. Hell, he had accepted it completely over the last half hour. It would be enough. He nodded as Spike moved away.

"Thanks." The mixture of gratitude and shame in the low word stopped the vampire's exit from the shower. Spike reached back to run a palm gently over Xander's cheek.

"You're welcome." Blue eyes conveyed sincerity and concern. Then Spike stepped out to dry himself before he gave in to the desire to grab the human and cling to him, to feed his own deep need for connection. He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked out of the bathroom.

Xander rinsed himself quickly and stepped out of the shower. He continued to avoid the mirror, unwilling to look at the violent drunk who took advantage of a friend's kindness. A shudder ran through him as he relived the feeling of Spike pressed up against him, holding him, stroking him, accepting him. He suppressed the image and pulled on his boxers and t-shirt, preparing to curl up on the couch and sleep off the remaining E and alcohol in his system.

As he moved back toward the main room, he registered the fact that Spike lay in the bed, barely covered by the thin sheet. His face appeared peaceful, and with the lack of breathing, he looked very much like the corpse he was. A beautiful corpse, but a corpse nonetheless. He forced himself to quit staring and moved to grab a pillow off the bed.

"Turn out the light before you crawl in, eh mate?" Spike mumbled without opening his eyes. Afraid to see that Xander would choose the couch over the space he had clearly left in the bed, he forced himself to stay casual and still.

Xander frowned. Crawl in? His brain caught up with the fact that instead of spreading out in the middle of the bed, Spike lay on the far side. Leaving space for him? He glanced over at the couch and then back to the bed. Fuck, he was tired, and the bed sounded so much better than the couch. Sleeping next to the vampire could hardly be more intimate than the shower scene they just played out, he reasoned. Finally, too tired to think any more, he flipped off the lamp and settled into the bed with a sigh, sliding into sleep almost immediately.

Spike grinned. Maybe tonight sleep would be safe. He luxuriated in the warmth radiating off his bedmate as he drifted off to the sound of the slow, steady heartbeat.

Some hours later Xander's choked off cry and sudden dash to the bathroom jarred him into wakefulness. The vampire sat bolt upright, game-face to the fore, searching for the threat. From behind the bathroom door, violent retching sounds reached him. Looks like sleeping still wasn't so safe after all.
Chapter 8

Spike swung his legs over the side of the bed and scrubbed his face with his hands. He listened to the sounds of the retching tapering off, toilet flushing, and water running in the sink. Human sickness left him at a loss, so he walked to the bathroom door and knocked gently.

"You okay?" He grimaced at the idiocy of the question.

"Yeah," Xander's shaking voice belied his answer.

Spike stared at the door, wondering what to do next. He put his hand to the doorknob, but before he could fully turn it, Xander leaned against the door, discouraging his entry.

"Spike," the whisper barely permeated through the door, "gimme a couple of minutes here. Okay?"

"Sure, pet." Spike stepped back from the door, unnerved by the terror and sadness that colored the barely there voice.

Inside the bathroom, Xander moved the hand braced against the door back to the sink. He struggled to still the shaking in his arms. Since that seemed to be a losing battle, he slid down to sit on the floor with arms wrapped tightly around his knees. He hung his head and squeezed his eye shut against the tears, but he couldn't shut out the dream images that streamed through his mind.

Spike paced, glancing occasionally at the bathroom door. He had promised patience for a couple of minutes. He snagged his cigarettes and lit one. Only when he finished it, he promised himself, would he approach Xander once more. Still, he couldn't keep himself from monitoring what he could hear. The pounding heart and ragged breaths bled through the apartment.

_Had to be a sodding dream. Fucking hell. Told the wanker it wasn't safe with me._ Spike took an angry drag at his cigarette, cursing himself for giving into the mortal's insistence at staying. As he turned in his pacing, his cursing turned on Xander for wanting to stay. Finally the cigarette flared down to the filter, and he tossed it into the sink.

Still no sign of Xander leaving the bathroom, and the requested time was up.

He moved to stand in front of the bathroom door, debating the best approach.

"Fuck it," he growled softly to himself. He opened the door and slid inside. Seeing Xander curled into himself, shaking, chased the anger back.

"Xan?" Spike knelt carefully in front of his friend. He stroked a hand over the sweat-damp hair.

Xander flinched away at the touch, but the hand didn't draw back. He took a deep breath and mentally kicked himself in the ass, telling himself to get it together and get off the floor.

"Sorry," he muttered as he struggled to his feet. Spike stood with him, present but not crowding him. "Guess drugs really not the best idea for a good night's sleep." He risked a look at the vampire only to meet a gaze filled with compassion and concern, and he quickly looked away.

"Drugs." Spike repeated quietly.

"Yeah. Guess I really shoulda listened when they taught us 'just say no' in school." Xander kept his eye averted as he shuffled past the vampire and into the main room. Once there, however, he seemed to be at a loss as to where to go. A firm hand on his elbow made the decision for him as he was
steered back to the bed.

"Sit."

Xander sat. He stared at his knees.

Spike frowned. He remembered the disorientation and fear that followed his nightmare in the hospital. Those warm human hands had held him, grounded him. He had done the same thing for Dru hundreds of times after her visions. But could he do the same for Xander? Would it be accepted if he tried?

"Fuck it," he muttered to himself once more. He settled onto the bed leaning back against the headboard and manhandled Xander between his legs, pulling the stiff back against his chest.

In shock, Xander didn't struggle at first, but as his brain registered Spike holding him, stroking firm hands down his chest, he moved to get away. This was too close, too much, and he could feel himself breaking apart under the vampire's touch.

"Stay." Spike kept his grip gentle but immovable.

Xander snorted. "Sit. Stay. I'm not a fucking lapdog." He pulled away once more. "Let me go."

"Why?" One hand kept up the gentle petting while the other held him firmly in place.

"Huh?"

"Why?"

"Well," Xander sputtered, "because." He struggled for a reason other than the fear of emotions breaking loose and drowning them both.

Spike studied the tense neck muscles, scenting the fear, shame, and arousal that swirled around the man. He recognized the iron grip that Xander struggled to hold on his feelings, but remembering the terror and despair that overwhelmed him after encountering the slayer in his dreams, he wanted nothing more than to smash apart that grip. Despite Xander's casual redirection toward blaming the drugs, Spike had his suspicions that much more was at stake here, and it was that undefined more that had him pressing closer to Xander rather than letting him slide away.

"Not much of a reason, that. Because."

"Asking should be reason enough," Xander retorted.

"Why are you asking?"

Irritation flared at the quiet reasonableness of Spike's tone.

"Let me go, you asshole."

"No."

"Fucking vampire dickhead."

"No."

"Spike!"
"Tell me what happened."

"Told you." Xander answered shortly. "Drugs. Woke up sick."

"You think lying to me is going to get you free faster?" Spike asked the question in the same reasonable tone, as if he were truly curious.

"Don't fucking do this, Spike."

"Don't what? Don't ask? Don't hold you? Don't care?"

Don't care, Xander's brain screamed out in agreement, but he retreated into silence.

Spike continued to stroke the tense man, struggling with his own impulse to smack him around and make him answer.

Minutes passed in mutinous silence.

The gentle touches picked away at the walls Xander struggled to keep erected around his heart. As he envisioned those walls, the terror of the dream struck at him once more, and he shuddered in the vampire's arms.

Not my fault. Not my fault. Chanting internally, he tried to beat back the images of the First Slayer taunting him. I didn't know. Didn't ask for this. Don't want it.

Spike held him closer as he felt the shivering begin. He murmured comfort into the dark hair.

Caught between the threat of the dream and the concern of the vampire who held him, Xander felt himself drowning, and he renewed his struggles to get free.

Spike debated, but removed his arms. Xander shot off the bed and began pacing with his arms wrapped around himself protectively. Spike tilted his head and considered the next line of attack. He thought over other times that he had seen Xander lose control emotionally, and he realized that there weren't many. Anger. Sure, he'd seen that often enough, but this wasn't about anger.

"Feeling better?"

"I'm fine, Spike. Told you that."

"Uh huh." Spike slid off the bed in a fluid motion and wandered into the kitchen, affecting nonchalance. He began the preparations for tea, giving him something to focus on apart from the tense human.

"Rather you said nothin' than lie to me," Spike spoke quietly, not looking at Xander.

The soft voice pulled Xander up short, unsettled. He tried to relax, but found his heart further twisted up by the fact that he was lying to the vampire who had been open and handed over his own pain. Guilt began to bleed into the fear that gripped him.

"I get that you don't want to talk about it, pet." Spike turned on the electric kettle to heat the water and reached for the box of tea.

"It's just…" Xander trailed off. He rubbed his hands over his arms as if to warm himself.

Silence overtook the small apartment, broken only by the sounds of Spike pouring water over the tea to steep. He leaned back against the counter and took in the miserable figure before him.
"Tell me something else then."

Xander flashed a look at him, emotions closed off, brown eye wary.

"When Joyce died," Spike stared directly at him, "what'd you do? Helped yer demon chit understand what mortality meant? Held her while she cried? Held Buffy? Let Dawn stay at your place, safely tucked away from reminders of her mum?"

Confusion began to replace the blank look.

"What about when Buffy flew off that tower? Or when you saw her hands all bloody from crawling out of her own grave?"

"What are you talking about?"

"D'ja swap between holding Anya, lettin' Willow cry on your shoulder?"

"Yeah, so?" Xander held still.

"What about when you walked out of yer wedding? When you saw me and your girl spread out on the table at the Magic Box? What about walking away from the Hellmouth, knowing she was buried underneath? What did you do?"

"I…"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Got pissed off, got drunk, got back to business." Anger began to spark again underneath the woundedness. "None of your fucking business what I did. And is there a reason that you need to bring all that shit up now?"

"Hmmm," Spike pretended to consider him. "Just trying to figure what to do here. Maybe I'm asking the wrong questions."

Spike moved from his position against the counter and crowded into Xander's personal space.

"Maybe I should be asking," he trapped Xander against the counter with hands pressed against the countertop, one arm on either side of the tense figure, "who?"

Xander's eye narrowed.

"Who held you when Buffy died? Who let you cry when she came back?" Spike pressed closer, whispering in Xander's ear.

"Who wept with you when you walked out of the wedding? Who held your tears when demon girl bit it in the final battle?"

The shaking began again. Spike stepped back and slid his hands down the shivering arms.

"These the only arms that wrapped around you? The only ones that hold all that pain?"

Xander closed his eye and turned his face away.

" Doesn't have to be that way, pet. These aren't the only arms that want to hold you." To illustrate that point, Spike slid his arms around the man and pulled him close. "Wasn't there for all those things, but I'm here now. Gonna let me hold this with you?"
Xander felt the walls breaking again, and the dream images threatened to take him once more. Spike's words rattled his defenses and threatened to loose the emotion that could drown him, feelings so strong that no one else could withstand having to endure them with him. The conflict between need and fear swirled through his head and heart. He knew how to fight back, but it took all his courage to do it.

"Help me," he whispered brokenly.

In the next second, he found himself crushed to the vampire's chest, and he buried his face in the crook of Spike's neck. Tears fell hot and fast.

"She wants me... wants me to hurt. Hates me for what I did." Xander gasped out the words. "She said she won. I let her win. Like Lorne said. But it's my fault. 'Cause I gave up. I gave up. No more heart."

