Truth In Madness

Summary

Madness doesn't make you useless, and a costume-change proves just that. YAHF, this time with Xander as the Cheshire Cat. It's amazing what some cat ears and a painted on grin can do.

(Yes I'm late to the game, but I think it's pretty neat :P)
Quotes, grin-dropping, and a guest appearance of Soldier!Xander can all be found here!

Notes

See end note regarding terminology, and a mild warning for use of language.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It was very, very tempting to talk the kid out of getting the $2 gun, but there were a few other interesting things in the Under $5 bin. He didn’t feel like returning the fatigues from the army surplus so maybe he’d mix things up a bit, show off some creativity of the Xan-Man…. Maybe. Or he might skip all this and toss a sheet over his shoulder and call it a toga.

He was sorting through a handful of the small, bagged costume accessories when he caught sight of his girls.

“…wild with no repercussions.”
“O-oh I don’t get wild. Wild on me, equals spaz.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself, you’ve got it in you.”

Willow caught sight of him and grinned, obviously thankful for the distraction techniques he was so great at. His expert distractibility. “Xander! What’d you get?”

He made a face. “Before I play distraction, Wills’, whatever Buffy says you have in you, you have in you. Obviously—well, not to say you have anything like, in you in you, but… You know what? I’ll take distraction for 500—if I had that kind of money. I was going to grab a fake gun and go as an army guy, but, y’know…” The kid who took the gun from the Under $5 bin brushed past, and he gestured after him with his handful of costume parts, shrugging.

“Too slow? And… that’s not a costume.” Buffy half-asked, head tilted, and his annoyance from earlier returned.
“Yep. Too slow, too weak, didn’t feel like my street cred could get any better shaking down a kid for a toy gun… And I got fatigues from an army surplus at home. I’d say call me the 2-dollar costume king, baby—but, alas, my plan was foiled, so I’ll have to earn my title some other way.”

“Look, Xander, I’m really sorry about this morning…”

“Do you mind Buffy? I’m trying to repress.”

Willow nodded her head. “Yep, repression is good for a soon-to-be monarch.” Buffy rolled her eyes, smiling, and leaned against him. He allowed it, because he was the bigger person—not just literally, and also, y’know, contact good. Contact of the not hitting kind, very good.

“Well, I’ll let you get pummeled. And I’m sorry your costume plan didn’t work out—but we can help you out with an alternative!”

Xander waited a half moment just to show he wasn’t weak to her puppy-dog eyes, then,

“Thank you. And, y’know, I’d say something like ‘curse you small child, for stealing my costume prop!’ Except this is the hell-mou…” he trailed off, because Buffy was interrupting their little touching reconciliation to look at… Well, all Xander could see was a Peter Pan-esque costume, and a blue poofy dress with an apron—

“Oh, are you thinking of going as Alice in Wonderland?” He didn’t need to look at Willow to know she was all with the grimace, but that was an old, old argument, and Buffy was…

Going right past the blue poofy dress to a big, pink… thing. Xander really didn’t know what to make of that much material. It was much poofier.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… look at this.” She fingered at the shiny material.

“It’s beautiful.” Xander was half-convinced Willow was saying that to keep the topic of Lewis Carol off the table.

He shook his head.

“Too bulky. I prefer my women in spandex.”

Now if Buffy and Willow wanted to go as superheroes, he could get behind that. Willow certainly had the hair for Jean Grey or the Black Widow—though really, weird thoughts connected Willow and sex, so maybe not the great BW.

But Buffy might not have an issue with wigs like Wills’ does, so she had a whole slew of characters open to her. She was already sort of a warrior princess, so she could totally pull off a short Wonder Woman…

He let himself soak that thought in for a moment.

He blinked when an old guy with a vague sort of smarmy accent pulled the extra-poofy dress from the wire model, and held it up in front of Buffy. It was very… Disney Princess. With extra, extra poof.

He really didn’t know what to think of so much poof.

But she looked enchanted over it, and apparently Halloween would be a quiet night—really, thank you Hellmouth, for this fairly ironic holiday—so what could be the harm?
Especially when she gets the thing on discount; nowhere near the two-dollar-deal he was aiming for himself, but pretty good considering… *poof.* Just so much with the pink and *poof.*

The maybe-English guy put her dress in an extra large bag after she paid, and then she turned back to Willow and he. “So you were saying Alice in Wonderland earlier?”

“Oh boy…”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh c’mon Willow, it’s a *book.* Get over it.”

Buffy looked between them, pouting a bit in the way she did when he and Willow had one of their grew-up-together moments.

“We had to read it in third grade. Willow didn’t like it…”

“…And Xander *did.*”

“Wow, Xander *liking* a book? Willow *disliking* a book? Maybe something funky is going to happen Halloween after all.”

“The book just doesn’t make any sense!”

“Yeah, and it’s hilarious because of it! C’mon,” he grinned, and made his voice all whispery and creepy the way Willow used to hate. “*We’re all mad here, Willow… OooOO0aaaaaao000owww— ow!* There’s also significantly less violence in Wonderland. It’s all verbal insults and eating and drinking suspiciously labeled things.”

“And head chopping. I just don’t understand why you have to like the one classic book I don’t like. It’s much with the not making sense!”

“Exactly! *I’m* with the not making much sense-ness, so it’s perfect!—wait.” He tried re-arranging that sentence in his mind, before shaking it off as a non-matter.

“Wait, wait, so… Willow *doesn’t* like the book because it doesn’t make sense, and because it doesn’t make sense, Xander thinks it’s funny?”

“Seems like.” Xander shrugged and started sorting through his handful of costume bits.

Little plastic bats, what looked like individual false fangs, a pirate’s earring, a makeup fluffy brush thing, and what he first thought was fake centipedes but was actually false-eyelashes.

The Probably-English guy who gave Buffy a deal on her dress sidled up beside him.

“Thinking of going as a vampire, then?”

He’d never felt so connected to his girls as when they all three made faces at the thought. English Guy held up his hands, eyebrows raised. “Pardon my assumptions, but fangs and bats bring about an image.”

“Yeah, we aren’t really a vampire sort of bunch, not in the way you’re thinking.”

Digging through the under-$5 bin, Xander came up with a pair of grey cat ears, a roll of fishing wire, and a black and white zebra tail. Eyeing his finds, along with what else he had in hand, he gave English Guy a speculative look.

“Well how about I go as the Cat?” he shrugged.
“Not the Mad Hatter? Wasn’t he your favourite when we were kids?” Willow was still scrunching her nose, but the fact that she’d remembered that much made him smile.

“Hah, yeah, but if I could get a top-hat and wig and some sort of jacket all for under five bucks, something seriously wrong would happen immediately after, probably right on Halloween, too.” English guy made a small noise, and Xander looked to see him half-raise a hand to his mouth.

“Bite your tongue? Hate it when that happens. So how about… mmn, three bucks for the face paint, cat ears, and teeth?”

English guy gave him a sort of sideways-look, and Xander grinned.

“C’mon, these won’t sell, not when you’ve got like a dozen black cat ears over there, and what’s a little make up and teeth between friends, huh?”

English guy looked him over for a moment, considering.

“$5, and you can take the tail, the twine, and the earring along with it. Not going to sell with just the one.”

“Deal.” Xander pulled a fiver from his pocket—he wasn’t planning on spending even this much on a costume, but…

Money changed hands, and English guy gave him a sort of smug look. Xander wondered if he’d somehow been duped, but while he wasn’t exactly swimming in cash, he wasn’t going to hurt over a couple dollars.

“Enjoy your time as a cat.”

“Will do!”

He helped pull Buffy’s huge-and-fluffy purchase from the store, the faithful pack mule, and wondered if stuffy and odd were the only two settings English guys came in.

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So face paint was a bit harder to put on than he’d thought—he should have bargained for the little make-up brush thingy, too—but he smudges together black and white enough to get a stripy light-grey dark-grey thing going for him, and had used a little extra black paint to give himself a crease on his upper lip and an extra-wide grin that nearly reached his sideburns.

English guy must think Xander was more into the DIY aspect of costumes, but he wasn’t, so he skipped over the fishing-wire whiskers for white painted on ones. Really, the guy had high expectations if he thought Xander would try for sticking-out-of-his-face sort of whiskers.

He thought for a moment that he should stop by the shop after the kids were escorted home, to show off his decent but not spectacular make-up job, and grinned—and then stopped, because that made his drawn on grin move weirdly, and he’d like to leave the freaking out to other people. For once.

The ears went on, and because he felt like it he added the gold hoop earring to one of the felt tips. A little bit of charcoal grey-ed up the zebra tail, and he was all set in army surplus pants and a black tank. He wasn’t the Two-Dollar costume king, but he’d claim the lesser prize of the Fiver-Fiefdom happily.

He headed out with the fangs and face paint in his pocket—he’d try getting the teeth in at Buffy’s,
and hopefully she or Willow would be willing to take the make up off his hands—both literally and figuratively.

It might be charcoal dust and face paint being un-mixy, but if the English guy ripped him off in some way, it was for the hard to get off make up.

Buffy’s mom didn’t do up their house crazily, but with some fake cobwebs around and a pumpkin grinning toothily from their front doors it was a sight better than Xander’s place.

He rang the doorbell, and made sure to grin extra wide. “Ready for Wonderland—” he stopped. Hey, look, Buffy’s wearing a wig! Score the first for Wonder Woman fantasy!

“She’s wearing a wig! Score the first for Wonder Woman fantasy!”


She smiled, and curtsied. “And don’t you make a charming cat.”

“That’s Cheshire Cat, thank you.”

“Willow and I can help fix your make up before we leave—oh, but wait till you see… Casper.”

Willow was in full-out ghost garb, ‘Boo!’ written out across her chest. Xander thought he knew now what she and Buffy were talking about at the costume shop.

So yeah, poofy and pink looked amazing on the Buffster, but then both she and Willow looked good covered in dirt and leaves, so this was no surprise. Willow was… the ever-friendly ghost. Jesse could be a dick, but he’d been a good friend and always knew the right thing to say to Willow to boost her self esteem.

Both she and Buffy did indeed ‘fix’ his makeup, and added face paint to his hair and on his arms—he wished he’d worn some sort of jacket, now, since it seemed like he’d have unwashable stripes down his arms for a week now—and Willow was the one to figure out how the tooth cement worked with the fangs, and then they were off to school.

For a change, it was crawling with little kids, and a scattering of parents, and probably for the first and last time ever he felt a little in control entering the building.

Adults? Maybe. People his own age? Only if he can snark.

But kids? Kids he knew. He was the favourite older cousin on both ends of relative-bearing uncles and aunts, so while he could think of better things to be doing on a day like today, it wasn’t exactly the hardship Principal Snyder made it out to be.

“Where’s your body guard Harris? Did you help her do her make up, too?”

At least a dozen pirate-jokes came to mind, but they wouldn’t change Larry’s mind, and it wouldn’t do anything at all good to start a fight… not to mention Buffy would pout like there’s no tomorrow if he messed up his face paint.

He also thought he might puncture his lip if he got punched with these teeth in. So there was that.

When he got his kids for the evening (A soccer player, a lady bug, a butterfly, a Hangman, and a pixie/superhero as she couldn’t decide which she liked better, and all the power to her for it), he decided it was his duty to share his years of experience with them, so that one day they may pass on his wisdom.
Okay, on sleazing extra candy, tears are key. They’ll get you the double-bagger. You can also try the old ‘you missed me’ routine, but it’s risky. Only go there for chocolate. Understood?"

Nods and grins, and that’s all he could hope for.

He skipped Mrs. Davis’ house from tooth-brush-horror experience, and similarly avoided Mr. Rybak-of-the-rulers and Miss Penny-of-the-Breath-Mints, and nearing the end of the night he thought he’d trained the group well in the best route for Candy. Superhero/Pixie girl was grinning and smudged dark from holding his charcoal-coated zebra tail, and he might get in trouble for that, but he didn’t think anyone could say they hadn’t had fun, so.

So…

So why was he getting a shiver down his spine?

He looked up and down the street for either of his girls, and while there was no sign of pink’n’poofy(‘n’gorgeous, obviously), there might’ve been his white-sheet-compadré. Or another Toga guy.

Wow was he ever thankful he hadn’t gone as a toga guy.

The hair of his arms were standing on end where they weren’t painted down, and he was getting the feeling that maybe the nothing-happens-on-Halloween thing was big on the not happening.