"It's okay, pet. She can't hurt you now." Spike attempted to make sense of the mutterings, but his primary focus remained giving Xander the safety to feel and talk. He felt his suspicions confirmed about the isolation and loneliness in this human that matched his own. His own heart creaked at that, for Xander had been, more than any of them, the loyal knight who loved fiercely.

Emotion pounded through the broken man, fear, sorrow, but he felt grounded in Spike's arms. This realization scared him almost as much as the dream, and he startled Spike by stilling suddenly. He beat back at the feelings but couldn't bring himself to move from the encircling arms that had made him feel safe and seen. Stupid, fucking stupid. He blinked away the tears furiously.

Spike maneuvered them back to the bed, keeping Xander close.

"We'll figure this out, pet."

"She," Xander halted over the words.

"First Slayer?"

"Yeah. She was there, in the dream, along with all the new slayers."

"Tell me," Spike murmured quietly as he continued firm strokes over Xander's back and arms.

"They were all in this line. Standing in line to get into the new Council's front door." He shivered. "But they all had to get past me, and as each girl came up to me, I... Fuck, Spike, I ripped out her heart and dropped it in a fucking box." Terror pounded through him as the images replayed. "I took their hearts! And the First Slayer, she was there the whole time, smiling at me, encouraging me, and reaching in the box to squash the hearts with her bare hands, and then she'd lick the blood off her fingers." He shuddered violently.

"Shhh, pet. Just a dream. She can't get you here."

"Don't you get it?" Xander's voice broke with despair. "She is here. She's won. She's got me ripping out slayer's hearts! Lorne said that I have to let her stop winning, but I can't stand up to her. In the dream I knew that. She's stronger than me."

Spike snorted inelegantly. "Never met anyone with a stronger heart than you, Xan."

Xander stilled.

"There's a reason you were the heart in that spell way back when. Same reason she's after you now."
And that's not weakness, luv, it's your strength."

"But I gave that up."

"Gave what up? Yer heart? Kinda hard to go on living without a heart."

"In the dream." Xander shuddered. "That's where it started."

"Tell me about where it started, then," Spike prompted after a long moment of silence.

"Sunnydale. Outside that fucking crater. We were all in the bus, and in the dream, it was just like it was. Slayers hurt, blood and triumph but a weird sort of lostness, too." Xander spoke in a hushed tone, pain bleeding through as the images played once again in his mind. "Only, it was the First Slayer driving the bus. And I walked up to her. I couldn't stop myself. I knew what she wanted from me. Because it wasn't her fight, ya know? We just barged in and took the slayer thing from her without asking her. Gave it to all those girls. So we owed her payment for that or something. I dunno." Xander sighed harshly. "Maybe that's all justification."

"What did you give her, pet?" Spike asked already dreading the answer.

"My heart. I reached in and ripped out my own fucking heart and handed it to her." Xander squeezed his eye shut against the memory.

Spike held him, absorbing the terror and despair.

"And you know what she did?" Xander gave a short, dark attempt at a laugh. "She tossed it out the window. Garbage. That's all it was to her. She left it lying on the road. Next thing I know, I'm at that fucking door to the Council yanking out slayers' hearts as the price of admission."

"Slayer bint didn't try to kill you, though, in this dream?" Spike asked the question cautiously. He didn't know what to expect of Xander's response, but the difference between all the other dreams that the First Slayer had made a guest appearance in and the one that Xander related tonight seemed too significant to let slide.

"She didn't have to." Xander spoke bitterly. "Don't you get it? She already won. She got what she wanted from me."

Thoughtful silence greeted that statement.

"I'm already dead." The mournful whisper snapped Spike's attention back to the broken man next to him.

"Yer not dead, Harris." He gripped Xander's shoulders. "Look at me, you git." He waited for Xander to make eye contact, and the despair there shone clearer and with a depth that the vampire knew was normally hidden. When he had Xander's attention, he moved one hand to press firmly on the warm chest, feeling the strong heartbeat.

"I can feel your heart. Here under my hand. Felt it in the hospital when you were there after that soddin' nightmare. Yer heart's still there. Bitch is lying to you, and that's all it is."

"I don't know what to do, Spike." Xander spoke low, but less despairing.

"We'll figure that out. Got the best evil detective firm on the case, don't we? We'll go back in the office tomorrow and see what they've have come up with, then go from there." Spike spoke reasonably.
"Will you…"

"What, luv. Just ask."

"Will you hold me tonight?"

The small voice swelled Spike's unbeating heart. He tightened his hold briefly. "Sure, pet."

"I know it's kinda stupid, but I feel like maybe you can keep me safe, away from her till tomorrow?"

Xander sighed. "Shit. That's what I was supposed to be doing for you, not getting all wimpy on you."

"Shhh. None of that. Keep each other safe from that bitch. K?"

"K."

They shifted into a close embrace as Spike flicked the blankets up over them once more.

"Sleep, luv."

Exhausted from the terror of the dream and all that came after, Xander slid into an uneasy doze as Spike wrapped himself around the warm, fragile human and struggled against the worry that Wolfram & Hart might not have the resources that they would need when it came to slayers.
Xander swam groggly up from the dreamless sleep that surrounded him. He blinked his eye, and as he reached to wipe the sleep from it, he realized his right arm was trapped beneath his bedmate. Last night came back in a rush, and he forced himself to stay absolutely still, unwilling to wake Spike from what appeared to be a peaceful sleep.

The tousled blond head rested against his right arm, and his chest pressed to the unmoving back of the man he had his other arm draped over. Sometime in the night, they had shifted positions, with Xander waking spooned against Spike's back, legs entangled.

As Xander became aware of their arrangement, he also became aware of the morning hard-on that pressed against a sleep-warmed backside. For a moment, he willed himself back to sleep. In sleep, he could deny the confusing emotional onslaught from the night before. In sleep, he could escape the desire for physical connection that centered in his cock.

He closed his eye, unable to look at the Spike's peaceful posture. Such peace came so seldom to any of them. How much less must it come for a century old killer with thousands of lives on his conscience? Xander didn't want to disturb that peace for either of them.

However, he couldn't deny the effect of Spike's body on his own. In the year since the fall of Sunnydale, he had not shared a bed with anyone. Not that there hadn't been opportunities, but he could never bring himself to be so vulnerable as to sleep with anyone this close. A quick fuck in another room—sometimes paid for, he grimaced to remember—to relieve the physical need was one thing, but the vulnerability of sleeping, holding someone close to him, pressed too closely on the walls he needed in place to keep going every day.

Those walls had crashed spectacularly the night before, and Xander already dreaded the aftermath. He knew that the day had to begin. They would both have to wake and return to Wolfram & Hart to research and what? defeat? drive away? destroy? the First Slayer who threatened them. That meant facing Spike after breaking down so utterly and begging to be held against the bad dreams. Bitter shame welled up along with that memory.

Xander swallowed a gasp as Spike shifted in his sleep. That firm backside rubbed against his eager cock, replacing remorse with good old fashioned lust. He squeezed his eye shut and moved his hips subtly, against all good sense searching for sensation.

"Wondered if you were gonna get around to doing something with that." An amused whisper reached Xander's ears as Spike matched the gentle movement.

Xander started, but before he could back away, Spike shot out an arm and held him close.

"Don't go."

"Sorry, fuck. Didn't mean to wake you up." Xander felt the blush running up his chest to his cheeks.


Xander shook his head, then, aware that Spike wouldn't be able to see him, spoke. "You don't know what you're saying. You don't want this. Just emotional aftermath or something." The words came out slightly gasped as Spike kept up the gentle movements of his pelvis, sliding ever so slowly and minutely against Xander's cock.
"You want this." Spike suddenly ground back hard and then without warning turned in Xander's arms to press his own desperate cock against Xander's thigh. "I want this."

Xander kept his eye squeezed shut, shaking his head even as his body belied him, hips jerking against the hard stomach, hands clenching Spike's back.

"Xander," Spike's voice softened. "Look at me." He watched that beautiful ruined face, tracing the fatigue lines that gathered at the corners of eyes and mouth. Raw need, fear, confusion, desire all shone out at him as Xander obeyed the command.

Seeing that he had the man's attention, Spike slithered down the bed to mouth Xander's cock through the thin fabric of his cotton boxers.

"You don't want this," Xander repeated breathlessly, wanting to stop him but at the same time wanting to rip his cock free and slide it between welcoming lips, lips that had kissed him with kindness and concern last night in the shower, lips that had spoken words to shatter through his defenses and yet hold him together.

Spike growled. "Want this." He bit gently on the twitching cock. "Want you." He wouldn't take the man against his will—fuck knows he had come too close already to doing that last night during their fight—but he needed this. He couldn't have explained it to either of them, this desperate need to hold onto the connection that had been forged in the hospital and again in the trauma of the last twelve hours. But he needed Xander to feel that need as well.

Xander's pupil dilated at the sensuous vision before him. His cock demanded what his heart feared most—connection. Sure, they had held one another through some of their deepest fears in the last week, but sex with a friend never led anywhere good in Xander's experience. Mostly it led to dead friends. And pain. Worlds upon worlds of pain.

Spike mouthed Xander's cock patiently, sensing the man's capitulation. He recognized the fears. He probably had similar ones himself, but dear god the need.

Xander lifted his hips and began to slide the boxers down. Spike scrambled out of the way to help, avoiding words that could only get in the way at this point.

"Wait," Xander pressed a hand to one pale shoulder to hold the vampire away. He blushed. "I can't just, um, lie there while you…" He gestured vaguely. Spike looked at him with a mixture of impatience and confusion.

"Turn around."

Spike looked over his shoulder dubiously.

"Not that way, dipshit." Xander laughed, the tension of the moment broken. He gestured longwise down the bed. "Head to foot. You know."

Understanding flashed across Spike's chiseled features and dissolved into a hungry lust that left him scrambling to draw breath.

They settled into position, and with a sigh, Xander felt Spike's lips slide over the burning skin of his erection. In response, he licked across the blood-reddened cock before him. Minor shifts in position on each side occurred as they each settled to the task before them.

Xander pushed aside the nagging thought that this position had more to do with his need for distance than with the desire to suck Spike off. Granted that desire was there, but concentrating on that velvet
hard cock that slid back and forth over his tongue left no room for what ifs or what does it all mean types of questions.

Xander groaned around the foreskin he had been tonguing as Spike pulled back with particularly hard suction. Between the sensation that his cock shot up his spine to his brain and the determination to give as good as he got, Xander effectively shut down all worries about anything but fucking.

They set about a conversation without words. Spike grazed teeth along the thick vein on the underside of Xander's cock. Xander responded with a thrust of the tongue over the head of Spike's erection, sliding underneath the foreskin to get to his prize.

Struggling to keep his hips from pounding into those strong lips, down that alabaster throat, Xander gripped Spike's ass and pulled the vampire's cock as far down his own throat as he could, swallowing hard against the intrusion. He repeated the gesture twice more, pulling back and gasping for air between each swallow. The third time, he had to remind himself not to bite down as Spike effectively sucked his orgasm out through sheer bloody-minded determination aided by vampire strength and the lack of respiratory demands.

His orgasm ripped through him, and Xander groaned around Spike's cock, struggling to retain his hold on conscious thought long enough to shove one long finger into Spike's ass and scrape a dull nail along the insides until he hit the spongy prostate trigger that had Spike coming sharp and sudden over his tongue.

Swallowing the offering quickly, Xander licked a long trail down Spike's softening cock and shuddered as Spike returned the gesture. Post-orgasm laziness settled through his limbs, but he nearly jumped as Spike's face suddenly appeared over him with an entirely self-satisfied grin.

"Was it good for you?" he purred.

Xander rolled his eye. "If you gotta ask, I'd say you weren't paying attention, buddy."

Spike grinned once more and leant down to kiss the swollen lips of the man before him, but before he could make contact, Xander turned his head. He backed off in confusion as Xander struggled to get his limbs back under enough control to get out of the bed.

"Gotta pee." Xander avoided eye-contact. He yanked his boxers up and stumbled to the bathroom, leaving Spike sprawled on the bed staring after him.
Chapter 10

Spike stalked into Wolfram and Hart with Xander trailing behind him, silent and unhappy. The mercifully short ride back to the law firm's offices had been tense. Xander had withdrawn to a self-protective distance when he had emerged from the bathroom, and Spike retaliated with his own confused silence. Neither talked about what had happened in the bed that morning.

"Spikey!" Harmony's greeting grated across his nerves. "You're late. Everyone's waiting for you guys down in the lab."

Without acknowledging her, Spike changed directions and punched the down button to call the elevator. Harmony looked at the two unhappy men.

"What's going on? No one will tell me anything." She whined at them. The elevator arrived, and to both men's chagrin, she joined them. "Wes has been here all night, Fred's been building stuff in the lab, and Angel is growling at everybody. He didn't even notice my new shoes!"

Xander automatically glanced down at her feet. He looked away and caught Spike doing the same. Harmony glared at them expectantly. "Well?"

Xander shrugged. "Nice shoes."

The elevator pinged as it arrived on the research floor, and Spike brushed brusquely out the door, leaving the others to follow in his wake.

"You know, I get that he has problems with women. I mean, the Slayer?? But I thought maybe since he was getting some from a guy, he'd mellow out or something."

Xander sputtered unintelligibly.

"Please, like you guys don't reek of each other, and can I just say 'Eeew'. Au de sex is so last year. Maybe it's the whole soul thing that has him so closed off. I mean, it's not like Angel is exactly Mr. Share Guy. Oh!" Her eyes widened as Spike slammed her against the wall of the corridor.

"Harm. Shut. Up." He growled before releasing her and continuing toward the lab. Xander scurried after him, willing down the blush that pounded under his hot skin.

"You know, I get that he has problems with women. I mean, the Slayer?? But I thought maybe since he was getting some from a guy, he'd mellow out or something."

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"Harm. Shut. Up." He growled before releasing her and continuing toward the lab. Xander scurried after him, willing down the blush that pounded under his hot skin. The last thing he wanted was Harmony outing the new dimensions of his relationship with Spike when he felt so conflicted himself. He knew that he could love Spike the moment he gave himself permission, but the same control that kept him distant from his friends kept him safe from the pain of losing those friends. Love only raised the stakes.

"Spike, Xander. Good. You're here." As Wesley turned from the texts spread out on the laboratory desk, Xander silently admitted that Harmony had been right in her assessment that Wes must have been up all night. He looked more haggard than usual.

"Harmony!" Angel barked at his secretary.

"What? I told them to come down to the lab as soon as they got here. It's not like it's my fault they were late."

"Where is my blood?" The aggrieved tone cut her off.

"Oh. Sorry, boss. It's just that when I got upstairs, there were all these messages, and I had to
rearrange your schedule because you wanted me to cancel all those meetings. Which, by the way, the D'Knolan Clan was not happy about, and they'll be filing a complaint."

Despite Xander's determination to keep aloof, he couldn't help sharing a smirking glance with Spike at the constipated look on Angel's face. Spike had to admit, if only internally, that Harmony managed to drive his Sire to greater levels of irritation than even he could, and she apparently did it without expending any focused effort at all.

"Harmony. Blood."

She stared blankly at him before shifting into her demon visage. "Vampire," she hissed, and launched herself at him, pulling a stake from within the sleeve of her suit jacket.

"What the hell?" Angel grabbed her hands as she lunged at him. Startled into stillness, the others watched the struggle for a long moment.

"Hey, knock it off you daft bint." Spike leapt into the fight and tried to drag her from Angel, but she fought with unexpected strength. The two master vampires managed to knock the stake from her hands, but she continued to claw at them, until working together, they sent her slamming into the hallway.

She hissed at them, hatred shining from yellow eyes. "I will see you dead, Demon." The threat focused on Spike. He stepped forward to hit her once more, but Fred's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Something's not right."

Harmony's attention swerved from Spike to Xander. A cruel smile graced her demonic features. "I win." The grin turned to surprise as two tranquilizer darts punctured her abdomen.

Wesley lay the gun on the table. "We had best restrain her before she regains consciousness."

"Will someone please tell me what the hell just happened?" Angel managed to include everyone in the room in his glare.

Spike avoided the question by the simple expedient of picking up Harmony and carrying her into the adjoining room to place her on a gurney.

"Are you okay?" Fred asked Xander gently. He had frozen in confusion and fear as Harmony spoke to him. He shook his head in response to Fred's question.

"Xander, do you know what she meant when she said 'I win'?" Wesley's question caused the man to flinch in pain.

"That was what the First Slayer said to me. Last night. In my dream." Xander mumbled. He rubbed his hands over his face, careful of the eye patch.

"Damn, what'd I miss?" Gunn looked at the shocked faces and glanced into the adjoining room where Spike methodically fastened restraints on the unconscious receptionist. The others ignored his arrival in favor of watching Xander.

"It would appear that the First Slayer no longer restricts herself to speaking through dreams," Wesley observed.

"But how is that possible?" Fred asked, sensing Xander's need for space and stepping back as the man wrapped his arms around himself. "And why would she speak through Harmony?"
"I'm not entirely certain." Wes looked over at the restrained vampire.

"And when the bloody hell did she get so strong? Thought you kept the minions on a non-human diet, Peaches." Spike stepped toward Xander but halted when the man took an unknowing step back. Looks like whatever closeness he had felt developing between them wasn't going to hold up in the cold light of day. He masked his hurt and trampled down the need to comfort his clearly distraught friend.

"Wes? Still looking for answers here." Angel's patience stretched thin.

"As impossible as it may sound, the most reasonable hypothesis is that Harmony, despite being a vampire herself, is also a Slayer."

"Right. That's the last time I'm late for a meeting." Gunn shook his head and leaned against one of the lab's counters.

"It makes sense," Fred agreed. "She isn't really that old, and if she's been living only on animal blood for the last year, which if she hadn't it would have shown up on our test, then there's no way that she should have been able to fight off both Angel and Spike unless there was something else going on."

"And that something means she's a Slayer? Sorry, but I thought these Slayers had to be human and mystically called or some shit." Gunn looked between Wesley and Fred in confusion.

"That is how it has worked for millennia. But several months ago, at the same time that Spike was killed closing the Hellmouth, a powerful spell was invoked to activate, or 'call' if you prefer, all of the potential Slayers." Wesley turned to search through the notes that littered the table. "We have already seen one instance in which a mentally unstable girl, one who was possibly psychic or otherwise aware of preternatural beings, became a Slayer with rather unfortunate results." He ignored Spike's snort at the understatement. "What is to prevent us from discovering that other potentials with unusual circumstances also became active Slayers as a result of that spell?"

"So, what? We now have a vamped Vampire Slayer on our hands? Damn, man. That just can't be good."

"But Harmony was dead when that spell was cast. How can a vampire become a Slayer?" Angel's disbelief irked Wesley for reasons he couldn't fully define.

"The spell has no precedent. There is no way to know what unexpected results have occurred."

"No." Xander's quiet voice broke through the debate. "Willow wouldn't do that."

"Sure, mate. Like Red's mojo never had 'unexpected results' before." Spike ignored the flash of betrayal in Xander's eye as he snarked.

"Whether Miss Rosenberg intended it or not, this is the most likely scenario." Wesley frowned. "Further, it explains Harmony's words to you. If she is a Slayer, she is also a vampire, another unstable entity, not entirely unlike Dana."

"This is nothing like Dana!" Xander fumed. "Dana was human. A human girl fucked up by the shit that happened to her. Harmony," he pointed furiously at the other room, "is a vampire. A soulless demon." He hated himself for reacting so strongly, but the need to defend his best friend and the entire Watcher/Slayer community was much easier to deal with than the fear and helplessness that the gloating from the possessed vamp had engendered.

"We're not saying that Willow did anything on purpose, Xander, really." Fred interjected earnestly.
"But this could be important. We've been trying to understand what's happening with this First Slayer and why she's attacking Spike and now you through dreams. None of our tests showed anything unusual in Spike's room, but if she's been possessing Harmony, then maybe we wouldn't have noticed anything. Harmony's presence was in Spike's hospital room, but we expected that, so we didn't think it meant anything."

"And if she went all Slayer-y, the nurse wouldn't have noticed anything till it was too late," Gunn agreed. "Makes sense that she woulda been staked easy."

"How long will she be out?" Angel interrupted the theorizing.

"She should be unconscious for some hours yet. I didn't want to chance hitting her with only one tranquilizer dart."

"Fine. Harmony later. Let's get back to what we need to do for Spike now." Spike blinked at his Sire's clear prioritizing. He had not experienced being first priority in the elder vampire's world in over a century, and not often then.

Fred took a deep breath and glanced at Wesley for approval. They had agreed that her recitation of research and potential plan would be better received than if Wesley spoke. The ex-watcher held in his own bitterness at the knowledge that Fred had a level of trust from the vampire that he no longer enjoyed.

"Okay, well, until this morning, we've only seen the First Slayer appear in dreams. Both the ones that Spike experienced after the attack and the ones that Xander told us about. In each case, the dreams came after an intense connection with a Slayer." She glanced around to make sure that everyone was tracking. "Xander said that last time Buffy confronted her in a dream and convinced her to go away. Basically, Buffy took control from her instead of the First Slayer controlling the dream. That got us thinking. All we need to do is give Spike a way to control the dreams, and that should make the First Slayer powerless." She grinned.

"Does what happened with Angel's crazy girl Friday make a difference to that theory?" Gunn threw out the suggestion despite Angel's clear unwillingness to address the issue.

"I doubt that it would make a difference in what we have devised." Wesley dismissed the concern.

"What's this big plan then? You're not planning on mojo'ing me, are you Percy?" This time it was Xander's turn to take a comforting step closer, but the rigidity of Spike's stance kept him from reaching out to touch. He berated himself because he knew his own retreat from the bed this morning and subsequent withdrawal lent to that tension. Confusion mounted as his desire for the vampire warred with his own insecurities and fears.

"Not magic," Fred chirped. "We're gonna use science."


"There's been lots of research on people learning to control their dreaming. The technique is called lucid dreaming. In it, the dreamer first trains himself to recognize when he's dreaming and then to take control of the direction of the dream."

"Sounds simple enough," Gunn agreed. "What's the catch?"