He led his group closer to hers—they’d already gotten to that house, but then, they couldn’t go much further without the possibility of being late to get the kids home—just in time for a full-body shiver and for him to see one of her kids attack Mrs. Walters, see Willow stagger back with her hands going to her throat.

“Willow!” His shout was almost lost amongst the screaming, and he giggled, grin widening when the girl with butterfly wings took off and got caught up in the branches of a tree. Willow collapsed, and while it wasn’t where he would have stopped for a nap, he couldn’t fault her dramatics.

He wondered how he knew her. Willow. Lovely name, but the trees might find issue with her decision to use it.

A little horned being ran past, and might have been gutted if he hadn’t drifted to the side, feet barely grazing the concrete as he twisted to look after it. What a curious place.

Utterly lacking in colour, but curious nonetheless.

“Xander?” He turned to look, and found Willow—the girl, not the tree—apparently done with her nap.

“You know you’ve lost your sheet.” He wondered if she’d noticed she’d lost much more than that. Some people could be sensible to notice things like that, others… Well. Not everyone could be Alice, but then, that was rather the point of being oneself in the first place. You couldn’t be everyone. He grinned, and looked at his hands. Hands were different. He wiggled his fingers, flicking the claws out and wondered how Alice got anything done with such funny little digits.

“Xander, stop joking around! This is no time for jokes, and I’m a little on edge right now!”

“Purrfect. When you’re not on edge, you’re taking up too much space.”

He grinned, words tripping off his tongue in a mad scramble half-remembered as said before. He
blinked at her, and swiped a paw—hand?—through her.

“Though it looks rather like you’re not taking up any space at all! I think in this instance you might wish to be a tad less on edge, if you expect to do anything in this world.” He grinned. He could understand being insubstantial every once in a while, but her situation seemed a bit… permanent. He blinked at her again, head tilted just so, and understood.

“Ah, I see, you are not usually so dead as you are now, are you? And not in the usual way, either.”

“W-what? I don’t…”

His grin widened a fraction. “You’re dead. But you didn’t die. And you weren’t killed. Why would you want to do a thing like that?”

“I didn’t want to die—be dead! I didn’t try for—” words escaped her as she gestured at herself. It was interesting that she didn’t go through herself. He supposed it was all a matter of perspective, to be substantial to yourself and no one else.

“Well I like what I do is the same as I do what I like, don’t you agree? So I do, so you do. So why?”

He straightened, a thought tap-dancing through his mind.

“Where is Alice? This isn’t Wonderland…”

“Oh no, you’re not…”

“No, you don’t… hmm, how could you not know… no, you do know Alice, or know of her. Makes a certain sort of logic. Who is Xander? How are you Willow that I know when you’re obviously Willow that I don’t?”

She frowned. “That you don’t what?”

“That I don’t what, what?”

“That you don’t what—no, you couldn’t have chosen any other costume? Oh god, the costumes. I dressed up like a ghost for Halloween, and now I am a ghost, and you were… Oh no. Oh no, no, no… you dressed as the Cheshire Cat…”

His tail curled in interest, and he was beside her in a half-instant.

“I dressed as myself? Well I suppose it’s only fair, but why would you dress as a ghost—ah, I see. The perfect crime, in that it’s not a crime at all, and not suicide either, not technically.” He snapped his fingers because he could, and smiled because it was natural.

“Clever, clever.”

“That wasn’t—”

A sound like a Dandelion roar made him bare his teeth beyond the norm and he yowled a warning bluff at the fanged being—it ran, which was a welcome change. For all that this was not Wonderland, there was pleasantness to be had where no one knows how cowardice warred with his natural curiosity. Where they ran, not knowing he’d dissipate to In Between at a threat.

“No! They’re all people in costumes! We can’t hurt them! We can’t—Buffy!”

What happened next had him wondering at his own madness, as Willow asked the Lady what to do when faced with rather large opponents… and the girl fainted. He tilted his head, unimpressed.
A small being in green pattern ran past, shooting a… gun, yes, that’s what they were called, though he hadn’t the clearest idea how he knew that.

In any case, the two fanged beings—demons?—ran from the noise.

“Are you okay? Buffy, are you hurt?”

“…Buffy?” Her voice was pitched high, breathy; she sounded like a rose. Not terribly bright, roses.

“She’s not Buffy.”

“Who’s Buffy?” He had a vague inkling, another’s thoughts in his head like particularly dodgy catnip, and laughed at Willow’s mutterings.

“So much fun,” he agreed. Words bubbled up from the recesses of his mind—of Xander’s mind?—and he smiled wide. “Buffy. Lady of Buffidom, duchess of Buffonia… and slayer, too. She has many titles…” At the hopeful look Willow gave him, he let his grin grow wider, watched her eyes do the same. “Still me. Your Xander has interesting thoughts.”

“Oh, great…”

The year the brunette spouts is boring, though Willow finds meaning in it—it does not explain or dismiss Not-Buffy’s complete and utter dullness, though.

“… your dress, everything is strange, how did I come to be here?

“Breathe, okay, breathe, you’re going to faint again.” She turned eyes wide. “How are we going to get through this without a slayer?”

He tilted his head, and abruptly sees that Willow does not know that the rules have changed. His eyes flash, and her attention stays on him. “Your view conceals a tragedy. The whole truth you ‘claim’ to seek eludes you because you won’t look at what’s around you! There’s no method in this Madness!”

“What do you mean, what, please, what does he mean? Why is he dressed so?”

“You seek to use the rules of chess to play checkers; things are at once simpler and more complex than you imagine.”

“But if we can’t figure out how to turn everything back—”

He rolled his eyes, but a swell of affection for the ghostly girl made it soft.

“Predictably rash. It's not a question of ‘if’, Willow, it's ‘when’. You hope for Order… Abandon that hope! A new law reigns in this Wonderland, my dear Willow; it’s very rough justice all around. We're all at risk here, always, and just as much now as yesterday.” He twisted his head around to glare at the beast that thought to sneak behind him. “You, be on your guard.” It scrambled back, and he thought it must be a rather easy existence in this world.

For a moment he rather thought he’d only get more questions—before she’d been trained out of it, Alice had been rather full of demands for explanations, as if there were ever any right answers. Ah, he missed her already.

But instead, she only looked rather alarmed, clutching her throat, and the brunette didn’t look much better.
“Your... your head... You...”

At least until the brunette darted around to hide behind him, pointing at an upcoming... thing.

“A demon! A demon!”

She would be amusing if she was insane, but ignorance is simply boorish.

“What a curious thing to travel in...” Thoughts of cars, and buses, and general transportation flashed through his mind, and he wondered what use he had for something like that. The main use of evaporating skills would be for travel, after all.

A thought—he debated sharing it, decided to see what would happen, first.

Willow suggests retreat, and the unasked for affection from earlier makes more sense.

The house they go to is neither over large or too small—you could open the door yourself without a team to push or pull, but you could also enter without first shrinking oneself to the right size. It was all rather staggering, in a way.

“How boring is your life that you don’t need a magnifying glass to find your house?”

The brunette just stared, but clutched at his arm—it seemed as though she had discovered he was Mad, yet still deemed him the safest to cling to; he’d evaporate from her grip if she weren’t both clutching and petting he fur of his arm. It was pleasant.

*Contact good*, he half-remembered.

The house they entered had pictures of blond versions of the nameless brunette, and also of Willow, and also a boy he supposed was Xander-who-was-He. All two-legged and human.

He flicked his ear, deciding this was acceptable. Xander looked the male clone of Alice, and what thoughts that drifted from his consciousness were pleasant in tone, if not order.

He ignored the blind panic of the Brunette as she refused to consider the truth around her. Instead he stuck his head through the wood of the door to see who was knocking.

His sudden, grinning appearance again scared the beast into retreat, and it was amusing enough that the Brunette’s foolishness could be dismissed.

“I want to go home,” she pouted.

“You are home... she couldn’t have dressed up like Xena?” He laughed, understanding the reference and Not, and wondered again if he should share his thoughts...

“Every picture tells a story.” He says instead, aiming to calm Willow. “Sometimes we don't like the ending. Sometimes we don't understand it. She does not like it, understand it, and does not even want to know the story. Do you know the logic of the house guest?”

Willow hesitantly shook her head. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she didn’t want to hear what he had to say!

“A *good* guest does not overstay, a perfect guest stays home! She is a guest who *wants* to be home, but isn’t. Do you blame her?” He would have said more, perhaps more of these strangely borrowed words if he could not keep to his own, but there was screaming outside.
He was cowardly, for sure, but found that he put himself at risk due to his natural curiosity—however, Xander’s thoughts and instincts said otherwise. Xander’s thoughts and instincts said to help, regardless of threat.

He raised an eyebrow at Willow, unimpressed despite himself.

“Your friend is foolishly brave. I will return shortly.”

Appearing in the midst of running and fighting was not how things usually went—it was commonly the reverse, but rescue was an even stranger beast to bear. The screamer—and oh how this new, borrowed part of him laughed at the thought—was familiar, and flailing, and it was obvious that she was different from his fellow costumed cohorts by the way she fought back.

He was not one for fighting, but no cat would fight with slaps when claws were an option.

Grabbing her was simple, and the small retreat of the beasts surrounding her made his uncharacteristic rescue even simpler.

It was a bit of a game to scare the beasts that followed once the girl was inside, the best game of peek-a-boo ever played, and he was laughing when he heard the girl—Cordelia—snipe at Willow.

“And you went mental when?”

“Never,” he answered from over her shoulder, grinning at Willow. “If she were Mad we’d have more interesting conversations.”

“Ugh! You’re such a creeper! What’s with the name game?”

“A lot’s going on…”

“No kidding! I was just attacked by Jojo the dog-faced boy. Just look at my costume! Do you really think that PartyTown’s going to give me my deposit back? Not likely.”

He looked at the scratches in her clothes, and in half a moment had a jacket to give her. It looked vaguely familiar, so he supposed the closet he’d taken it from was his own. Interesting.

He’d never had need to faze one limb elsewhere, before.

He was getting all sorts of new, useful thoughts.

Cordelia—the much more interesting brunette—seemed pleased when he draped the jacket around her shoulders.

“Thanks… Is that fur?”

“Okay, you guys stay here while I go get help. If something tries to get in just fight it off.”

“W-well it’s not our place to fight. Surely some men will protect us…”

Cordelia scoffed.

“What’s that riff?”

“It’s like amnesia, okay? They don’t know who they are. Just… sit tight.”

He thought privately that Amnestic Buffy would be more fun than the Lady, and drifted in front of Willow before she could make her escape.
“Xander’s interest and affection for you has made me stay so far, but why should I remain when you leave?”

For a moment Willow looked stern, before the expression crumpled. “Can you please stay and look out for them? For me? Please?”

He tilted his head, feeling a surge of fondness for her. She was not his Alice, but she was Xander’s Willow. “I will stay until the physically stronger ally arrives.” He flicked his fingers through her playfully, shooing her and her confused expression away.

“Who died and made her boss?”

He laughed, grinning wide. “She did.”

He was not one to do much heavy lifting—except where he as Xander was, somewhat—so he alternated between cuddling the Lady and helping Cordelia stack furniture across the windows and doors.

This world was dull and lacked colour, lacked Alice, but Xander had found people who knew how to make a Cat happy. Physical affection was somewhat lacking, in Wonderland.

Cordelia had started to complain about the cuddling, at least until he’d cuddled her, too, purring deep in his chest, and now she was mostly quiet and scowling. His cuddling kept the Lady quiet, too, and he wondered if he should try this next time Alice was speaking of logic and rules where there were none.

And then tall, dark, and broody walked in.

“Oh good, you guys are alright. It’s total chaos out there.”

He giggled and tucked his face in Cordelia’s hair, laughed harder when the Lady moved to hide behind their combined bulk.

“Who are you?”

“This is the physically stronger Ally,” he said, eyes gleaming in the low lights at the look it got him.

“Okay, someone want to fill me in?”

A name fluttered to the forefront of his mine, and then another. He untangled himself from around Cordelia, and moved to circle the other man.

“Is your name Angel, or Deadboy? Xander has many names for everyone, so it does get confusing…”

“What are—Buffy, what’s going on? Buffy?”

The other man stepped once towards the Lady, and she stepped back, back again, and got squinted at for her trouble. “You—what’s with your hair?”

Cordelia got her voice back from wherever she put it down for cuddling, “They don’t know who they are—except, maybe, Xander, I don’t know—everyone’s turned into a monster, it’s just a whole big thing… Angel, how are you?”
He sighed and gave her a long look.