"Time," Angel said shortly. "Lucid dreaming takes time and practice. Some people never master it despite years of attempts."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Peaches."

"Yes, while that's true, I think we've found a way to get around that problem." Fred took a deep breath. "Dreaming really isn't anything more than electrical impulses in the brain, just like all thought. So with a combination of manipulating those impulses medically and applying the techniques of lucid dreaming, we should be able to put Spike into a dream state and then give him the control he needs to take over his dreams from the First Slayer."

"There are a few things we need to talk about first," she continued. "We're going to use a combination of hypnosis, manipulating electrical impulses, and lucid dreaming techniques. Essentially, we'll put you to sleep with hypnosis, take you to a dream state by manipulating your brain waves, and then use a simple signal to help you with the lucid dreaming, for example tapping fingers on the back of your hand. We'll use something tangible like that, something that someone outside the dream can do to help make the lucid dreaming that much easier."

"So I'll be dreaming, you pat me on the hand, and slayer bitch goes poof?"

"Um, well, essentially, yes?"

"Let's do this then. Sooner that bitch is out of my head, the better." Spike shrugged out of his duster. "Where do you want me doc?" He winked at Fred, who blushed.

"What if it doesn't work?" Xander blurted out. "What if this lucid dreaming thing doesn't work? I hate to be the voice of doom here, but I would have died the last time if Buffy hadn't gotten rid of her."

"Gimme a minute with the whelp." Spike grabbed Xander by the arm and ushered him into the hallway.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you?" He hissed. "You think just because we're not your precious Council, this can't work? We're supposed to trust in your girl Willow's oh-so-pure methods but not in Fred's?" Spike knew that Xander's trust or distrust of Angel's team was not the heart of the issue, but he reacted out of the frustration he had been feeling for the last few hours.

"No, that's not it," Xander insisted. "I just want us to think about this."

"Seems like 'thinking about this' has been the last thing on your agenda today, mate." Both knew that Spike wasn't talking about the plan Fred laid out.

"Spike," Xander cursed himself for sounding so broken. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I just…I don't want…what if something goes wrong?"

"What if it does?" Spike spoke harshly. "One less vampire in the world and Slayer life goes on as expected." Bitterness laced his words, and he wished he could take them back. Fighting with Xander wasn't helping anything, but he couldn't reign in the frustration at being pushed away. It smacked of his relationship with Buffy, and that was a path he had promised himself never to walk down again.

"I'm sorry. Is that what you need to hear, well, I am." Xander wrapped his arms around himself once more, as if that was the only comfort he allowed himself. "I'm sorry I freaked on you this morning."

"Just tell me why. Can you do that much? Thought everything was going fine. What did I do wrong?"

"It wasn't you. It's me." Xander paused. "And could I be any more cliché?" He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. "I'm not used to...I mean, I don't...Oh hell, Spike, I fucking fell apart
on you last night."

"Seems to me, I did the same to you."

Xander shook his head. "You don't understand. I let you in, let myself go, and I'm not the same guy that can do that anymore. Can't. Won't. Whatever. I haven't let anyone that close since before…"

Spike took in the misery on the man's face and chanced stepping closer. He lifted Xander's chin. "Look at me, pet." He waited for Xander to open his eye. "Not going anywhere." Slowly he leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on the trembling lips. Xander hesitantly gave himself over to the kiss, but then pulled back regretfully.

"You can't say that, Spike. What if this doesn't work? What if they're sending you to be killed with this plan? I can't watch you die."

Spike sighed and pulled Xander into a reluctant embrace. "You've been through more than any human should, pet. Don't want to put more on you."

The regret in Spike's voice pulled at Xander's heart. He tightened the embrace, trying to communicate need, want, desire, and fear through his actions.

"Promise me you'll kick her ass. Kick her ass and come back to me?"

Spike placed a gentle kiss on the warm neck, unsuccessfully attempting to mask his own fears. "Gonna try, pet. Promise you that much."

Xander pulled back and nodded shakily. Together they walked back toward the lab, each fearing that Fred's simple plan would go the way that most simple Scooby plans went and become far more complicated than anyone could have ever anticipated.
"I dunno, boss. I don't think the Senior Partners are gonna wanna get involved with this one."

"I don't care what they want or don't want. Spike was attacked here in their territory. If they don't want me to hold them responsible for that, then they better get involved."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one facing the big cat." Gunn scowled. "If it's even still the cat up there and not that howling abyss thing that showed up the last time we asked for their help on behalf of vampires."

"Who, what, and can I just add, huh?" Xander's glance darted back and forth between the vampire and lawyer. Fred and Wesley had clearly excused themselves from the discussion as they fiddled with dials on machines on the other side of the room.

Gunn ran a hand over his head and turned to face Xander and Spike as they re-entered the lab.

"He sendin' you to the White Room?" Spike asked tersely before Gunn could speak. Xander glanced at the strong arms that the vampire circled around himself in a gesture that was becoming all too familiar for Xander's liking. It meant that Spike felt threatened. "Not sure I want those wankers sticking their noses in."

"It's just a back-up measure, in case..." Angel trailed off.

"In case I screw this up, you mean." Spike sneered.

"That's not..." Angel stepped forward aggressively before pulling himself up short. "I want to make sure all our bases are covered. If they know something about this, I want to know."

"Still needing some back story here," Xander volunteered impatiently.

"The White Room is the conduit to the Senior Partners." Wesley stepped over to join the conversation.

"Those are the big evil guys that ran this place before you guys took over, right? And we're going to ask them for help, why?" Frustration tinged with a bitterness he couldn't fully suppress colored Xander's question.

Angel glared.

"They have been of use to use before," Wesley mused before adding, "when it fits with their own interests."

"No." Spike spoke with a quiet vehemence. "We do this," he gestured at the machines, "dream thing the way Fred planned it. No Senior Partners, no sodding Powers that Be." He stared at Angel until the older vampire nodded and looked away.

"Good then." Spike clapped his hands together. "Where do you want me, doc?"

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Xander forced himself to stay still during the twenty minutes it took to get Spike spread out on the hospital bed and hooked up to the machines. He could see Fred and Wesley's unspoken irritation with Angel's hulking presence as he lurked, watching over their movements with a lowered brow.
Jealousy pricked along Xander's skin, and he unwillingly conceded that Angel's actions screamed Sire. Despite the animosity between the vampires, Angel hadn't blown off the attacks on Spike. Instead, he had stepped up to look after his Childe. For that, Xander didn't know whether to respect him or hate him all the more for the shit he had put Spike through in the past.

"We're almost ready," Wesley attached the last of the wires to Spike's brow.

"We'll be monitoring your brain activity from over there," Fred pointed to the machine on the far wall. "Wes will help you get sleep using a hypnotic suggestion that will root the trigger for lucid dreaming, then put you to sleep. You should go almost immediately into a REM state for dreaming. We'll be able to tell when the dreams start, and then I'll tap on your hand. That will activate the trigger to give you control over the dream."

"All I gotta do is kick Slayer ass, then. Been there, done that." Xander could hear the tension under the cocky smirk. He clenched his fists, feeling more useless than usual.

Leaving Wes and Fred alone with Spike, the others retreated to the adjoining room to watch through the glass as the procedure began.

Tense silence overtook them as they waited and watched. The ease with which Wesley hypnotized the vampire seemed eerie and reminded Xander of watching Spike's eyes glaze over in a manner far too similar to his falling under the influence of the First's trigger. He shuddered as his foreboding grew. This wasn't going to work. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did.

Xander tried to shake off the feeling of impending doom, telling himself that he couldn't be objective after his own experiences with the First Slayer. He couldn't forget her words to him, however, nor Lorne's admonition. Yet here he was being useless again. What if this was letting her win? What would that mean for Spike?

"What's wrong?" Angel's voice crashed through his thoughts.

Xander shook his head but didn't break his stare at the prone figure that began to thrash on the bed as Fred tapped patiently on the back of the pale hand. He wanted to break in there, pull the wires from Spike's head and tear him away from whatever was happening in the dreams, but for all he knew that would kill Spike just as surely. He hadn't understood all of the intricacies of the machinery that Wes and Fred had explained to them.

"I hate this. Gimme a demon to pound on any day," Gunn muttered. "Or even a bit of fancy legal maneuvering over this waiting shit."

Xander ignored the muttering and watched with intense concentration as Spike's struggling increased. Suddenly the vampire lay still. Fred and Wesley poured over the readings flashing across the computer screens. Angel stormed into the room, hissing demands for explanations.

Helpless fear paralyzed Xander until he caught sight of tears leaking from Spike's closed eyes. That vision of Spike's pain galvanized him, and he turned to Gunn urgently.

"This White Room – can you take me there?"

"I dunno, man. Blondie there was pretty adamant about not wanting them involved."

"Something's wrong." Both men glanced at the increasingly frantic activity in the makeshift hospital room. "Right now I don't care who these guys are, but if they can help, then I want to meet them. Now."
Gunn stared at him for a moment, then nodded. Without a word to the others, they hurried to the elevators.

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The drawing room walls closed in on him, narrowing his vision to the figures rocking against the wall. His mother, the only childe he ever made, rubbed obscenely against his young vampire self as the First Slayer hissed in disgust. He watched his own hand come up to press the stake through the bosom that had comforted him as a child, and through the dust filling the air, the First Slayer sneered, "Killer." From his place in the corner of the room, Spike howled, overpowered by the guilt of having murdered his beloved mother not once but twice in the same day.

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Xander fidgeted with equal parts impatience and anxiety. Impatience won out slightly over the fear of what he might find waiting for him in the heart of the evil empire that the Council had adamantly cut all ties with. I can't let her win, can't let her have Spike. He watched Gunn punch in a sequence of floors, and his eyes widened as a single large button appeared on the panel.

"Ready to go down the rabbit hole?" Gunn pressed the glowing button with determination.

"If Keanu Reeves shows up, I'm so outa here," Xander muttered. They waited for the elevator to deliver them to the White Room.

The elevator doors didn't so much open as they did dissolve. Xander turned to comment on the weirdness, only to find himself alone in a very white, very empty room.

"This cannot be good." He glanced around frantically for Gunn or the elevator, but found neither.

"Hello?" His voice echoed. "Hello? Uh, here kitty kitty?"

"Hi Xander." The soft voice sent chills down his spine and broke open his heart. He turned slowly.

"I've died, haven't I? Useless Xander goes off to play the knight in shining armor and in the meantime the world ends, or did the building just blow up? I mean, I know there's supposed to be the whole white light thing, and, well, I guess this is white. Not exactly what I was expecting what with the walls and ceiling and floor and all." He trailed off as the kind eyes watched him.

"You're not dead, and the world hasn't ended. And," Tara put up her hand to forestall the next question, "I'm not the First either."

"Then, how?" His voice broke.

She frowned. "We don't have much time. The Senior Partners lent us the conduit, but they won't give us long."

"Us and huh?"

She smiled. "I've missed you, Xander. Missed all of you."

He blinked back tears, but forced himself to focus. "This is about Spike. Please tell me this is about Spike, that you can help him?"