“Ah, Lady. We can't go home again. No surprise really. Only a very few find the way, and most of them don't recognize it when they do. Delusions, too, die hard.” He spared a glance for Angel. “Only the savage regard the endurance of pain as the measure of worth. Forgetting pain is convenient, remembering it—agonizing. But recovering the truth is worth the suffering and my Wonderland, though damaged, is safe in memory... for now. But memory is a fickle thing, dearest Lady, and you are in a unique position of both being here, and not, which is common for me, except at the end of the night, the you that never experienced this will be home, and the you that is here will leave only a shadow of yourself on your host…”

He laughed. “However, the longer I stay, the more of me stays, and much of me mixes with your friend Xander. At the end of the night, your Xander will be here, but how much of me remains depends entirely on timing. I will be elsewhere, too, both wholly and partially, as I am always many places at once, so this is no hardship to me.”

Cordelia nearly went as wide-eyed as the Lady.

Angel blinked.

“So… not Xander, then.”

“What? The longer you’re possessing Xander, the more of you will stick around? You couldn’t have said that earlier, when Willow was here?”

His grin widened, and Angel took a menacing sort of step forward. He drifted forward, and then upwards until he could look eye-to-eye with Angel. “What of the living matter to the dead?”

When Angel tried to swipe at him he danced back, laughing, drifting to sit on top of the furniture piled in front of the main window.

“Why should we trust you to tell the truth?” Angel demanded. The fluttering brunette—not at all like his Alice, that one, wouldn’t survive a day in Wonderland—clutched her hands to her chest, eyes blank with panic.

Hmph. Utterly boring, that one.

But there is a way to have some fun…

His grin widened further.

“Hmm, how about we make things interesting, then. I will tell you one truth you don’t want to hear, and then one truth you do want to hear… the truth is so much more interesting, after all.”

No one looked happy, but then there was violence surrounding them… Alice would enjoy this.

“So, what happens when you notice an unfortunate crush, and find yourself unable or unwilling on acting on it, hmm?” His eyes settled on the Lady, half-wishing his Willow could be here to hear this.

“You focus your attentions on someone you know will never return your feelings.”

“You’re saying, Xander…” Angel trailed off, and craned his neck to look down at the Lady. Her attitude did not match up with Xander's internal profile, and he was rather pleased to dismiss her as
boring. He smirked when Angel turned back to him.

“And, in Xander’s case, has a strong dislike of those who make him feel like he has to show off his affections beyond what he’s comfortable with.” He smirked. “Honestly, it’s all rather simple.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, reviewing the few half-memories he had of his apparent hosts situation. Xander had a lovely malleable mind, open to all possibilities in conversation as they should, but… Hmm.

He took a moment to wash behind his ears, and decided on which truth to dole out. They wanted so many… but then, did he ever say he would tell them the truth at once? It seemed as though they wanted and needed so many truths, all while lying to themselves, so…

“And for a truth that you want to know, I suppose these three facts roll up into one currently important truth; It’s a specific spell that caused the events of this night, it was intentionally cast, and it can be easily broken, if you know how. I don’t know how, but I’m sure it’ll be obvious when we get there. I suppose now that you’re here I can go back to Willow… I did only promise to stay until you showed up. We’ll have to play more of the game later, but for now I’m feeling bored.”

“What? You knew I’d show up? Xander—what sort of cat did Xander dress up as?”

He gave a short wave to the Lady and Cordelia, waggling his fingers, and started to disappear.

Willow was where the interesting things were at, so maybe he’d grab her and bring her back to the group, maybe also… who? G-man, Giles?

When nearly all of him was gone and away to the In Between, he remembered that Angel had asked a question, and he blinked, his grin all that was left of him.

“Why the Cheshire Cat, of course!”

He perched on top of one set of bookshelves, and looked down at Willow and Giles.

“L-let’s, let us review, ah, everyone became whatever they were masquerading as?”

“Right, Xander was the Cheshire Cat, and Buffy was an 18th Century girl.”

Giles blinked, glasses in hand, and didn’t seem to know where to look.

“A-and, ah… your costume?”

He laughed and jumped down to the floor, swiping a paw through Willow when she gave him a wide-eyed look.

“Why she’s a ghost, of course!”

Giles opened and closed his mouth, looked him over, and said “yes, erm, a ghost of what, exactly?”

Willow crossed her arms, darted a look at him, and glared at Giles. “T-this is nothing! You should have seen what Cordelia was wearing, a unitard with cat things, like ears and stuff.”

He pushed a stack of papers off the desk to hear the sound they’d make—“Oh, hmm, I wish you hadn’t done that,” says Giles—and gave Willow a look. “Oh? Is there a problem with cat things?”
“No, no not you Xander—or, well not you as the Cheshire Cat, you’re just, erm, would you prefer I call you, or…?”

He shrugged with a smile and sat where the stack of papers once were. “I have no preference. Xander is as good a name as any, and that name at least won’t make trees bluster at the presumption.” He gave her a look just to be clear he was indeed talking about her, and blinked. “Oh, right, Cordelia seems to think I should tell you that you have a sort of time constraint on a solution. I don’t think it matters much, as by the end of the night no matter what you do things will be back to your definition of normal.”

“Time constraint? And Cordelia didn’t turn into a feline, did she?”

“Hmm, yes, and no, Cordelia is all human, not a whisker in sight. I don’t suppose you know anything about evaporating skills, do you?”

“Hmm? Well, yes—oh, well I suppose that is how you got in here! Fascinating, really—”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, well repetition is boring, so I will not say everything again, but instead say that this spell has more on the line for your Xander than anyone else—you know, of course, that those with evaporation skills are multifaceted, yes?”

Giles was busy cleaning his glasses, and he was tempted to interrupt to tell him they were already clean, but Giles was also nodding. “Yes, yes, well, research suggests that it takes a certain sort of, well, mind to employ the, er, skill…” Giles trailed off, and he nodded.

“Yes, you must be mad enough to see the logic in the air and the In Between… but to see that you must have your mind in several places at once—hard to do with complete sanity, you understand.”

“W-well, no, I don’t think I do, but then I don’t have this evaporating skill.”

“Quite right. However, try to twist your mind to understand this—in several dozen universes there are several dozen me’s, and at any one point I, that is to say the me that is present now and then and everywhere at once, will experience several dozen universes at the same time. You see?”

The part of him that he was recognizing more easily as Xander found pleasure in the puzzled look on the Watcher’s face—oh, another title, another name, how lovely.

“Umm, so there might be a hundred Cheshire Cats in a hundred universes, but you experience it all as one person—ah, being?” He smiled at Willow, delighted. It looked as though she’d possibly sprained something on the way, but she’d gotten there.

“Yes, exactly. And this universe is convincingly sane enough not to have me in it—or at least, it was. What do you suppose happens now that I’m here?”

“Um, you’re… here until the spell or whatever it is gets broken?”

“Not quite. The longer I stay in one place, the more of me remains and, spell or no, ‘contrary as a cat’ is not simply a saying.”

“Wait, wait, how do you know this? This is simply not written anywhere…”

Giles started flipping through papers and books, almost at random. Well, whatever gave him comfort. He smiled at the thought.

“Yes, well, with a thousand universes to remember and exist, a boring little universe such as this is
not hard to interpret. I can even tell you all you’d need or want to know about the spell, but, hmm, perhaps relocating to not-Buffy’s house would be rather more interesting.”

Grabbing a handful of Giles’ jacket, and placing an arm around where Willow’s waist would be if she were corporeal, his grin grew wild.

“Now I’ve never tried to do something like this before, but this is a night of new experiences, so let’s see if I can’t bring you with me, hmm?”

Willow doubled over gagging, and Giles looked rather green, but altogether they didn’t seem too worse for wear. Cordelia shrieked, and Angel burst through the door, fang-faced—Cordelia shrieked again at the sight of him.

“Oh my god you ARE a vampire? How has Buffy not staked you?”

He laughed, and gave Angel a rather suggestive look.

“Well if he’d bend over long enough, I’m sure she’d be happy to oblige—”

The grin fell from his face, and Willow gagged again when he bent to pick it back up.

“Ugh, I can’t believe I just said that, I just… hmm. I suppose Xander is rather uncomfortable thinking about Buffy and Sex…” He blinked. Looked around.

“Where is the Lady?”

Angel lost his ‘game face’, and immediately shifted to his ‘brooding face’.

“She… ran.”

He sidled up to Angel and draped an arm around his shoulders. He got a particular look for the action, but he wasn’t shrugged off, so he assumed Angel wasn’t against cuddling any more than the Lady or Cordelia were. “Aww, it’s difficult explaining things like possibly harmless vampires one-on-one, isn’t it?”

“B—ugh, Xander never do that again. But, Buffy is gone? Where?” Giles looked about the room, as if the Lady would jump out at any moment.

To be fair, he waited a moment to see if she would do just that, before shrugging.

“I’ll go find her, you all…” he wiggled his fingers, and gestured between them. “You all… talk, do sane things, share information—unless that’s not something sane people do.”

Angel stepped between him and the door, and he moved forward to hug him around his middle. He was delightfully firm. That took some of the menace out of his frame, and the demand that followed sounded less threatening than he was sure Angel was aiming for.

“Why are you going to go after her?”

“Because she’s more likely to run from you, and the sooner you all break the spell, the sooner the Lady will be Buffy, and the less of me that will stay with Xander past this night. I don’t mind sticking around, not a such, but I prefer Wonderland to… this. Besides, Neither Buffy nor Willow are my Alice, but Willow titters and twitches like Rabbit… and the male I’m… possessing, he rather likes them both. Even if he doesn’t like you over much.”
Monstrous children were everywhere, and the part of him-that-is-Xander noticed a few actual Vampires out and about, looking baffled but gleeful running with the temporary monsters.

Whether or not it was Willow, Giles, Cordelia, and Angel who did it, or someone else entirely, this spell would be broken before midnight.

He only wondered if it would be broken soon enough. He wasn’t lying when he said he didn’t mind this world…

But he really wasn’t lying when he said he preferred Wonderland.

But for now he was looking for the Lady.

“Oh, Lady! Laaaaady!”

Perhaps he should leave it to the In Between places and try finding her that way… There was more than half a chance he’d end up somewhere else entirely, but it might be worth a shot.

“Laaady!”

“If that’s how you think you’ll get a girl, mate, I’ve got some news for you…”

The blond looked familiar, and had his game face on—didn’t balk at his grin, either, which made a change of pace from the other beasties he’d met so far.

It either made him interesting or run-away-able.

He frowned, tilted his head.

Run-away-able? No, it made him either interesting or the sort of person he would soon be running from.

But run-away-able was shorter, and fun, and maybe that was why Xander mangled words so much. And it wasn’t like you couldn’t understand what he meant…

“Oi, I don’t appreciate being ignored.”

And oh, there was the feeling of needing-to-run. But he wasn’t frightened, not in his usual way. He wasn’t sure if he liked Xander’s particular brand of bravery. It was odd.

“Oh, don’t mind me, reliable sources say I’m Mad.”

“Well that’s mean.” He got the impression there was a joke in there, somewhere, and tilted his head sideways.

“I quite agree with them. To begin with a dog's not mad. You grant that?”

“I suppose so,” said the Blond.

"Well then," he went on, "you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm Mad.” He grinned wide, purr like a motor in his chest. It was quite easy to be pleased, he was finding, which didn’t seem like such a sane thing. Sane people find it so easy to fret, to worry, to allow their insides to twist them into some strange upright thing. For beings who pranced about on only two legs, they
certainly had interesting concepts of stability.

Though he thought he rather liked Xander… maybe. Probably. He was certainly interesting enough, but did that translate into like…

“That is the question…”

The blond vampire frowned, a rather drastic expression with his game face on.

“What question is that, hmm? C’mon now, share with the rest of the class…” He spread his arms, and the short demons at his side looked warily between Spike and he. His grin widened, and he flashed his teeth at the shorter one.

“Oh, there are many questions, many with answers, many with answers I don’t think you’ll properly give…”

“Oh? That sounds like a challenge. Let’s hear one of those questions.”

Oooh, cocky. He liked and disliked it, but mostly thought it was amusing. Hmm. As the night wore on, his opinions on matters were getting rather… mixed.

But which question to ask? He blinked, remembering from reading and from experience, and found his smile widening.

“Well I don’t suppose you know why a Raven is like a Writing desk, do you?”