"Yes, this is about Spike. The Powers That Be and the Senior Partners have both staked a claim on him, but the Powers can intervene in this, while the Senior Partners can't. The Slayer belongs to the
"I don't know how to stop her," Xander admitted painfully. "Lorne says that I'm letting her win, but I don't know how to stop her." As he spoke, the world around them shifted dramatically. The white room became a dusty, smoke-filled chapel lit only by the fires that burned in corners of the room.

"Sorry, luv. I don't speak Chinese."

Xander gasped at the vision before him. Spike held a young girl in his arms, breaking her, drinking her down. He glanced around at his surroundings and knew he was witnessing Spike's first Slayer kill.

"Tara?" He automatically whispered, not sure if the occupants of the chapel would be able to hear him, and he was fairly certain that he did not want to attract the attention of this Spike.

"They can't hear us or see us. But she can," Tara pointed. The First Slayer spit invectives at the duster-clad vampire huddled against a wall.

"What's going on? Where the hell are we?"

"She opened the door to Spike's dreams, and we've followed her."

"Um, okay, good, I guess. How do we stop it?"

"I can't do anything, Xander," Tara looked at him intently, "that's not why I'm here."

"It's why I'm here, isn't it?" He wished the fearful quaver hadn't been quite so prominent, but one look at Spike's suffering bolstered his determination to stand up to his nightmare. She nodded. "And you're here because…"

"Someone has to speak for her."

"So what does she have to say for trying to kill Spike?" Anger bled into the question. As his voice rose, the First Slayer swung around. She bared her teeth.

"The demon must be destroyed." Tara's voice, but Xander knew the sentiment belonged to the Slayer.

"Spike isn't that demon," he gestured to Spike wrapped in Druscilla's arms, "not anymore."

"This demon kills. The Slayer exists to destroy the demons, and he kills us." The First Slayer stalked between the huddled Spike and Xander as Tara spoke. As she finished, the scene shifted once more, leaving Xander struggling for his balance as they suddenly stood in a moving subway car.

This time Xander expected the scene, so he was unsurprised to see seventies punk Spike crouched over a black girl, breaking her neck. The wail that went up from the huddled Spike who was pulled along with them, however, stabbed him to the core. Enough. The bitch has tortured Spike enough.

"Yes, he did this, and yes, Slayers are supposed to kill demons. But you're missing the point here. He," he pointed to punk Spike who methodically stripped the leather duster from his kill, "is not the same demon as him." He swung his finger to point at the distraught figure who wept and clawed at his own face.

"Demon," the Slayer hissed before Tara could speak.

"No." Xander spoke vehemently. "He is more than the demon." Without turning from the Slayer, he
spoke to Tara. "She's not the only one who gets to pick where we are, right?"

"Nope," Tara answered quickly.

"Good." He concentrated on visualizing as he spoke. "The Slayer doesn't fight demons. She fights evil. Evil like Hell Gods." This time the Slayer gasped as they stood on the makeshift tower hundreds of yards above Sunnydale. "Here's your demon. See that innocent little girl? The Hell God wants her dead. That's evil, and that," he pointed once more, "is the one you dismiss as a demon trying to save her. Saving innocent little girls is good. Slayers don't kill what's good." He focused on the First Slayer, trying not to see the tormented vampire who had shifted with them.

"He fails. The demon is not strong enough to do what the Slayer must." Before them, Buffy leapt to her death. "Death is her gift. Only the Slayer is strong enough to bear it."

"But the slayer couldn't have done this alone, and it wasn't just Buffy being the slayer that made it possible. That's what you're still not getting," Xander insisted, feeling his advantage slip away. "She loved Dawn, and she loved the rest of us. That gave her the strength to do what she did, but she could never have gotten up here without Spike. He loved her enough to try to do what she wanted, what she needed. And he suffered for it." Below them Spike collapsed in tears as the Scoobies moved toward the Buffy's broken body. Suddenly the differences between the Spike below and the Spike at the top of the tower seemed to disappear as both grieved.

"Only the Slayer can keep the world safe." Xander was grateful that the arrogant comment was delivered in Tara's soft voice, otherwise he might have taken his chances trying to beat some sense into the volatile Slayer before him.

"You know, the only times I've hated Buffy, the only times that I've really not trusted her to do what was right was when she believed that crap. You think only the Slayer can keep the world safe? Well, newsflash—she's not the one who saved the world the last time around."

The tower transformed into the Hellmouth. Around them slayers fought against the vicious Turok-Han. The First Slayer roared impotently at the chaos.

"The Slayer isn't alone anymore. They're all slayers. But you know what, even though there's a whole world full of slayers just like you, none of them could stop this." He spoke furiously. He had to make her understand that this narrow-minded 'demon-bad, human-good' dichotomy just didn't work. Hell, he knew it wasn't the easiest concept to grasp, but he had managed it and so would she.

Slayers fled as vampires began burning into dust around them. "Buffy couldn't save the world this time." The observers turned to watch the flames dancing between the two figures at the foot of the stairs. "But Spike could." Xander's heart broke at the looks between vampire and slayer and the words of love spoken and denied.

Buffy fled as commanded, and Xander felt as though he was moving through molasses to reach the burning figure's side. "Spike did save the world." He clasped the burning hand and felt the flames leap to him, crawling up his arm and over his chest. In the brief moment before the flames claimed them both, he felt the vampire's hand squeeze his in grateful recognition, saw Tara's compassionate smile, and recognized that the First Slayer acknowledged his point with a quick nod. Then he knew only burning pain and darkness.
Chapter 12

In the lab, Spike lunged into wakefulness, hardly aware of his own weakness until his legs collapsed under him when his feet hit the floor. Vice-like arms surrounded him and dumped him unceremoniously back onto the gurney.

"Let me go, wanker." Spike struggled against the hand that held him down. "Xander!" he searched frantically. "Where's Xander?"

"Spike, what happened? What did you see?" Wesley spoke as he carefully began to remove the wires attached to the vampire.

"I have to find Xander." Spike made to rise from the bed once more.

"You're not going anywhere," Angel growled as he continued to press Spike into the mattress.

"Spike, please, we need to know what happened. We couldn't get you to respond for the longest time." Fred bit her lip as she watched the anxious vampire warily. "Xander's with Gunn. We'll find him, I promise," she hurried to reassure him, "but we need to know about the First Slayer. If she's, you know, going to come back or something."

"She's gone. Buggered off to whatever place she came from." Spike gave in and quit struggling. He didn't have the strength to fight off his Sire after the trauma of the dream, and he began to fear what he would find out when they did finally get around to looking for Harris.

"You're quite sure about that?"

Spike nodded.

"What happened?" Angel spoke bluntly, concern translating into brusqueness.

Spike sighed and raised a hand to cover his eyes. Bad enough he had to narrate what he had seen. The last thing he wanted was to see their expressions as he did it.

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"Mother fucking…" Gunn growled as he kicked the elevator, frantically pressing buttons.

"Whoa there, Nellie. I know we're supposed to take out the baddies, but what law did the elevator break?" Lorne snapped his cell phone closed and shoved it into his suit jacket pocket as he pressed through the small crowd that gathered to watch Gunn assault the elevator.

Unable to completely hide his panic, Gunn kept pushing buttons as he answered, "I can't get to the White Room. I took Xander up to see if we could help Spike, but it kept him and booted my ass back down here."

"Slow down." Lorne reached out to still the hand stabbing at the elevator panel. "You took Xander to the White Room because why?"

Gunn slumped back against the wall of the elevator. "He insisted. Said he had to do something to help. Fred and Wes have the bleached vamp downstairs hooked up to machines to make him dream. Gonna drive out that Slayer that's been stalking him, but it all went to shit. Now I can't get back up there, and he's stuck in the White Room."
Lorne shook his head, taking in all of the information. "If the Senior Partners don't want us up there, then we're not getting anywhere beating this metal box into submission."

"We gotta do something." Gunn drew back his hand and slammed the flat of it into the elevator wall in frustration. "I led him up there, Lorne. I was supposed to keep him safe."

"I'm not sure either one of us has the power to do that. This is mystical, big on the mystic." Lorne glanced thoughtfully upward. "I'm guessing this is something Xander had to do on his own."

"He's not one of us. He doesn't belong up there."

"At this point, we don't even know what's up there, do we?"

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, but it might mean we don't have anything to do with this, and going back up could make things worse for him as easily as they could make it better."

"Fuck," Gunn swore vehemently. "Better get down to the lab and let Angel know what's going on."

The elevator responded obediently to the request to return them to the laboratory floor.

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"Uhhhng," Xander groaned as the bright light in the Hellmouth faded to the starkness of the white room. He pulled himself upright, wincing at the aches that shot through his frame. Memory of the dream flooded him.

"Spike?" His frantic question echoed off the walls.

"He's safe from her now." Tara's quiet voice answered him.

"Is he okay?"

"Yes, your conviction taught her what she needed to see."

"She won't be back, right? 'Cause burning up in the Hellmouth? So something I don't want to go through again."

"That still depends on you," Tara held his gaze.

"What? What do I have to do with it??" He took an unwitting step backward.

"Slayer and Watchers aren't enough." Wisdom and sorrow blended into a sympathy that Xander recognized as purely Tara. "Without the compassion of the Guardians, balance becomes impossible, leaving blind and brutal war as the only option between Good and Evil."

"Tara, donut boy here, wanna dumb it down for the people watching at home?" Xander sputtered, wanting only to get back to the vampire he had seen suffering at the hands of the First Slayer.

"Xander," she chided, "you're not stupid. You have been invited to be a Guardian."

"Huh?"

"Slayers are called, created by Fate at the time of their birth. Watchers experience a similar call. They're often pressed into service through family obligations with little say in deciding their path. But
Guardians are invited to join the fight, just as Fate offered you that opportunity years ago by revealing who Buffy is."

"How come we've never heard about Guardians before? Shouldn't Giles have said something about that?" Xander narrowed his eyes suspiciously, suddenly very aware that he stood in what passed for the sacred center of Wolfram & Hart.

"Caleb killed the last Guardian of the old order. When Willow changed the Slayer legacy, she changed more than the slayers. You know that there are girls all over the world now trying to understand who they are, what they can do. The Watcher's Council will reform to teach them to fight against the darkness in the world, just as they did six thousand years ago."

"But that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Sure, it could be." Tara offered ambiguously. "The Powers recognize the value of allowing all potentials to be actual slayers. But at the same time, we saw what the outcome of the old Watcher-Slayer roles can be."

"A Council who sees the Slayer as nothing more than a weapon to use against demons," Xander responded flatly. "So where do these Guardians fit in?"

"The Council is the mind and the Slayer is the hand. Magic can bring spirit to the mix, but only the Guardian can act as the heart." She watched him carefully.

"The heart," he echoed hollowly. The dream images of ripping out slayers' hearts came unbidden.

"Your heart led you to intervene for Spike." The kind smile reached her eyes, a twinkle of merriment there leading Xander to wonder exactly how much the Powers knew about his relationship with the vampire.

"Uh huh." Best to stay non-committal about fucking—loving, whispered a traitorous voice in his mind—the undead.

"Xander, I know this is kind of a shock, but we don't have much time." The laughter left Tara's face.

"Let me guess, the Senior Partners want their sandbox back."

"Will you be a Guardian to the slayers?" Tara spoke insistently, ignoring his sarcasm.

"Hey, don't I get to think about it? I'm just regular guy, not much use in the battle against evil anymore. Unless, are there any cool superpowers that I should know about?"