Spike—he wondered if it was another nickname?—blinked, then answered,

“Depends on what they have to say, don’t it?”

Spike didn’t blink when he made a single move and appeared right in front of him, ignoring the chaos around them, ignoring the way the two shorter demons jumped back, and he looked the vampire over, pleased.

“That,” he said with a purr, “is a good answer.” There were so few people who knew how to give a good answer.

He tilted his head, and tapped a finger on Spike’s chest.

“You wouldn’t happen to be related to my Alice, would you?”

He got a laugh in response. “Well she’d be dead by now if she was,” and he was jerking away from the vampire at the thought of his Alice being dead—had a thought that perhaps he should go look for her. Was tempted to simply leave these three to their own devices, to go find Alice on a night like tonight… His whiskers twitched at a thought.

It might not be his Alice, though… The idea of encountering a fake with presumptions of friendship had his tail lashing.

And he still had to find the Lady… his Lady, he supposed. She wasn’t as interesting as Alice, not by half of a half, but she was his. Buffy, from his-not-his Xander-memories seemed much more interesting. He thought he might like her. Another thought, and he turned back to a bemused-seeming Spike. He was rather thankful for the bemused-seeming…ness, as otherwise he rather thought he’d need to be running, or at the very least escaping.

“You’re looking for my Lady, aren’t you?”
“Nah, not if your lady is also your Alice, though hey, if you’ve seen the Slayer around…”

He flicked an ear, nodding.

“My Alice is my Alice, and my Lady is only my Lady for tonight, before she’s back to being Buffy…” he smiled. “Buffy, Lady of Buffdom, Duchess of Buffonia… you know, I once belonged to the Duchess, but then she went around trying to eat mad women….” He trailed off, before focusing on Spike. He felt the serious truth weigh on his words, making his tongue heavy, “I think you’ll find you’ll soon lose the taste for madwomen, too.”

Spike scoffed, but seemed more amused than anything.

“You’ll find that my tastes can be whatever the fuck they want to be, mate… but is sanity required for this conversation? ‘Cause I’m getting the feeling you’re as rattled as my Dru.”

That seemed promising. Perhaps later, if he had the time, he’d seek out Spike’s Dru… He frowned. But not now. Not yet, at least. The universe said no, and in this instance he’d listen. The universe was lucky.

“A limited quantity. You're not mad enough to be rejected. You're like them, of them in a way, but not them. I should say 'not us', for I'm them, but you are on your way. The way is clearly marked.”

He shook himself, confused in a way he hardly ever was. “What? Other people’s words are tripping off my tongue, but that makes them mine… Mine as my Lady is Mine, you understand.” He looked at Spike. “Mine like Buffy is Mine—or will be. Or is Xander’s, I suppose… And later, Buffy might be yours, but not tonight.” He gave Spike a considering look, curious of a future he likely wouldn’t see first hand.

“And what do you mean by that?”

Oops, and there’s the menace. He moved to the upper branches of a nearby tree, an unhappy noise leaving his throat, and Spikes eyes found his in the darkness. He shook his head.

“You were told something about tonight, yes? Hmm, but not told all of it, not told you wouldn’t succeed. Not told you would, either.”

Spike stalked forward, shaking his head.

“If there’s anything I learned looking after Dru, mate, is that nothing’s set in stone. What do you know?”

“Nothing set in stone except the carving—she will die—has died, before, but her substance is not meant to be part of the rubble, not yet.”

“Why? Are you protecting her?” Spike was close, now, closer than was comfortable, so he moved to the next tree, and the rustle of branches made Spike change course.

“Not quite, not quite. I need to find my Lady for my Willow’s peace of mind—hers is not a mind that excels in chaos, but Xander is exceedingly fond of her… No, I must find my Lady… But your prospect, the possibilities your intentions bring up, they make me uncomfortable.” He gave him a rather unimpressed look. “I believe I know that way and I'd rather not travel further along it…” he scrunched his nose, “but this one has a strange sense of loyalty, where fight or flight is replaced with wait with witticism.” He grinned. That was a rather good word—and not even one he’d had to make up. Witticism. But his Lady was wandering the streets, and this was not Wonderland where conversation came before conflict.
He sent himself In Between, his mouth lingering only long enough to stick tongue out at Spike’s litany of cusses, such a dirty mouth, before he was scattered to the winds of In between.

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A being half the size of either Tweedle Dee or Tweedle Dum, but with the equivalent oral hygiene was holding his Lady against a wall, seeming to take delight in her tear-streaked face, and the rage he’d felt earlier returned.

She was not his Alice, but you did not manhandle his Lady. Not any more than you’d dare speak of Alice and Death in the same breath.

In this instance, the melding thoughts of he and Xander were in agreement; they tackled the pirate, yowling, and slammed him into the wall. The pirate swung a fist, but there was no shoulder for him to make contact with—he wrapped his tail around one leg and tugged, swiping with claws and baring his teeth; he grinned wide to show off all of them, in all their gleaming sharpness.

He kicked him twice for good measure, and the pirate went down, boxes and bags of packing-peanuts falling down on his head. It gave him a strange sense of closure to have beaten up that pirate.

One of the boxes was rather large, and just big enough for him to fit in, he guessed—he was about to curl up in it to find out, bafflingly, when his Lady let out a scream. “He’s a vampire!”

He looked to find, of course, Angel.

He turned to his Lady, and gathered her into his arms for a cuddle. She went quiet before, and maybe it would get her to stop screaming.

“Shh, shh,” he crooned, “yes, he is, but he is a comparatively good vampire… we’re friends with him, you understand? Or you are… It’s why we trusted him with you, understand?”

“R-really?”

The look Angel was giving him was an amusing mix of dumbfounded and scowling—presumably for the cuddling, and the idea had him laughing.

He released his Lady and moved instead to wrap Angel up in his arms. “See? He would not get cuddles if we didn’t trust him.”

Angel didn’t seem to know what to do with that, but his Lady was reassured.

She still looked worried, but hurried closer so he could wrap an arm around her; he pulled her close, into a three-way cuddle with Angel.

He grinned up at the man.

“Now is this a situation you’re really going to scowl at?”

Angel rolled his eyes, and awkwardly hugged back, huffing when that got him a smug look.

“Cuddling,” he informed him, “is infinitely more useful than brooding. Remember that, after tonight.”

And then, of course, there were demons, and two things became abruptly clear to him.

For one, if he existed in this universe for much longer, there would be more of he than Xander left
afterwards.

For another, he knew where the spell must originate from, and that was useful information.

He released his Lady and Angel, certain in a precarious sort of way that he should go, now, but there were also demons, and his Lady and Angel in range of danger, and—

“Oh, right.”

So he wraps himself back around the two, and brings them In Between with him, too.

He’s not actually certain what he’s supposed to do at the costume shop, but Giles is there—gives them a particular Look, but he’s not interested in that quite yet.

Maybe later, if he has the mind for it, but he’s—what was that phrase? Riding by the seat of his pants?

While it sounded completely uncomfortable, it did sound about right for this situation—

He recognized the other man, vaguely, as the costume guy. The Other English Guy was staring, and he grinned wide, wider, until even Alice would look away.

Perhaps there is time for one more bluff.

He—Ethan, perhaps?—is on the ground, but it’s nothing to pick him up—

Or at least it was, until Ethan’s plucked from his hands by Angel, and his Lady is cowering into his side, and really much as he loved the cuddles, this was not the time.

He drifts just behind Angel’s shoulder, allowing his Lady to clutch his hand, and laughed when Angel shook the other man hard enough to rock his head.

“Admiring your handiwork? I rather thought returning to the scene of the crime would be dull, but…” he bit at the end of the ‘t’, and would have continued if he hadn’t felt the pull, the drag of time across his pelt scraping away at Xander and rubbing his essence into the wounds. “I’ll count to, hmm, five, and after that I’ll have to figure out something drastic.”

The other man sneered, and glanced at Giles. “Not even going to threaten me yourself, Ripper?”

He laughed again. “Oh no, no, no, I’m simply giving you five chances, and myself twenty seconds, to figure out an alternative that doesn’t end with Xander a personality-shaped smear on this universe… So One,” he drifted his Lady closer to Giles, G-Man, ‘Ripper’, the Watcher, “Two,” he got his Lady to let go of his hand, “You’re not really going to—”

“Four,” he spoke over him, drifting to the ceiling to look around the darkened store, looking over the sparse displays.

He blinked, eyes settling on a mannequin in the corner, and grinned.

“Five. What happens when I put on a costume, right now?”

“Now wait one moment, let’s just talk about this—”

In a blink he was across the store, pulling a green blotchy patterned headband over his forehead,
slung a large plastic gun over his shoulder, and a plastic machete went through a belt-loop.

He turned to the group, and said, “I think I’m supposed to be a Soldie—”

Lieutenant Harris looked over the fuckers in his way, and ran towards the biggest threat, the big guy in leather. If he was going to go down as fucking unfit for duty, then so were all these other assholes. Crazy my ass.

His machete was out and slashing at his throat—he was fast, though, and ducked out of the way.

A chick was shrieking, and the littler fucker the leather guy had been holding was within striking distance, so he did.

He dodged, too, but slower, and he clipped his collar bone—fucker went down.

He’d have followed to finish the job except leather guy was back, and holy FUCK his face!

On top of that he then ups the fucked up factor and shoves him back hard enough to go through the fucking window!

He tucked and rolled, broken glass scratching up his arm, and fuck, maybe he was crazy—or he really was surrounded by monsters.

Hell, there was a blond one right there, and he had more monsters with him.

Well fuck that.

“Fucking finally, and is that a slayer I smell—oi!” Blondie jumped back quick as the other fuck face, and he looked just as fucking surprised. He reversed his grip and slashed, slashed again and caught one of the other similarly-fucked-looking guys through the throat—and the guy turned to dust! The littler demons were growling and retreating, and he was just about roaring with laughter because this was just SO FUCKING GREAT!

“Crazy am I? Unfit for fucking duty, am I? Then bring it on motherfuckers!”

Blondie broke his grip on the machete—along with a couple of fingers, the fucker—but he’d gotten his MP5 up and man did he have an itchy trigger finger!

From back inside the—what the fuck, a costume store? This wasn’t Iraq—he heard a guy shouting, “Tell me how to stop the spell!” The recoil was better than he remembered, but he wasn’t a fucking leftie and his hand fucking hurt, so his shots went wide; made a pretty mess of the remaining glass in the window, though, and if it killed the guy in leather that would be a bonus. Fuck, did he have any grenades left? He wanted to bring everything to the fucking ground.

“Janus! Break the statue before he kills us all!”

Leather guy was back and wrestling his MP out of his hands, so he kicked and elbowed and fucking bit when Blondie got into the mix. There was a crash somewhere behind them.

“Get the fuck offa me you demonic cunts! You motherfuck—ow, ow, OWOWOWOWOW! What the hell let me go!” Holy hell he had the worst migraine of the century! And also broken fingers, definitely some broken fingers happening, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!

Xander got a look at Angel in gameface looking surprised, and Spike—Well that wasn’t good. That was much with the not-goodness. His eyes went wide.
“Let me go! Let me go! Is it mad to pray for better hallucinations? I do not need to be in the middle of this!”

He shoved the toy gun in Spike’s face and scrambled to get away, shoving—

He turned towards Angel, sudden and smooth despite his flailing, and said, “Your curse is not as permanent as you think.”

He blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and then decided that little bit of weirdness could take a back seat to the fact that Spike was right there, right, right there, and he wanted to be far, far—oh look, Buffy!

She was wielding a coat rack with some ferocity—or at least he assumed from the sound, because he couldn’t currently handle things like, oh, seeing, or standing, or anything else really, because wow his head hurt. Like really, really achy.

He was more than half-certain he was sitting on broken glass—because thanks Angel, really appreciated the throwing—but he couldn’t really do more than sit and press the heel of his palms into his eyes. The demons who’d been with Spike turned out to be kids he recognized from Willow’s group—

“Willow? Where’s Willow?”

His head ached, a few fingers felt absolutely crushed, and he had glass in his arms and ass, but hey, he’d been there when Buffy had been dead. She hadn’t been dead for more than a few minutes, and yeah after some CPR she came back and kicked ass, but there was some shitty things that happened after that—and Willow had been dead for like, what? A couple of hours? Though she had been conscious as a ghost, so maybe… Ugh, and what about Buffy—he assumed she was alright, what with the ass-whoopage and the sound of running, but then there was also Cordelia, and hadn’t he stabbed a guy? The English Guy?