"Xander," Tara reached out to touch him for the first time, laying her hand gently on his arm, grounding him in the face of an imminent panic attack. "The Guardian's strength comes from compassion. All that you said to the First Slayer—that kind of seeing is what balances the power and knowledge of the others. Guardians know their own hearts and help others to live and act from love."

"The Posers that Be have really fucked up this time, if a Guardian is all about love. You've seen my history on that score." He crossed his arms and glared at his feet.

"I've seen you save the world from the darkest evil by the power of your love alone."

Xander looked up sharply.
"I saw what Willow did." Tears slid freely down Tara's cheeks. "Thank you for saving her."

Suddenly discussion seemed irrelevant. He knew that his impulsiveness had gotten him in trouble more than once, but being a Guardian felt right. The sense of loss and disconnection that had plagued him in the long months since the destruction of Sunnydale began to lift. Being with Spike had him listening to his heart once more, and he gave in to the inclination to gather Tara into a comforting embrace.

"So, no cool powers, huh?" He spoke against the top of her head, enjoying the feeling of being a comfortador once more.

She gave him a quick squeeze before drawing back. "Just follow your heart, Xander. It's all you've ever needed and all they'll need from you."

Elevator doors pinged open, and Tara gestured him in. "Go find your vampire." She winked at him as the doors slid closed.

"Just follow my heart. Gotta know that's gonna end well." He muttered with good-humor as he felt the elevator descend toward the vampire he hoped would be waiting for him.

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"I'm telling you, I went up with him, and he just disappeared." Gunn gasped out the words as Spike shoved him against the wall once more. The discussion had once again turned to the missing Scooby after Spike relayed the dreams while Fred checked over his vitals, such as they are for a vampire, and declared him fit.

"He's human. Humans don't just disappear." Spike growled and shook off Angel's restraining hand.

"Enough! We need a plan, and you two fighting isn't gonna help us figure out what happened to Xander." Fred stood with hands on hips, eyes flashing. "Charles, you went to the White Room, but only Xander got out of the elevator, and then Spike saw him at the end of his dream, burning up in the Hellmouth?"

Both men nodded.

"Perhaps the conduit provided the means for Mr. Harris to enter and share in Spike's dreams," Wesley offered.

"Uh, not to risk bodily harm here, but I agree." Lorne glanced cautiously at the still tense Spike. "Judging by what I read from our little songbird here, Xander is part of this as much as you are."

"And you neglected to mention that because?" Spike growled, eyes flashing yellow.

"Hey, hey!" Lorne held up his hands and took a step backwards, "Don't shoot the messenger. Psychic-client privilege. I told him, and if he didn't say anything, I'm sure he had reasons."

"I don't care what you saw. Spike's right. Humans don't just disappear. I want to get up to that room." Angel strode toward the elevators with the rest of his team and a gob-smacked Spike trailing behind him. He hit the Up arrow and turned back to issue commands.

"Wes, I want everything you have on contacting the conduit. Gunn, you're going to try to access the White Room the usual way. Fred, find anything in the lab that we might be able to use to bypass the control panel." Angel snapped orders, unaware that the elevator doors behind him had opened until he heard the throat-clearing cough.
"If you're waging war on the Senior Partners, don't let me stand in your way." Xander stepped from the elevator cautiously.

"Actually, we were on our way to find you," Wesley offered with good humor. "Gunn was concerned that he had lost you to the conduit."

"Hey!" Gunn protested, indignant.

"Right, good work." Angel shifted awkwardly. "You okay?" At Xander's nod, he stated, "Good. Back to work, everybody. We've got the D'Varnak conference in two days, and I don't want any surprises."

"Uh, boss? What about Harmony?" Angel looked at Gunn blankly. "You know, vampire slayer vampire?"

"My guess is that if the First Slayer has retreated, she will be free of the influence," Wesley spoke with confidence. "However," he frowned, "we will need to determine what to do with a vampire who is also a Slayer."

"You know, it could be why she was so bad at being evil. I have this theory…" Fred began to pull Wesley in the direction of the labs, chattering excitedly about Harmony's unusual status.

"Mr. Harris?" Wes paused before following Fred. "I would very much appreciate an account of your experience with the conduit. We have Spike's version; however, it would be prudent to compare the two so that we can determine if there will be any lingering ramifications from today's adventure."

"Um," Xander hesitated, glancing at Spike.

Wesley noted the discomfort and considered Lorne's earlier disclosure that he had read the man's involvement with the First Slayer. "Perhaps you could speak with Lorne, and he can write the report."

Lorne placed his hand on Xander's shoulder, "C'mon muffin, I'm sure you could use a pick me up, and I've just got a bottle of the good stuff from Uma and Ethan."

Gunn and Angel watched after them before deliberately going to their own offices.

Lorne led Xander and Spike to his office, cheerfully pulling bottles from his cabinet.

"What'll it be, boys?"

"I'm thinking water would be good here." Xander sat carefully on the leather couch, wanting to be close to Spike, but confused by the vampire's stubborn silence.

"Don't suppose you got any JD in there?" Spike leaned insolently against the desk, arms crossed in front of him.

Lorne swiftly filled glasses and passed them around before settling at the opposite end of the couch from Xander.

"Uh, where should I start?" Xander rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously.

"How about the part where you decided to rush off to face the Senior Partners by yourself?" Spike accused.

Xander startled at the venom in the vampire's voice, but Spike stared resolutely at the floor, avoiding
his gaze.

"I had to do something," Xander hated himself for the petulance that crept into his voice.

"What made you decide that you had anything to do with this?" Spike could no longer stand still and began pacing.

"He did." Xander shrugged and gestured to Lorne.

"As fascinating as this little by-play is, maybe we should stick to facts for the moment, eh, boys?" Lorne sipped from his drink casually.

Xander gave Spike one more mutinous look before focusing on Lorne again. "I went up with Gunn, only when the elevator closed, he wasn't there. Someone else was." He shifted uncomfortably, unsure how much he wanted or needed to reveal.

"Someone you knew?" Lorne hazarded a guess.

"Yeah," Xander sighed and watched Spike's tense back as the vampire ceased his pacing to stare out the window. "It was this girl I knew, we knew, who died a couple years back." If possible, the tension in Spike's back ratcheted up another notch. "It was Tara." Xander dropped his eyes to stare at the bottle of water in his hands.

After Xander gave the outlines of his journey through Spike's dreams for Lorne to report back to Wesley, Lorne had declared himself satisfied and shooed them from his office with a suggestive wink.

"So," Xander offered self-consciously. He had an urge to run his hands over the vampire to make sure that the burning he had felt in the dream hadn't left any wounds, but he held back. "You okay?"

Spike nodded, not trusting himself to speak without taking Xander to task for risking himself in the White Room.

"Um, that's good then."

Silence settled awkwardly.

"Look, can we get out of here? I've had about all I can take of offices and hospitals for one day."

Spike nodded again and spun away to stalk down the stairs to the garage. No way was he letting Xander back into the elevator that had spit him out into dreamland to be flambéed.

During the ride back to the apartment, Xander's heart sank. So much had happened since the drive in that morning, but here they were ending the day in the same tense silence that began it.
Chapter 13

Xander stared after the vampire as he slammed into the apartment and headed for the refrigerator to liberate a beer. He had a moment of wondering if the last twenty-four hours had even happened or if he was in a déjà vu-ing loop of some kind. He frowned as Spike opened the beer and then turned to shove the bottle at him. *Ok, not a repeat of yesterday.* He accepted the beer and watched as Spike grabbed another, banging it open on the side of the counter. The vampire drank as he paced the kitchen. Enough was enough.

"What the fuck crawled up your ass?"

Spike glared at him, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"Look, I get that you're pissed at me. Maybe if you actually told me what was going on under that layer of bleach we could deal with it."

The vampire's glare slid away from him to the bottle in his hands. Xander took an involuntary step back, remembering the shattering projectile bottle from yesterday.

"Not gonna hit you, wanker." Spike dragged a hand through his hair, willing himself to calm down.

"So talk to me."

"And what should we talk about, Harris? You running off to face the Senior Partners on your own?"

He shrugged. "For starters, I guess. Is that what has you so pissed off?"

Spike's glare turned incredulous. "The fact that you can ask that bloody question shows how stupid you are. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about helping a friend who looked like he was about to be destroyed by the First Slayer." Xander spoke heatedly.

"It wasn't your fight! You had no right to go barging in." Spike resumed pacing, unable to squelch the fear that returned at the thought of Xander in the White Room on his own.

"You were dying! That stuff Fred and Wes tried wasn't helping. The machines were going crazy, and they couldn't do anything. I had to try something." Xander grew angry at the accusations.

"Vampire, you git. Takes a stake or sunlight to kill me, not a sodding dream." Spike sneered.

"Slayer, you asshole. Who's to say she couldn't kill you in a dream? You didn't see what was going on. Fred was practically frantic. She said your brain was dying. Maybe your body would have survived whatever that bitch was gonna do to you, but you would have been dead." Xander slammed his bottle down on the kitchen counter, making the instinctive move to wrap his arms around himself as he relived the desperation at the thought that they were going to lose the vampire.

"And you thought you could help by going to the Senior Partners?"

Spike's question may have emphasized the lunacy of approaching the evil that owned Wolfram and Hart, but Xander heard the expected disbelief that he would have any useful help to offer. The comment bit deep.
"Is that what bugs you so much? That the Slayer's donut boy managed to save your ass? Sorry if I got in the way of you being mind-fucked, but I thought you might want to avoid becoming a vegetable." He stalked to his bag and shoved in the clothes that were hanging out, yanking the zipper viciously as he fought to control his hurt. What the hell had Tara been thinking when she told him to follow his heart? This is where it lead. Pain upon pain. Thank all the gods that he had managed to keep from falling any deeper for the acerbic vampire. It was just sex. He could walk away from sex.

He stood and slung the bag over his shoulder. "It's been fun. Have a great life, Spike."

Spike watched with growing disbelief as it registered that the man actually planned to leave. He growled and slammed the door shut before Xander could fully open it.

Xander threw the bag down against the wall.

"What the hell do you want from me, Spike?" He clenched his fists. "You want an apology? Not gonna happen. I did what I had to. I would do it again. I know I'm no slayer or witch or even an all-powerful vampire," he laid on the sarcasm, "but did it ever occur to you that this might be my fight as well? That there was a reason that I had to be there?"

Spike's eyes flashed yellow as he took in the trembling form. Anger and misery rolled off the man in equal parts. He stamped down on the anger and tried to address Xander's statement rationally. Since the debriefing with Lorne, he had wondered exactly what went on in the White Room once the First Slayer had retreated, and he had a feeling that was part of what had the man wound so tight.

"So tell me the reason. Tell me it wasn't just you throwing yourself into the thick of things without any consideration of the fact that you could get killed." He watched as Xander crossed his arms and glared at the floor.

"It doesn't matter why I did it."

"Matters to me."

"I told you I had to do something. Gunn said that maybe going to the White Room would help."

"And why did you think it had to be you going up there, mate? Charlie-boy has a pass to get up there, but the rest of us steer clear."