He shook his head, regretted it immediately, and decided for the moment to sit very, very still.

Breathed in, and out, in, and out, in long measured breaths while it felt like his brain was getting fried and scrambled.

A large dark shape was kneeling beside him, but it wasn’t Angel’s hand that settled on his shoulder.

“A Xander? Are you alright?”

“Yeah Buff… I’m, ah, I’m just going to sit here. For a bit. With my eyes closed. And I think I’ll need a few fingers taped.” Because they were definitely broken.

Fingers—unbroken, and decidedly more feminine than his own—carded through his hair, and he didn’t even mind that he was smudging face paint all over his hands and on Buffy, because while they had things they needed to do, people to check on—and kids to get home, actually—it could wait a minute.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you enjoyed, and also hope that in this rewrite things aren’t as choppy in places as I fear. Roughly 2-3k of this fic was written way, way, waaaaay earlier, back in like 2005, and while I did get rid of some of it, I tried to keep in a lot of it. It got spread out, some, which I fear makes things a bit choppy in areas (feel free to mention things you see), so my apologies for that.

And, as I said in the pre-fic note, here are some clearing-up type things.

>Quotes: I used at least 18 quotes, most of them adjusted to fit the story

>POV: Might be confusing, but the Cheshire Cat doesn't refer to himself as anything, really. In the Books he’s 'said the Cat', but I generally don't think animals register people-names like people do. More like every pet has a name that actually just means "Pay attention". So lots of 'He thought/said/whatever'. Apologies for any confusion.

>Evaporating skills: A Tim Burton name for the Cat’s quirky ability, and I like the imagery involved in it.

>Cheshire Cat abilities: above mentioned evaporation skills, autonomous use of his body parts to the rest of his body, insanity, and also a bit of a seer-like accuracy when giving advice.

*^That last one was inspired by American McGee’s Cheshire Cat’s guiding role, as it sometimes seems more than a little precognitive.

>Insane!Soldier: I like the idea that whichever costumes you got from Ethan’s, your perception of it changes how you’re changed by it. I imagine if Willow thought all ghosts were vengeful spirits, she probably wouldn’t have gotten up as a dead-er version of herself. Canon-Soldier!Xander introduced himself as a Private, I imagine he’d be more take-charge-y if he’d introduced himself as a Corporal. The Cat couldn’t quite perceive a sane soldier, so… yeah. And book!Wonderland isn’t terribly violent, beheadings aside, so army/soldier probably equates to the Red Queen’s card soldiers in the Cat’s mind (maybe), so, violent.

>Spike: Head!Canon that Spike has a soft spot for the crazies.

And hopefully I got anything that might need clearing up. I’m working on the next chapter now while the inspiration is here, but I’m not sure how far this fic will go. If ch2 doesn’t work out, I’ll post a chapter letting you know this is an odd one-shot. But I’m working on the next chapter now, so… Let me know what you think :)

Also, check out League of Super Critics in “Alice In Wonderland - Nostalgia Critic,” link below if it’ll show:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeSa_TDtKcM&index=16&list=PLWdTF5FulcwfswhVib5TonoEtAdxexUYB
Chapter Summary

After Halloween
Also, Ford is not such a great planner.

Chapter Notes

Next chapter, yay! All notes and remarks about Alice in Wonderland and the Cheshire Cat can be found in the previous chapter.
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2—Losing Your Head

He’d really like to say that things went uphill from there, but it was more like they went in a sort of wobbly straight line, with a few ups but mostly unexpected potholes. Oh, and what up-parts there were, were mostly the sorts of things you tripped over.

Mostly not worse off, but only mostly.

The kids were brought back to the school, Giles and Buffy helped him out with his fingers—Buffy with her makeup removal witchery, and Giles with the tape and tiny splints—and Willow was found thankfully quickly. Surprisingly, it was Cordelia who had found her first, as Giles had told her and Wills to leave the costume shop guy to him and to help find Buffy.

She made a face when he grabbed her up for a hug, sharing the make up still on him, but by far the oddest thing he remembered from his night as the Cheshire Cat—and as a crazy soldier, though he was working on forgetting that kind of crazy—was that he got to give pretty much everyone but Willow some patented Xander Hugs… Though he supposed they were technically Cheshire Cat Hugs, at the time, but his arms, his huggable-ness… all that made them Xander Hugs.

“I’m glad you aren’t dead,” he whispered into her hair, and she didn’t say anything but squeezed him back harder. Cordelia sighed, loud and dramatic, and declared she was going home. He smiled, and didn’t even say anything about the fact that she still had his jacket around her shoulders. He ached everywhere, but he was feeling rather cheerful despite it all.

They stayed at Buffy’s for the night—a good thing, a great thing, because Xander was still reeling from the headache from hell, and also the magic of makeup remover—and he did his best to ignore the unsaid awkwardness between he, Buffy, and Angel, because yeah he remembered everything, and he wasn’t really willing to talk about any of it—like, at all.

It was only because they seemed to acknowledge that and accept that that he ignored the obvious
kissing happening in the other room while Willow double checked him for glass shards and makeup, and kept him company as he wiggled the cemented on fangs from over his teeth.

He still had dark splotchy stripes on his face and arms from the make up, which sucked, and made Ethan Rayne so much evil-er in Xander’s books, but currently it was the residue of the tooth cement stuff that was bugging him most.

Left a gross taste and feel in his mouth.

“So what happened at the end there? All I know is that I went looking for Buffy with Cordelia, and then I was all alive and in my body again.”

Xander made a face and scraped at the excess tooth-cement lingering on one of his teeth. “Well I as the Cheshire Cat thought that if it took any longer for the spell to be broken, there’d be like, more of him left at the end of the night than me, y’know? And he likes Wonderland more than the good ol’ U-S of A. But when I—he—found Buffy, Angel was there, too, and a bunch of costumed-demons around, so he grabbed them both and just…” he wiggled his undamaged fingers at her, “to the costume shop.”

Willow scrunched her nose and shuddered. “That was not a fun way to travel. I’m glad I didn’t have a body for that, or I really would have thrown up. Barfing is not fun. I’m impressed Giles didn’t, though, he looked a bit, um, barfy for a bit.”

“What was it like? The whole, In Between bits, because I’m remembering things weird, more like ‘I want to be there so poof, I’m there’, but I don’t remember the actual poof.”

“Oh, it was like the worst kind of roller coaster,” willow shook her head, “but like a roller coaster that kind of had different parts of you going at different speeds? I guess? I think Giles is going to be sore tomorrow. Oh, but do you remember doing any of the other stuff? Like your, uh, head?”

He rubbed at his temples and winced. “Well if I did anything with my head, that’d explain the splitting headache I’ve still got going on. I feel better in physics class, if that gives you an idea…”

“Mnh, your neck would probably hurt more.” She winced and touched a hand to her own throat. “You kind of turned your head around… like, all the way. 180 degrees. Oh, and your mouth fell off once, and you picked it up like it was no big deal! You put it back on your face even after it was on the floor.” She looked conflicted, like she wasn’t sure if it was the falling off part or the floor contamination part that was worse. Xander laughed; certainly explained the mouth-scrubbage happening earlier. “Oh, the Cheshire Cat was not a good costume…”

“I dunno Wills, he figured out how to keep me and him from going all the way mixy—after he did his, y’know,” another bout of finger wiggling, which was as appropriate a gesture for the poof thing as any, “he put on one of the display costumes in the store…”

“Oh that’s smart. Can’t get overly mixy with the Cheshire Cat when you aren’t the Cheshire Cat! Oh, so what did he—you—what was the costume?”

Xander winced. “Well that was the only issue with the plan. Grabbed up one of the big expensive guns, a plastic knife, and a camo-print headband, and I was already with the,” he gestured at his clothes, “so Xander the Cheshire Cat turned into Xander the Soldier, only, uh, the Cheshire Cat was kind of, well, Mad. Like, capital-em Mad.”

It took Willow a moment to get what he was saying, which was impressive even considering how adept she was in Xander-speak.
“Oh, so you were—Oh! So you were a crazy soldier! Well it couldn’t have been that…”

“Crazy soldier with a big gun and a machete.”

“…Bad. I’m guessing he wasn’t all crazy like, ‘oh I can’t stop tapping on this wall’ kind of crazy…” She sounded hopeful anyway.

“No, he was more like ‘oh I guess I’ll just shoot everyone because that wall looked at me sideways,’ that kind of crazy. I’d prefer it hadn’t happened if it didn’t mean full on mixing with a crazy cat, because as convenient as knowing how to use a gun is, and a knife, I’m kind of really freaking out about the explosives knowledge.”

C4 was really, really scary stuff. Just the thought of the kind of damage they could do to people gave him full-body shivers.

“Oh.”

The silence that followed was a mix of Xander not wanting to think about it, and Willow not wanting to ask about it but probably feeling like she should.

He closed his eyes, hoping that maybe if he fell asleep fast enough he could skip the rest of this conversation, even if it meant falling asleep leaning against a bed.

“Well, I guess forgetting all about it is an option? Maybe?”

Xander sighed, feeling his headache ease somewhat with his eyes closed. “Forgetting’s just forgetting, except when it’s not. Then they call it something else.” He frowned, eyes still closed.

“What’s with the weird talk.”

He opened one eye and tilted his head to see Buffy and Angel in the doorway, giving him a curious look. But that wasn’t a question. If it was, he really didn’t have an answer either way, though, so… He shrugged, bewildered.

“C’mon Xander, we don’t need any secrets from tonight…”

He raised his hands, palms out, taped fingers all unwieldy.

“Hey! I’m an open book here! A secret is only a secret when it is unspoken to another, and you know I’m all with the speaking!”

He turned to Willow, looking for some solidarity here, but she was giving him a concerned look, too. “Xander, you are sounding a bit different…”

He scoffed and shook his head. “Hey, everyone’s a little different after tonight, and you guys at least didn’t have a, ah, evaporating something-or-other cat in your head. Or a crazy-crazy soldier. And different denotes neither bad nor good, but it certainly means not the same.”

He blinked.

“Okay, maybe I am talking a bit differently. Who the hell uses the word ‘denotes’?”

“You were doing it immediately after the spell was broken, too,” offered Angel. “Something about wishing for better hallucinations…And you said something about my curse, too.”

Xander couldn’t remember saying anything about hallucinations, but he remembered the thing about
Angel’s curse.
“Oh, right, and what’s up with that? When were you going to tell us you could lose your soul?”

“Angel could lose his soul?”

“I didn’t say anything because I don’t know any way to break the curse—as far as I know, there’s no way to lose my soul.” Xander shook his head. Honestly, why did Buffy have to be all googly-eyed over this guy. Vampire. Whatever.

“Nuh-uh, you can lose your soul.” He paused. “What’s up with that? If you’re going to curse a guy with a soul—and may I just say that is a weird sort of curse to come up with—but if you’re going to curse a guy with a soul, don’t give him a loophole or whatever so he could lose it. That’s like, completely—” he turned to Willow, the word escaping him. “All reverse thoughtful? Mean one thing, act another, but all with intentions and being extra stupid?”

“Contradictory?” she offered.

“Yes, that. So really, what the hell?”

“Xander,” Angel gave him a long look, “why are you so sure the curse put on me isn’t permanent?” Something in his extremely limited facial range hinted at Angel coming to some great conclusion the rest of them hadn’t, and Xander sputtered.

“Because it is!” Because he was, and he could totally lose his soul! Xander wasn’t sure how, but he totally could.

“But how?”

“I don’t know, but he can! And it’s probably some stupid way, because when loopholes aren’t clever, they’re stupid.”

“Why can’t it be clever, then?”

“Because it’s a stupid curse, that’s why.”

Angel sighed.

“Buffy, he’s not going to be able to say anything else about it… and I think I should be talking to Giles about the possibility that there’s some sort of loophole in my curse.” And there was Angel giving him a weird side-eyed look, kind of like he knew something but mostly looking all significant. What an asshole.

Xander scowled and would have said more about that except he saw a bit of movement from Buffy, and turned just in time to see her put down a stake, all casual like, on her dresser. He gaped.

“Wh—you can not tell me you were considering dusting me! I’m not a vampire!”

She looked uncomfortable, but shrugged. “I wasn’t going to stake you, I was just, you know, being prepared. You don’t remember it, but last time you were all possessed, you weren’t exactly a joy to be around.”