Xander's head came up as he stared at Spike with blatant shock. "You think I should have sent him up alone? Are you damaged? He never dealt with the First Slayer before. There's no way I was gonna chance getting somebody else killed when it was me who insisted on going up there. I know you think I'm just some weak human, but give me a fucking break, Spike. I'm not that much of an asshole."

Spike shook his head. "Not weak. Bloody careless with your own safety when you get going, but never weak."

"Oh." Xander struggled to process that. "Is that why you're pissed? 'Cause I could have gotten hurt?"

It was Spike's turn to look away.

"Spike, I could have been hurt every day for the last eight years. Hanging around with slayers has never exactly been safe for us human types." The vampire moved to speak, but Xander held up his hand to stop him. "I know. I know. Fragile human is stupid for fighting the monsters. But I can't sit back and do nothing. I know about the monsters, and when people I care about are threatened, I
couldn't live with myself if I stood back and did nothing just on the off-chance that I might end up dead."

"And your Scooby mates are okay with that?" Spike mocked. "You ending up dead? 'Cause I'll tell ya, mate, you think I'm pissed off now? If you got yourself dead..." He couldn't continue.

A little voice in Xander's head broke into the Snoopy dance. *Spike likes me!* The voice got a stern slap upside the head, however, as Xander reminded himself that getting emotionally involved was very much a bad idea.

"I didn't end up dead. And I know you don't want to hear this, but I did have to be there."

"Lorne tell you that, or was it Tara?" Spike asked shrewdly.

"Something like that," Xander answered evasively. Once he had left the White Room, the confidence he had about accepting the position as a Guardian had faded, although he still felt the rightness of the decision. The thought of saying it out loud? Well, it just made the whole thing seem more ridiculous. He had no doubt that it would sound that way to anyone else. He agreed with Tara that the way they were gathering slayers now and isolating them from family and friends was akin to the way the Watcher's Council had operated for centuries, and he had begun to wonder if tearing them from their homes was what the heart-removing in his dreams meant. After all, Buffy was the longest living slayer in history, and she had done that, in part, by being supported by her family and the Scoobies. But he wasn't anybody special, just somebody who still cared deeply about his friends who were working so hard to rebuild and move on, despite his attempts to convince himself that he could walk away any time he wanted to.

"Xander," Spike prompted, concerned by the man's unhappy introspection. "What happened up there?"

Xander looked away. "You were in the dreams. You saw."

"After that."

Xander shrugged.

"Alright. Sit." Spike grabbed him by the shoulder and manhandled him over to the couch. He shoved Xander down and stood over him, arms crossed.

"If you won't tell me what happened, tell me why you won't tell me. After everything that's gone on the last couple days, you owe me that much."

Xander stared at his hands. Part of him wanted to share with Spike, wanted someone to sort through the prospect of what it meant for him to be a Guardian when the Council seemed to have no prior experience working with them. The rest of him said that telling anyone was a bad idea, and telling Spike would get him outright disbelief at best and mockery at worst.

"Nothing happened."

"New question, git. Keep up. I thought," he bit back a growl, "thought maybe we were friends, didn't I? Something big happened up there beyond standing up to that slayer bint." He relaxed his menacing stance and tried to ignore the hurt at being shut out again by someone he cared for.

Xander glanced up and caught the flash of sadness on the vampire's face. Guilt warred with shame. He hated bringing that expression to Spike's face.
"Look, it's not you." He blew out a frustrated sigh. He sat back on the couch, wishing he could just curl up in a corner and hide away until he made sense of all that had passed in the last twenty-four hours. Instead, he unthinkingly gripped his arms around himself. After the last year and closing himself off as much as possible from connecting to anyone in the wake of Anya's death, all this emotion upset that equilibrium he had worked so hard to maintain.

Spike recognized the standard Harris gesture of self-protection, and it only made him angrier. He should have just let the man leave. It would have been easier than fighting for his trust when he clearly didn't want to give it.

"Forget it. You want me to back off, fine. Don't have to tell me a sodding thing. My mistake for caring." He threw himself down onto the couch as far from Xander as he could get and flipped the TV on, scrolling through channels, telling himself he didn't care that Xander's hands gripped just a bit tighter and the man sunk in on himself that much further.

"Yeah, it was," Xander agreed sullenly.

Spike clicked the TV off and tossed the remote onto the table before turning to stare. "It was a mistake to care," he clarified slowly.

"Jesus, Spike. That shouldn't be a difficult concept," Xander spat out bitterly.

In a move too fast for Xander to follow, Spike had him pinned to the back of the couch. Eyes flashed yellow as he growled. "Enough of that self-pitying not-worth-anyone-caring crap. You saved me today. Yeah, and that scared me 'cause it coulda got you killed. I coulda got you killed."

Xander shivered under the weight of the yellow gaze, turned on and afraid because he was turned on. A vampire holding him down shouldn't bring his cock back into the game. He struggled to pay attention to the words.

"Fucking hell, Xan," Spike closed his eyes against the concern and arousal that thrummed through him. "Why won't you let me in?"

"I can't, Spike." Xander whispered hoarsely. Desperation had him suddenly struggling against the powerful arms that held him down. He had to get away before the need became too much and they ended up back in bed with the nakedness. Sex this time wouldn't be casual, and he had a feeling that Spike knew that as well.

"Stop. Xander. Stop it!" Spike shouted to get the attention of the panicking man. Xander stilled. "Not gonna do anything you don't want." Spike gentled his hold and crouched down in front of Xander, trying to shake off his confusion. "Just wanna understand, okay?"

Xander brought his eye up to meet the concerned blue ones. The depth of feeling smashed at the walls around his heart that were already shaky at best. He wanted the vampire, no doubt there, and he could feel himself nearing the edge between lust and love. He had to save himself from making that mistake again. He unfolded his arms to reach out and stroke Spike's cheek with one hesitant finger.

"We don't exactly live a life that's conducive to this, and I'm not strong enough to lo...to care about someone and lose them again. I wish I was, but I know I'm not. So I can't let you any closer." He spoke with certainty and sorrow.

"Bollocks," Spike answered softly. He let his desire show clearly, unwilling for there to be any misunderstanding. "I want you, Xan, no mistake about that. Coulda lost you today, and you know
what I woulda regretted?"

Xander shook his head mutely.

"Not any of the times between us, not touching you, not seeing you let go and come so beautiful." Xander blushed and shifted uncomfortably. "Wouda regretted not trying harder to break down those walls you got up trying to keep yourself safe, not getting to touch your heart like I got to touch your body." His hands reflexively tightened on Xander's arms as he felt the man pulling back. "I know there's a chance of pain. Love's bitch here. Been through my share of pain and more. But I never regretted loving. If you really think there's nothing here, I can back off. But don't lie to me, pet."

"Spike," Xander's voice broke and he cleared his throat to try again. He had to be strong, but he refused to let himself lie to the vulnerable vampire before him. "I want you, too. You know that." He gestured toward his lap and blushed. "I care, but it has to stop."

"Why?"

"Because," he groped for a reason other than the one he had already offered and had rejected. "I have to go back to London, you know, the Council. It wouldn't work--you here and me there."

"Not much of a reason." Spike stroked the back of his hand over Xander's jean-clad erection. "Neither of us knows the future for certain, do we?" He turned his hand and cupped the man's groin, basking in the arousal that surrounded them, wanting more.

"Uhhhn," Xander closed his eyes and dropped his head back on the couch as his cock leapt under the vampire's gentle touch. His body wanted nothing more than to give in to the sensations, but he struggled against it.

Spike sensed the struggle and increased the pressure. As Xander's lust-glazed eyes opened, Spike leaned forward slowly. He watched the brown eye track his progress as he pressed between legs that fell open to accommodate him.

"Please," Xander moaned, hardly knowing whether he was asking Spike to stop or do more.

"Yeah, pet," Spike whispered as he brought his own hard cock into contact with Xander's and captured the warm lips in an open-mouthed kiss.

For long moments, tongues tangled and hips rocked in increasing friction, allowing the heat to build.

Xander groaned and admitted to himself that he wanted nothing more than to be back in Spike's bed, naked, hard and filled by the vampire. He knew that he would go back to England and the Council, that this would never work in the long-term, but that certainty now argued for taking what he wanted for this one night. At least he would know what it was like to have Spike fuck him, and maybe, just maybe, that memory would be enough.

"Please, Spike. Need you." Xander's hips thrust helplessly against the vampire nestled between his legs.

"What do you need, Xan?" Spike murmured against spit-slick lips.

"You...inside me." He reached between them to grasp the vampire's hard cock. "Need you to fuck me."

The combination of Xander's words and his warm hand had Spike panting with desire. He didn't
stop to question the change of mind. Instead he levered himself to his feet and pulled Xander toward the bed, deftly working at undressing them both as they moved.

In what seemed like seconds, the vampire had him spread-eagled on the bed, kneeling between his open legs, ravishing his mouth with strong kisses. Xander wrapped his arms around the pale torso, pulling Spike flush against him, gasping as their cocks pressed together. His hips thrust involuntarily at the contact.

"Please, Spike." Having given in to his desire, his need to have the vampire inside him grew to impossible proportions. He couldn't wait.

Spike luxuriated in the hot body writhing underneath him. Their cocks slid easily against one another, but he wanted desperately to come inside the man, imagining how hot and tight that grasping channel would be around him.

"Yeah, want you, Xan." He gasped between kisses. "Love you."

Xander couldn't repress the full-body shudder that when through him at the vampire's words. He didn't want love, couldn't have love. He needed to be fucked. Hard, fast, and now. He released Spike and pulled his knees up, offering himself.

The sight of Xander spread open for him shattered any thoughts of restraint, and Spike grabbed for the lotion on the bedside table, spilling it over his uncoordinated fingers to rub it into the man's welcoming hole. He watched as Xander threw his head back on the pillow, breath coming faster and heart pounding. He scissored his fingers, focusing on making the still-regenerating nerves obey as he coaxed the strong ring of muscle to relax.

"Now, now, fuck me, dammit." Xander chanted.

"Shhh, pet. Gonna have you. Gonna make you feel good." He increased his speed and depth as Xander pressed against his fingers. When he withdrew his hand, Xander whined.

"Ready, luv?" At Xander's frantic nod, he positioned his cock at the man's entrance, forcing himself to move slowly so as not to hurt his lover. Xander was tight, and he didn't want to cause pain by thrusting too hard, too fast. His care was roughly pressed aside, however, by Xander's sharp push back against him.

"Oh fuck," Spike breathed as Xander's heat enveloped him.

"Yeah, fuck," Xander agreed hoarsely. "Fuck me. Need you. Need this." He pressed up once more, taking Spike inside himself fully.

"Gonna fuck you," Spike soothed as he adjusted his weight on his arms, preparing to move inside that grasping channel. He slid out slowly before pressing back in, making sure to slide the head of his cock against Xander's prostate with each thrust. They writhed together as the vampire set an easy rhythm.

"More," Xander gasped. Spike's declaration of love still resonated in his head, and he wanted to escape that and lose himself in the sensations coursing through his body. He reached a hand down to pull on his own cock, wanting more stimulation until all became bodies and fucking.

"So beautiful, Xan," Spike murmured, his eyes raking over the glistening body beneath him. He leaned in to kiss the full lips as he prepared to increase his thrusting.

Xander's eye opened as he felt Spike shift above him, and he turned his head away from the kiss. At
the same time, he reached up to grab Spike's ass and forcibly increase the strength of the vampire's fucking.

The vampire's head dropped forward as his cock slid deep, he felt Xander clenching his ass around him. He struggled to regain control and keep from pounding into the human with all his demonic strength, but Xander seemed to have other ideas as he continued to yank Spike forward with each thrust.

Spike faltered under the punishing rhythm, and he frowned down at Xander's face, not liking the painful concentration that darkened his features.

"Xan, luv?" He tried once more to kiss the panting mouth, but Xander turned away once more. His stomach sank and his erection suddenly became less urgent, although the stimulation still had him rock hard.

"Luv," he tried again, his heart sinking as memories of another wounded human begging him to fuck harder, fuck faster, refusing any intimate, loving gestures. "Stop, Xander, wait."

"No." Hips lifted off the bed, slamming into him. "Need this." Sheer determination had Xander gripping Spike hard enough to leave bruises, and he felt himself tear a bit as his uncoordinated effort had him thrusting erratically.

Shocked into stillness at the sudden scent of blood, Spike flashed into game face and pinned the man's hips to the bed. He growled a warning that had Xander finally meeting his eyes.

The ridges and yellow eyes slid away to reveal hurt and confusion swimming in a clear blue gaze. Xander blinked and looked away. He allowed his legs to lower back down to the mattress as he tried frantically to think of a way to extricate himself from the mortifying position. He swallowed heavily and clenched his hands in the sheets.

Spike bit back several accusatory comments before he gave up and sunk down on the rigid body, resting his forehead against Xander's chest.

"You want me to hurt you?" He finally asked in a small voice.

"What?" Xander startled at the question. "No. No. I...I just wanted..." He blew out a harsh sigh. "God, Spike. I'm so screwed up."

"And you thought a brutal fuck from a monster would sort you out?" Spike lifted up to look at the pained face. "I've played that part before, and it didn't work out well that time either." He felt ridiculous with his hard cock still up Xander's ass, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away completely, not if the situation could be saved. For that to happen, though, it would take Xander being honest with him. He remembered the gentle arms that had held him in the hospital, the welcoming heart that had held onto the fear and pain with him. He wanted that Xander back with him, the one who could be fully present, not half locked away in some place in his own head.

"Talk to me, pet." He stroked gentle fingers down Xander's cheek.

"I want you so much," Xander admitted as his eye filled with tears.

"You have me, luv. Told you that."

Xander shook his head as a tear trickled down his cheek. "I'm scared," he whispered.

"Tell me, Xan. Let me make it better, luv," Spike begged. The man clearly held too much pain, and
"You can't. Nothing you can do or say will make it better. Don't you get that? That's why I thought I could have this, if I didn't want too much, just fucking, just feeling you in me. It would be enough."

His words tumbled out, hitching as the tears came faster.

With an effort, Spike managed to carefully turn them so that they lay still connected but on their sides, and he wrapped his arms tightly around the distraught man.

"Didn't want to just fuck you," Spike admitted. "Wanted to make love to you."

The vampire's words shattered into his soul, and Xander once again heard Tara's admonition to follow his heart. Still he fought against it.

"Don't." He spoke harshly. "Don't love me, Spike. It won't end well."

"Xander, luv, you haven't even let it start, and you're focused on it ending badly?"

"It always ends. And it always ends badly," Xander spoke bitterly, feeling an unexpected surge of anger. "And Spike? It's going to end tomorrow as soon as I walk out that door to go back to the Council. You know it won't work."

"So this was what? A fuck for the road?" Spike narrowed his eyes as he took in the miserable face. "I know you, Xander. You don't do casual sex with people you care about."

"People change." Xander shuddered as he thought about the one night stands that he had accumulated in the last year. He felt a wave of self-disgust for the way that he had tried to lump Spike into the same category.

"Sometimes," Spike agreed. "Sometimes people do things to protect themselves, to keep from getting hurt. But white hats don't suddenly decide to go around using people and raping their friends."

"I didn't!" Xander's eye flew open as he stared at the anger and hurt whirling through blue eyes that held nothing back.

"Yeah, if I let you keep on the way we were going, it would have been a helluva lot closer to that than a fuck between friends." As the shame and self-loathing filled Xander's face, Spike continued to meet his eye, willing the man to face the fear and anger that he had repressed for too long. He still had an uneasy feeling about what could have happened in the White Room, and he had an equally strong certainty that it all tied together somehow.

"God, Spike. That wasn't what I wanted."

"I know, pet. S'why I stopped."

Silence fell for several moments as Spike waited, and Xander struggled to make sense of the emotion roiling through his head and heart.

"I don't want to be so afraid, but I don't know how to stop." He spoke brokenly.

Spike sighed softly. "There's no guarantees, pet. Can't tell you that you won't ever hurt again, but closing yourself off isn't doing you any good."

"You don't know the half of it." Xander unwittingly pressed closer to the vampire as he felt the guilt for having turned away from his friends and their rebuilding efforts for so long.
"Tell me," Spike repeated.

Xander took a deep breath and hid his face in the vampire's neck, needing to not watch those expressive eyes as he spoke.

"You were right about there being more, with Tara, I mean, after the dreams." He paused, gathering courage. "The First Slayer showing up again was...it was partly my fault." He felt more than heard Spike begin to speak. "No, don't argue. It was. My dream about ripping out slayers' hearts? It's because I was supposed to be, I dunno, paying attention or something to their hearts or maybe more like to their connections with people. The First Slayer...well, she likes it when they're cut off. It's why she was happy about me taking their hearts 'cause it meant that they were gonna be the solitary warriors that she was created to be."

"But Buffy wasn't like that," Spike stated.

"No, and that's why she lived so long, I think. She loved all of us, and we loved her. It gave her a reason to fight. I'm helping take that reason away from all the new slayers, setting them up with nobody around but other slayers and watchers, taking them away from everyone they love."

"You're not doing that all by yourself," Spike pointed out, frowning.

"But I saw it happening, and I didn't let myself care about it. Besides, it was easier for me that way. It meant I didn't have to worry about getting attached. Or getting hurt."

As important as all of this was, Spike felt like they were getting further away from the core of the problem rather than closer with all this focus on the Council's rebuilding efforts.

"What made you stop caring?"

"I had to. It hurt too much to care. Stopped seeing any of my friends. Stopped trying to connect with anybody."

"Sounds bloody lonely, pet."

Xander shrugged awkwardly in Spike's arms.

"Now I'm supposed to go back. Tara...she asked me to be a Guardian." He fell silent. Spike tried to sort out where he had heard of Guardians before. An image of an ancient wisp of a woman flitted across his brain.

"You mean one of those bints that watch over the Watchers?"

Xander snorted at the description. "Yeah, only not so much with the bint part. She said that the only way to keep from going back to the old way where the slayer was just a weapon in the hand of the council was that there had to be someone caring enough to guard their humanity." He paused as he recollected the way Tara had explained it. "It's like the Watchers are the brain and the Slayers are the hand and the witchy folk are the spirit, and the Guardians are the heart." He couldn't help but wince. "I'm supposed to be the heart, but I've been screwing that up. How am I supposed to go back and be a Guardian? Even if everyone actually believes what Tara told me?"

Spike stroked the dark hair comfortingly as he considered his words. "Seems like this whole Guardian thing is just doing what you've always done."

"Feels like that was a long time ago. I don't know if I can be that way now."
"Sounds like what you've been doing here with me," Spike suggested. "At least when I'm the one who's being threatened. You followed your heart up to the White Room, didn't you? Guessing you listened to your heart in coming here at all."

Xander stilled. He gripped the vampire tighter. "Couldn't lose you, too."

"Then let me love you, Xan." Spike pressed light kisses into the dark hair, stroking his hand down the tense back.

"I want that," Xander spoke quietly, shaking at the admission.

Spike's heart soared at the whispered words.

"Spike?"

"Yeah, luv?"

"Will you make love to me?" Xander pulled back, afraid but feeling oddly lighter for having laid his burdens in the arms of this beautiful creature without being rejected or derided.

"With pleasure," Spike gently undulated his hips, his cock twitching with renewed fervor.

Xander gasped as his prostate bore the brunt of that fervor. He surged forward to claim Spike's lips in a kiss, allowing himself to feel the fullness of his desire for the first time. He melted into the heat of lips and tongues sliding and tangling. He delved deeply into the cooler mouth, wanting to be as close as possible to the vampire now that he had given himself permission to care. The fear of being hurt still threatened, but he stubbornly ignored it. That fear had had him nearly raping Spike in the effort to take selfishly, and he wanted to make up for that. His hands stroked at hard arms, and he slid fingers between them to pull at Spike's nipples.

The passion that Xander poured into the kiss along with his wandering hands soon had Spike back on the edge of orgasm. He turned them so that he once again nestled between Xander's legs and reestablished his earlier gentle but thorough thrusts.

"God, Spike, so good." Xander gasped between kisses, unwilling to pull away from the talented tongue for long. Each kiss seemed to sink deeply into him, rebuilding his wounded soul.

Soon, Spike felt Xander's muscles tighten, and he reached down to stroke Xander's hard cock in time with his thrusts.

Xander stiffened as sparks shot down his spine, but still he didn't pull away, and he came gasping his pleasure into Spike's mouth. His clenching ass had Spike coming in a few more short strokes, filling him with the vampire's cool release.

Spike collapsed on top of the warm body, and their kisses became more languid.

"Love you, Xan," Spike murmured, snuggling close.

Xander took a deep breath. "Love you, too." He stared at the pleased shy expression on the vampire's face, and then he couldn't help it. He burst out laughing. "I love you," he repeated between giggles.

Spike arched an eyebrow as he watched the hilarity.

"Sorry," Xander gasped as he struggled for control. "Not laughing at you." He sobered quickly as he
considered that Spike might actually think he was laughing at him. "I do love you. I never thought I would say that to anyone again, but it's true." A grin split his face. "I'm in love with you."

"Feels bloody nice, doesn't it." Spike couldn't help but grin back.

"Yeah. Yeah, it really does."

"Still worried that it's all gonna end badly?" Spike didn't want to ask, but he couldn't stop himself.

Xander considered the question seriously. "Yeah, I am. But you're right. There aren't any guarantees. I want this. I want you. I hated the person I was becoming, all closed off, but I couldn't find my way out of it." He closed his eye. "Maybe that's part of why I came here. You wouldn't let me be that person." He reopened his eye to smirk at the vampire. "Not that this is exactly how I saw it all playing out."

Spike kissed the smirk away before allowing Xander to continue.

"We might never have been the best pals, but you never backed away from telling me the truth. I needed that." Xander returned the kiss. "Needed this more. You gave me back my heart." He rolled his eyes as he heard the words over again in his head. "And we've now reached the sappy post-coital part of the evening."

"Sod off. I like it. I like that I gave you back your heart 'cause it means I get to share it with you." Spike's smug grin slid into a yawn as the day caught up with him. He carefully slid from Xander's ass and gruffly pulled the covers up over them, snuggling close to that enticing warmth.

"Now go to sleep."

Xander chuckled, but agreed that sleep would be welcome. There would be time enough in the morning to deal with the practicalities of loving one another but living apart.

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