Xander bit his tongue at that, and Angel looked confused. The Hyena thing wasn’t his fault. It also wasn’t something he was willing, at all, to explain to Deadboy, and he sincerely hoped neither of his girls would clue him in.
But seriously, the willingness of staking, not cool.

“Well good thing you didn’t change at all from being possessed by an 18th century noblewoman; you’re as randomly lethal and entirely confused as you ever were.”

“Xander, you have to understand we’re allowed to be worried when you’re acting a little… um, mad. Like Wonderland mad, only I can still understand you.” Willow shrugged. “You’re just sometimes acting a bit… unstable. But in a nice, kind of Xander-ly way.”

“The unstable are more than merely mad: they have ‘other parts’. And for the most part, have I been acting differently?” He didn’t think he had been…

“Not that I can tell,” offered Angel, but Xander only rolled his eyes at that. “Yeah, thanks Deadboy, that’s really helpful. Buffy’s mom knows more about me than you do. No offence meant to your mom, Buff.”

“Well, aside from a few out of character instances—like since when have you used the word ‘merely’?—you do seem to still be all Xander-like…”

“Oh thanks Buff. Willow?” at the affronted look that got him from Buffy, he shrugged. “We’re buds, Buffy, you know we are, but if you guys are allowed to worry after my sanity, I’m allowed, too. And Willow knows me the best, so…”

She was quiet for a worryingly long time—oh god, what if he was entirely bonkers??—but he resisted the urge to rush her; Willow could probably be the smoothest, most coherent and competent girl in school if only people gave her enough time to think, to process the situation. That, and if her parents wouldn’t keep brainwashing her into thinking she had to be perfect, and let her get to that level all on her own.

Hell, she already had. She was the perfect Willow, for all ranges of Willow-ness, and she’d only get better with time.

“…You’re still Xander,” she eventually offered, “only you’re Xander with one less filter between here,” she pointed at her head, “and here,” she tapped her lips.

“…Xander has filters?”

“Funny, funny, Deadboy. You’re a venerable font of witticism and humour. Obviously Buffy appreciates you for your brain—ow!” he rubbed his arm, but grinned, because he can’t be terribly different if Willow felt comfortable enough to smack him.

She smiled. “You have said a couple of weird things though, and, just to be safe, we should probably get Giles to check you out.”

A giggle welled up in his chest, and the small smile on Willow’s face faded slightly as she gives him a questioning once-over.

He has to put a hand over his face to keep from grinning like a loon, but his eyes danced.

“So, ah, we’re going to get the school librarian to check me out, huh?”

He can’t keep his laughter in, and probably laughs more than necessary, but it gets his girls to smile, at least.

“You know, if you really did go insane, at least you’re also insanely happy about it.”
He grins when Buffy tosses herself on the bed, his backrest shifting under her weight, and wow he’s still giggling. But *mainly* giggling, more of a *guffaw* than anything, so it’s okay to beam at the room at large.

“Yep, that’s me, the Xan-Man, bringing Insanity back into style—complete with completely inappropriate laughter!”

He doesn’t even feel bothered by Angel lurking by the door, as he’s significantly less broody than he seems to be at, oh, every other point in time. He does look rather pensive, however, but hey! They’d stopped a prankish curse before the night was over! And sure, both Willow and Buffy were giving him sidelong glances when they thought he wouldn’t notice, and they’d probably make him explain everything in exhaustive detail to Giles, but he was fairly confident that a little madness between friends could be handled.

He turned to Willow.

“Remember, toast only lands butter-side down when it’s not in a sandwich.”

Her smile dropped.

“Xander, your eyes!”

“What? What about them?”

“They’re—they *were* blue!”

“What??”

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Basically the whole next day was useless—Giles didn’t know what else to do, but had done some mystic stone-and-stick waving around him, and found that he was exactly what he was; Xander.

When he’d turned to Giles in the middle of said test and said, “your actions in the future will have long-standing consequences you’ll have to live with,” going all blue eyed, Buffy had been ready to kick his ass. But, as he said before, Giles hadn’t gotten anything but ‘Xander’ back from his tests, even with random word-spewage, even with *apparently* flashing-blue eyes when said spewage was happening, and all questions beyond that were answered with glasses-cleaning and head shakes.

Yet somehow it made both Buffy and Willow sigh with relief, which was a bit with the annoying. He loved his girls, but sometimes…

He sighed.

This was going to take some getting used to.

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He couldn’t sleep. And not in the, ‘oh woe is me, my thoughts keep me awake’ kind of not-sleeping, or the slightly more regular sort of not-sleeping that’s all about too much sugar intake and not enough vampire slayage, no.

No, he could deal with that.

Instead it’s just the not-tired sort of not-sleeping. He’d been all to-the-bone-tired, but after a few hours of lying down, staring at his ceiling, he’d felt all rested up except for the, you know, sleeping
aspect of it all.

He blamed the still-present headache. It was better than it was on Halloween, but…

Which he wasn’t sure about dealing with, hence the outdoorsyness of his current situation.

A couple of stakes in his pockets, a cross, and he was all protected and whatnot.

He hadn’t actually encountered any vampires yet, so that was all good and probably Buffy-induced, but it also meant that little noises were making him jump.

The twirly thing that seemed to be put in every playground was doing its thing, slowly, squeaking and rattling softly, and of course there was a kid. With his luck, it’d be The Anointed One, or whatever the creepy vampire messiah guy was called.

“C’mon mom… she’s always late.”

Xander checked his watch—either the kid was acting for his benefit, he was making up excuses for himself to exactly no one, or… or his mom was really that crazy to leave her kid out this late. If it was dark enough for the street lights to be on, it was later than you let your kids out of the house—that was a pretty basic Sunnydale rule.

Talk about bad parenting…

“Hey kid, you should be indoors by now.”

The kid shrugged, leaning his chin against the jungle gym’s bars.

“My mom is supposed to pick me up.”

Xander scoffed.

“Yeah, I heard—”

“D’you want me to walk you home?”

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and even though the lady didn’t have her game face on, but she was practically sweating bad mojo. He shook his head.

“Uh-uh, no way, that is a b-a-d Bad idea right there.” When she turned to look at him, he just kept shaking his head ‘no’, moving the kid with him to keep the bars of the jungle gym between them.

“I’m not supposed to talk to people,” said the kid, though he didn’t seem to have an issue with keeping close to Xander. Good kid. Smart.

He laughed. “Yeah, she’s not exactly people, kid, but yeah, good idea.”

They kept moving around the bars, and the probably-vampire smiled. “Who’s a pretty kitty? My name’s Drusilla. Would you like to come home with me? We could get you a nice, warm bit of milk…”

“Drusilla…” Xander blinked, and frowned, words from… earlier snapping in his mind. “Wait, you’re not Spike’s Dru, are you?” Her face lit up.

And suddenly there was Angel, between them. Xander hadn’t even noticed that Drusilla—or Dru, maybe—had drifted until there weren’t any metal bars separating them, but now there was a leather-
clad back between them.

“Oh thank god, it’s Angel.”

“Xander, run home.”

The kid, smart as he is, bolts, but Xander can’t quite break eye contact with Dru over Angel’s shoulder, and somehow that translates to his legs not moving.

“My Angel… is the kitten for me? Can I have him now?” Her head tilts, and she darts a glance to Angel’s expression with a coy smile. “Does he like daisies?”

Xander blinked, and tilted his own head.

“Well it depends on if they have anything nice to say.”

It was apparently the right thing to say to Drusilla, but it made Angel give him an incredulous look. Xander shrugged, because hey, it was true. Roses were usually pretty stupid, and generally unpleasant to be around, but Daisies were like 50-50 on where they’d land on the pleasant-scale. Sometimes they were nice, but sometimes… eeh. Xander blinked at his own thoughts, and kept the fact that flowers didn’t actually have personalities firmly in mind. This wasn’t Wonderland.

“Oh daddy, can I have him now, please can I have him now?”

No, Drusilla. Leave here.”

She pouts and frowns, and Xander has control of his legs again. He’d stagger back, but mostly he was concerned with the eye contact paralysis thing, so sticking with Angel’s back between him and her face is a good thing.

“Take Spike and get out.”

“Or you’ll hurt me?”

Silence, and Xander is tempted to peek out from behind Angel, or maybe run. Yeah, running is a good idea.

“…No…. No, you can’t. Not anymore.”

“If you don’t leave, it’ll go badly… for all of us.”

“My dear boy’s gone all away, hasn’t he?… To her.”

“Who?”

While Deadboy is playing extra dumb, and distinctly lacking with the whole fighting thing, Xander casts an eye around for, hell, anything that might help. It was amazing what could be helpful, really, like a branch, or a shovel, or a—

“BUFFY!” He’s away from Angel in an instant, going through the trees to get to the steps to get to good ol’ Buffy, the Buffster, the girl who won’t let her good friend Xander get snacked on.

Of course, when he gets to her and turns back, Angel and Drusilla are gone, but from her expression he can tell she’d seen them, too. So he wouldn’t have to prove in some way he hadn’t just been more crazy than usual and imagined it all, so, yeah, helpful.

“Xander, what happened? What are you doing out? Why aren’t you at home?”
He shook his head. “Couldn’t sleep, and wow, next time I’ll just suck it up and watch a movie. And what just happened? Creepy just happened. Kid was out alone, I tried to help—vampire lady shows up, cue creepy talk from vampire lady, and Angel shows up, with more creepy conversation with Vamp-Lady, and, weirdly enough, I think Angel knows her? Like from before? Pre-soul? So creepiness, kid ran, I literally couldn’t move my legs, and then you—hi, by the way, and have I mentioned you have wonderful timing? It’s lovely to see you.”

She sighed into the hug he gave her, but didn’t complain about the contact, which was good. He’d been feeling rather contact-starved, of late, which basically translated into many Xander-hugs.

“So, Drusilla,” he explained the next morning, “is Spike’s ‘Dru’, who he mentioned on the… well, on the night we’re all very focused on not mentioning, except you give me looks like you’re giving me right now. What’d I say?”

“You met Spike when you were all Cheshire-y?” Willow was doing her panicky-voice, which was very not good so early in the morning. He maybe should’ve waited until lunch for this conversation, rather than before class… He made a face.

“Well, yeah, but there was more contact with him when I was all crazy soldier rather than when I was all crazy Cat. But in the tiny, tiny little conversation we had before I went and found Buffy before he did—you’re welcome, by the way—he might’ve said something like me as the Cat being as crazy as ‘his Dru’…”

“Which is a lot of crazy… sorry Xander. So what’s Angel got to do with all of this?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Xander thinks that they might’ve known each other before the whole soul deal.”

“I’m telling you Buff, there was a lot of brooding happening, even more than usual—his jacket was all broody, his hair was done up with extra brood, and just, all of him, so much brooding.”

“And you know he gets his extra brood on when it’s something from when he was pre-soul.” Willow was nodding, and a nodding, agreeing Willow usually meant he was making sense, so.

He would have added that the last time Angel got his Brood on was when Spike first showed, but the bell took that moment to ring. Willow and Xander had Math, Buffy had French. They’d have to ambush her with logic in History.

Willow’s lips were pursed, a tiny frown on her face, and her expression clearly read ‘you don’t even know you did a bad thing, do you?’

It was entirely unfair.

This was how Buffy found them.

“Umm, what’s with the frowny face?”

“Xander let some of his crazy out in Math class.”

“I did not. I made entirely valid points!”

“Well sure, but getting into an argument with Ms. Chard about the difference between a good answer and a correct answer… that’s, like, a Philosophy and English type of conversation, not Math.”
“But Willow there is no such thing as a correct answer!”

Buffy gave him a considering look. “You should speak to my French teacher, then. I thought the memories of French from the Lady on Halloween would help me, but apparently my pronunciation is off by modern terms, and it’s considered haughty to expect to be called Mademoiselle, rather than common courtesy.” Her mouth twisted into a slight grimace.

Willow gave her a look, then. “Your Lady is showing, too. But Xander, in Math class, there are right and wrong answers.”

He shook his head. “Uh-uh, right and wrong is all about morals, and we’ve got those, but correct answers don’t stay correct, so they’re never really correct, you see? What we’re learning now wouldn’t be ‘correct’ a couple hundred years ago, and what we’re learning now won’t be correct in a couple hundred years, so each so-called ‘correct’ answer is both correct and incorrect, and also might be correct. It’s Schrödinger’s answer!”

Willow sighed, but Buffy shook her hear with a small grin. “Like I said, talk to my French teacher. Can’t say I’m not looking forward to English class with you later, though!”

He couldn’t see it, but he could certainly feel the warning look Willow gave him throughout History class, so he tried his best to stay quiet. He couldn’t quite keep from laughing at the talk of beheadings and Queens, and couldn’t stop the grin from blooming on his face at the look Ms. Kale gave him. “Off with her head!” he said, but while it got his girls to laugh, Ms. Kale only gave him a flat look.

He was tempted to say more, especially when Cordelia was giving her opinion on Marie Antoinette, but one laugh from Willow and Buffy did not acceptance of crazy make. Though really, it wasn’t like he was really crazy. He just sometimes said kind of crazy stuff.

So aside from correcting ‘depressed’ to ‘oppressed’—though in Wonderland you’d likely be beheaded for depressing someone before oppressing someone, which rather explained how the Red Queen stayed in power—he kept relatively quiet.

They picked up their graded papers at the end of class, and Xander was in the middle of handing Buffy and Willow their own papers—as an H-name he selflessly skipped through the stack to grab an R- and S-name since he was there—when he smiled and turned to Ms. Kale.

“When feeling lost in the dark, I find looking up to be helpful.”

Willow made a gesture, and Buffy clapped both hands over his eyes and pulled him from the class by his face.

It was exactly as uncomfortable as it sounds.

“What the—Buffy!”

“My, you can’t go all flashy-eyed at people!”

“I did not—” he stopped, considered how what he’d said to Ms. Kale could be considered relevant…

“Oh, well then.”

She’d need the advice later, he knew… somehow, but he wouldn’t mention that.
"So my eyes did the…” he flicked his fingers, and Willow nodded.

"Yep. Blue and flashy."

“It’s be neat if it didn’t only happen when you were going to say extra weird stuff.”

“It’d be neat, too, if it was another colour—not to say blue doesn’t look good, because it does, but, y’know…”

“Well it’s not like other colours are all that great. I mean, once you start breaking it down, there aren’t really many options that don’t already have, you know, bad associations. I already have brown eyes, but if I had, say, yellow eyes…”

“Vampires,” Willow acknowledged, nodding.

“Exactly, and if I had red eyes…”

“Not only would you look evil, the Master had red eyes… I’m seeing where you’re going with this.” Xander smirked. “Pun not intended.”

“But accepted and laughed at anyway, Buff. And if I had, mmm, green eyes…”

“Oh, nuh-uh, nope, not doing that again. Your eyes went all green when you were Hyena-ed up.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But you see why blue isn’t so bad? And when you get into the less natural colours, it’s not exactly easy to pass it off as, say, a trick f the light. Ms. Kale probably didn’t even notice, but if my eyes went all purple…”

“Mhmm, yeah, she’d notice it. And Orange would just be a weird mix of vampires and, well, a worse vampire.” Buffy grimaced. “Couldn’t your crazy just give you lighter brown eyes, or something?”

He shrugged.

“At least I didn’t get black eyes. I get enough threats as it is—” he turned, catching the sleeve of a random guy. “This is not a plan you want to go through with.”

Xander blinked, and the guy blinked back.

“… Weren’t your eyes blue a moment ago?”

“What kind of plan do you have going that I need to tell you not to do it?”

“Ford!”

And of course it isn’t just a random guy; it has to be Buffy’s childhood friend, her 7-year buddy, her fifth grade crush.

And he had a plan. Apparently a bad one.

“IT was terrible, I moped over you for months. Sitting at home listening to that Divinyls song ‘I touch myself’—” she cut herself off, apparently realizing exactly what she was saying, and to whom she was saying it to… Xander laughed.

“Oh? Do tell, Buffy.”

“Xander, if I have to come over there…” she left the threat hanging, “besides, I didn’t know what the
song was about back then…”

“Threats, promises and good intentions don't amount to action, Buffy.”

Willow thumped her head back on his arm were it was resting across her shoulders, and followed it up with a backhanded tap on his stomach.

“Ooh, and I am wounded!”

Ford laughed, looking between them, but mostly keeping his eyes on Buffy.

Oh, to see two people so annoyingly smitten…

“Haha, you’ve got an interesting way of speaking. Is it intentional, or were you cursed with the vocabulary of a fortune cookie?”

“A wise woman once said, ‘I know I’m guilty of something, but punishment hardly ever suits the victims of the crime.’”

Ford laughed after along moment when it became obvious that Xander wasn’t going to expand on that. To cover for their mutual bout of rudeness—thankfully Xander didn’t get thumped for his end of things—Buffy invited Ford out with them to the Bronze later on that night. Xander had to wonder if this was out of interest in catching up with an old friend, or maybe some sort of reaction to Angel’s apparent connection to Drusilla. He shrugged to himself. Maybe both.

“…Alright then, I’ve got to find the admissions office, ah, get my papers in order.”

Xander tilted his head, frowning. Something was off about that statement, but he didn’t know what. Maybe Ford was inventing an excuse to get away from them—the them that is not Buffy, that is.

“Well you know what, I’ll take you there and I’ll see you guys in French.”

That at least had he and Willow exchanging glances. French was one of the few classes Buffy had alone, and she had already finished it for the day.

Willow turned her head to look up at him. “Hey, who was it who said that thing about victims and crimes? The wise lady?”

An unexpected wave of sadness swept over him. Was it possible to miss someone you’ve never actually met?

“Oh, um, Alice. But, um, not in the books, I think…” he shrugged and tightened his arm around her shoulders. “I dunno. Buffy remembers old French, and I remember random quotes from people who don’t even exist, I guess.” And it was surprising, how much that fact hurt. While it was good and true that the Red Queen didn’t exist, and neither did the Jabberwocky, but Caterpillar, the Mock Turtle, and everyone else of Wonderland didn’t exist, either. Neither Rabbit nor Alice ever existed, in this universe.

And yet he did.

Somehow.

A moment of silence, and then Willow’s eyes were popping wide open. “O-oh, that’s what that song is about?”
Ford knew Buffy for a long while, and while that was irritating, Ford also didn’t have any issue sharing stories of the old Buffster, and so they had a friendly game of pool while they waited for Buffy to show.

Xander was still curious about whatever plan it was that Ford shouldn’t do or act on or whatever, but figured things would work themselves out one way or another.

Buffy would be sad if anything happened to the guy, but then…

“…The more people you tell, the more people I have to kill.”

But then, he also laughed when Buffy said things like that. Like it wasn’t at all within her abilities to do just that, if she felt strongly enough about it.

“You can’t touch me… I know all your darkest secrets.”

Xander opened his mouth to offer a bet against that, when suddenly the answer was right there.

He knows he knows he knows he knows he knows!

His mouth snapped shut, and he glanced to Buffy, then back at Ford.

But she doesn’t know he knows…

Willow tilted her head at him when Buffy left to the bar of The Bronze, and he quirked his head in Fords direction. Ford frowned.

“He knows.”

“He—oh, he knows? How do you know? Are you certain?”

“I know what?”

“Relatively certain, but not certain enough to not say more than ‘he knows’.”

“Does Buffy know? Did she tell him—oh, no, she would have mentioned…”

“Nope, she doesn’t know he knows, if he actually knows. Hence the vagueness.”

“I’d be able to tell you if I know if I knew what you guys were talking about.”

Xander shrugged.

“But if we were clear, then you’d definitely know, and we don’t let anyone in the know unless Buffy knows about it and acknowledges it. So. How’re you liking Sunnydale?”

A glance to where Buffy should be showed her with, what a surprise, Angel.

If the invite and friendliness to Ford was a way of getting back at Angel, she certainly wasn’t showing it.

Just judging by their body language, he could assume what their conversation was going like. It was a strange dance they had going on, for sure…

He leaned in, shifted, I’m so totally interested in you but I’m still putting on a half-assed pretense that I’m not, add brooding.
Her head tilted down, then up, cue defiant stare mixed with searching gaze, feet steady, *I want to know about Drusilla only I’m worried that you have romantic history, somehow know about my worries and also don’t lie to me*, add teenage hormones.

Uncomfortable stance, more shifting, look away, look back, yearning stare, step closer, look deep into her eyes, *this conversation is making me remember bad things, most likely pre-soul things, making me uncomfortable, but also the explanation isn’t Bronze-friendly, please trust me and let me explain later, I care, I have a soul*, increase brooding.

Smile, look fond, lean in, hand on chest, nod with head tilt combo, *I adore you despite common sense, I’m trusting you against the advice of my dear friend Xander, don’t take advantage of me, I’ll see you tonight for a lengthy explanation.*

Yet more brooding, *I’ll see you tonight for the bare minimum of an explanation that I hope you’ll accept.*

She shifted her stance, *not a chance in hell, maybe.*

Then both—*oops*, both look his way, and quite suddenly there’s new dialogue in there that seem suspiciously let’s-talk-about-Xander-like, and he makes himself look busy cuddling Willow close.

He’d feel bad using her as a social shield if there wasn’t the double-purpose of general, affectionate-but-not-crush-y contact going on, and thankfully both Buffy and Willow were accepting his sudden touchy-feely behavior.

Really, Angel should take a page from the Cat’s book; cuddles *are* better than brooding.

“That’s Angel.” Willow elbowed him a little farther away so she could take her shot at the pool table.

“He’s Buffy’s beau; her special friend.”

“He looks older than her… he’s not in school, right?”

“You’re not wrong… but you shouldn’t ask questions you know the answer to, it’s not polite.”

“Xander.” Buffy reappeared, eyebrows raised and giving him a rather familiar sort of look.

“Buffy.” But with familiarity comes resistance! “You know your shadow has gotten bigger, broodier, and even gained a leather jacket, all while your back was turned.”

“Hello to you, too, Xander.” And was that a hint of amusement he saw? No, surely not from He Who Broods! Xander didn’t know what to do with that.

“This is Ford. We went to school together… back in LA, I mean.”

The awkwardness of Ford meeting Angel, of Fords strangely passé attitude towards Angels Alpha Male shtick, against Angel’s brooding suspicions….

It was all just a bit off.

They shook.

“Whoa, cold hands.”

“You’re not wrong.”
He dodged Willow elbowing him, and amused himself translating the second conversation going on.

“So, you’re here visiting Buffy?” You better be planning on leaving.

“No, I’m actually here to stay. I’ve just moved down.” Nope, and let me give my dearest childhood friend a fond look just to show how far my head is up my ass in terms of assessing threats.

If Ford did know about vampires, he didn’t know how to act in a surviving sort of manner around them.

If he didn’t get a reason to leave, Xander didn’t see him surviving long. He tilted his head at Ford.

“‘Seek and ye shall find,’ they say, but they don’t say what you’ll find. Your plan is not a wise one.”

Xander blinked at Ford, and frowned.

“Okay, seriously, your plan, whatever it is, must suck if I’m telling you twice it’s a bad one. Whatever it is, just don’t do it.”

Feeling entirely irritable suddenly, he shakes his head at the looks he’s getting and heads to get himself a drink. He hears Buffy stutter out an excuse for him, in true Buffy Fashion, but it’s Angel who says the more surprising thing.

“It’s generally best to listen to Xander when he says things like that… I’m going to go check up on him, but I hope you realize that no one will be happy if you drag Buffy or Willow into this plan of yours.”

“You know it’s getting really crowded in here tonight, I’m, ah, I’m a little hot. You wanna take a walk? Of course you do, Ford, c’mon…”

Xander cracked the top off a bottle of Dr. Pepper, and focused on ignoring Angel. Willow, too, when she appeared at his shoulder, and he felt much worse about that.

“Xander… you need to calm down. I know you don’t like Ford, but…” Willow trailed off when he shook his head. He just kept shaking it, because no, no, nonono, just no to everything. Not just to what she was saying; to everything.

“It isn’t even that. Nope. It’s just he’s not going to listen. They never listen. And who are they? I have no idea who they are, but they never listen, and I know I’m letting my personal brand of crazy show, but people not listening to perfectly sound advice—it’s really annoying.”

Willow puts her hand on his arm, and he doesn’t shake it off though a good part of him is tempted. He’s still shaking his head, ignoring Angel because they have a good, mutual animosity thing going on between them, and Angel’s screwing with it by being weirdly supportive.

He takes another drink, wishes irrational frustration could be washed away with sugary carbonated beverage, but life doesn’t quite work that way.

Didn’t work that way in Wonderland, either, but there at least drinking something would give you a different sort of perspective, somehow.

Angel gestured, getting the barman’s attention. “Can you get some tea over here?”

Xander snorted, still shaking his head. At this rate, it’d shake right off.

“I hope that’s not for me. Those who say there's nothing like a nice cup of tea for calming the nerves
never had real tea. It's like a syringe of adrenaline straight to the heart! And really, please ignore everything I just said, because that’s not what tea is like, not here. And I don’t want it to be.” Xander frowned, and turned to Angel.

“And what’s with the niceness? We,” he gestured between them, “don’t like each other. It’s our thing, in as much as two people who don’t like each other can have a thing. Like if we were in a movie or TV show or something, our mutual dislike would be a constant. The sky is blue, Buffy kicks ass, and Xander and Angel have a mutual dislike of each other, so. What gives.”

Angel looked uncomfortable—as he should—and Willow leaned into his back, frowning at said brooding vampire from over his shoulder.

“And what’s with the niceness? We,” he gestured between them, “don’t like each other. It’s our thing, in as much as two people who don’t like each other can have a thing. Like if we were in a movie or TV show or something, our mutual dislike would be a constant. The sky is blue, Buffy kicks ass, and Xander and Angel have a mutual dislike of each other, so. What gives.”

Angel looked uncomfortable—as he should—and Willow leaned into his back, frowning at said brooding vampire from over his shoulder.

“Angel, it is a bit weird. You know, with the support and tea and…” she shrugged, but had said enough to prove his point.

“See? It’s weird. If you’re trying to lower my guard, consider that a failed plan. My guard is all the way up, and your whole brooding serial killer look you got going on is taking a serious beating, what with the sticking up for the zeppo shtick. So.”

Overdramatic broodster that he is, he doesn’t just lean back against the counter; he draped himself over it, the weight of his sorrow—of his very existence—too much to bear. He sighs, at once the tired old man about to give youngsters a life lessons and the tragic hero about to wax poetic about the conflicts of his past.

Or Xander is exaggerating, but…

Xander snorted, and scowled when instead of earning him an annoyed look, Angel’s stupid brickface goes all less anguished and more with the calm.

“Xander you… met Drusilla.”

“Yeah, scary-scary Vampire lady who went after the kid and called me, ah…” he trailed off, still not wanting to mention the ‘kitten’ thing, as recently any mention of anything feline related got him both the Patented Worried Willow Face, and Buffy’s pursed lips of I Can’t Tell How Much Of A Problem This Is Or Will Be.

“…names. Yes, she called you names.”

“She called you names?”

So maybe Angel could take a hint, which was good, especially as Xander was still getting the Worried Willow Face, but the brand that came from hearing about bullying rather than the Trouble With A Capital Tee sort of worry.

“Yeah, it was a thing. I’d really rather not go into it right now. Nowhere near Cordelia levels, but still. So why are we bringing her up—Drusilla, not Cordelia, and if it’s because she’s crazy, I’m going to stop you right now and make it clear that even if I’m a little bit crazy, it’s only a little bit, and we’ve all agreed it’s a happy crazy, and therefore nowhere near the Red Queen-ly level of insane she’s got going on.”

“It… her insanity is a part of why I’m bringing her up, but it’s… mostly about what she was like before I changed her.”

Xander opened his mouth.
“And yes, I was the one who changed her.” Xander closed his mouth. “And I… may have been a driving factor in what made her insane. When I was soulless. But I’m not talking about that. What I’m trying to say is that, there was a reason I changed her, specifically, and it was because she was showing all the signs of being a seer. Only, at the time, her foretelling was dismissed as lying and hysterics, and…”

All the trailing off was both annoying and uncharacteristic—but then, Xander thinks this might be the longest he’s heard Angel speak, so it was actually possible the pauses are just a thing he does.

If it was, it was an annoying thing.

Angel was an annoying thing.

“So you think Xander might be all seer-like with the random blue-eyes thing and weird advice-waring thing he does now? Oh.”

Willow was still leaning into his shoulder, now looking a little lost, so he squeezed her in closer to his side with an arm around her shoulders and gave her a little rock to shake her out of her own version of brooding. Willow brooding was a big no-no, because she quietly worked herself up into a great big freak-out, and somehow that translated to thinking it’s ok to drink coffee, and it was all just a mess after that. Just a big, speed-babbling stressy sort of mess.

“I’m all for super powers, but I think bits of mad-talk slipping through is more likely than that.”

Angel raised an eyebrow.

“And you know something about seers, do you?”

“Well, all the prophet/seer/fortune teller/I-can-see-the-future-type people in comic books usually, you know, tell the future in some way. All ‘some kind of doom is coming’ or ‘if you do that this will happen’ or even ‘we will be great friends, also there’ll be rain next Sunday’, not weird advice and warnings, apropos to nothing.”

“Gold star to Xander for the correct use of English Class’ word of the week… it was last weeks word, but gold star nonetheless.”

“Why thank you kindly, my dear Willow.”

Angel shook his head.

“It’s not common, but I have heard of seers who work through—”

“Mysterious ways?”

“…through advice, actually. None who’ve cropped up in the past couple decades, so far as I’ve heard, but they’re generally considered useful, if not particularly high-up in terms of power.”

“Well that I can agree with, at least. I’ll leave the high-powered things to Buffy and Wills. But I think I’d rather be with the mild insanity than the future-seeing. In the comics—”

“Because comics are obviously the best source material.”

“—every single future-seer is some level of crazy, the more accurate the more crazy. And I’d really like to keep from giving out advice when there’s a chance that no, actually it’s not accurate, it’s just me being a little extra crazy. And then they either die or end up screwing up something important in their lives because they focused on whatever I said rather than what they’d do normally.”
At the look that both Angel and Willow gave him, he returned with an irritable shrug.

“Hey, in the stories if the visions are the be all end all of what’s going to happen, then actually mentioning it is futile. It’s going to happen anyway, no matter what you do. And if it’s just one of several possibilities, then just saying anything changes it, which makes it moot, except the hero always uses it as gospel and everything gets screwed up. The love interest dies, or the kids get stuck in another dimension, or they end up killing both the bad guy and an entirely different guy who they only thought was the bad guy, usually based on what the seer person said.”

After a moments pause, Willow sighed and went all soft eyed that meant she was probably equal parts affectionate and exasperated.

“If you put the same amount of thought into school work as you do comic books, you’d have a much higher GPA.”

“There’s a huge difference between Shakespeare and Batman, or science and Batman, or pretty much any school subject and Batman. Batman is cool.”

“Your… strange insight aside, I still think it’s worth looking into. Especially as you’re so confident in your… advice. Drusilla was often confused before, well before, but you… aren’t.”

The whole less sleeping thing was nice, but also annoying.

Nice, because who didn’t want to be able to live off of a couple of hours of sleep?

Bad, because his walls were thin, and he could not deal with waking his parents up from videogames, movies, or music.

That was the quickest route to Crankytown, Violentsville.

So more walking.

But with a cross in one hand, and a stake in another.

He encounters a grand total of two vampires, but either some of Buffy’s ass-kicking skills were rubbing off on him, or these were minion-y fledges. He and Willow were much better at dealing with the minions, as they all had the same fight move and openings. Jump out, aha!, pause and growl with game face, and then sort of lunge into an attack.

But in the aha! stage, and the pause-with-growl parts, they generally didn’t think that the teenagers they wanted to snack on would run at them, and vampire eye-ridges weren’t conductive to surprised expressions, but they certainly had them in the half moment before they turned to dust.

He’d definitely have bragging rights at school if there weren’t some massive Sunnydale Hellmouth Blindness happening.

Regardless, it was a very good confidence builder.

Aside from the two vampires, who, the more he thought about it, looked like minion vamps—they weren’t even out of their funeral suits!—there was no Drusilla, or even random Angel showing. That was extra good, because Xander did not want to deal with his weird supportive-of-your-craziness vibe and opinion of Xander’s seer-abilities.
Really, comic books weren’t the last line on the how-to’s of life, but there was enough repeat when it came to those who know the future to be sure that in no way did Xander want to go that route.

That was a very bumpy road to go down, and on top of that it probably had, like, black ice or something. He’d heard that places that got regular snow like Canada and the North Pole, they got slippery stuff like black ice.

Also, considering the sometimes massive difficulty Willow and Buffy had when Xander said something particularly mad-seeming to them, having Angel be the one all gung-ho with the acceptance was more than a little unsettling.

His girls were trying to be all understanding, which was nice, but at the same time it hurt that they had to try.

But the next night they, as in Angel and Willow and he, which was weird, had a lead on the Ford Weirdness so that was good.

The Sunset Club, when they made their way into the creepy club basement, was, indeed, a creepy club basement. Complete with neon lights, creepy portraits, and a faint smell of mold.

The people, badly dressed though they are, are friendly. So they had that going for them.

“You guys are newbies, I can tell.”

The blonde was as friendly as everyone else, and also distractingly busty, but even better; she didn’t poke fun at Willow when she immediately went into mild babble mode.

“Don’t be ashamed. It’s cool that you’re open to it. We welcome anyone who’s interested in the Lonely Ones.”

Xander could hear the capital letters, and wow did that ever give him the wiggins.

“The lonely ones?”

“Vampires.” And that is the exact tone of voice you should use when surrounded by Vampire-groupies.

“Oh, Angel, you’re back, this is all sorts of yay, we were about to hear all about the Lonely Ones, capital letters included.”

“Oh, there is a great misconception that the Lonely Ones are violent, destructive beings… But that’s not true. They who walk with the night are not interested in harming anyone… They are creatures above us, exalted.”

She looked so very fond at the thought, and Xander had to cast an eye around in the gloom to see if there was any Kool-Aid sitting around.

“You’re a fool.”

Considering how cool he appears, Angel knows how to put his foot in it. Xander elbowed him as hard as he could, but all that got him was an annoyed glance and a sore elbow. His fingers were still healing, he did not need anymore broken bits.

“Right, see, but we’re ignorant newbies, just like you said, and we’ve obviously been researching the wrong books. Like Angel, here, he knows a lot about vampires, and demons in general, I mean,” he
laughed, over bright, grinning too wide, “it’s like he’s a 200-something year old vampire himself, he
knows so much. And, haha, he’s going to stay a lonely one if he doesn’t learn how to make friends.”

Somehow his jabbering got the injured, guarded look off of her face, but she still frowned at Angel.

“You don’t have to be so confrontational about it. Other viewpoints than yours may be valid, you
know.”

Xander laughed again, Willow joining in nervously a beat later.

“Yeah, well, again with the ignorance here. This guy knows a lot, but he’s definitely not a people
person.”

“Oh,” she smiled, well if you’d like we have some booklets you can look over—”

And that sounded like homework.

“Hahaha, of course, you know what they say about ignorance and bliss, and if ignorance is bliss, I
must be ecstatic. Let’s just—”

The grin dropped from his face, and he felt for the girl, really.

“Your personal identity will change several times more before you settle into yourself, but be warned
this way leads to danger.”

“We have to go.”

Angel already had the scruff of his shirts in hand, dragging him backwards away from the confused
blonde, while Willow settled for pushing t him.

“Oh, sorry!” he called to her, feeling a little bad. “Just ignore me, I’m just—I’m crazy, missed my
pills, all that jazz. Nice meeting you!”

“Going blue-eyed in a place like that is not helpful, Xander.”

“Right, like I can control it, at all. I don’t even register it as happening, most of the time!”

“Well you’ll have to learn then. Prophetic advice shouldn’t be given out all—all—”

“Willy nilly?”

Willow wilted, somewhat, under the look that got her, but Angel did nod. “Yes, that.”

Xander frowned. “Hey, there was no agreement about anything I say being prophetic. There was no
agreeing on any part, I remember this. I was all no, and Willow was all hmm, maybe, but in a no
kind of way, and you, Deadboy, were just stupid.”

“Can you not call me that?”

“Not until you stop it with the whole seer business!”

But he didn’t need to be a seer to know that Ford was most likely doing a Bad Thing, and also Buffy
shouldn’t be going after the guy alone.

He might not be a vampire—hell, he might not even be any sort of demon—but that meant that Buffy would hesitate over the beating and ass-kickage, never mind the fact that Ford was also a childhood friend.

So he was at Buffy’s house after school the next day, making with the sense and logic.

It was a novel experience.

“You shouldn’t go alone, Buff. And I know from your expression that I’m not all blue-eyed, but this is common sense talking here. Common sense, so you know that stuff’s in short supply.”

Buffy rolled her eyes, and tugged on a jacket, flipping her hair out from under the collar. “Xander, it’s just Ford, and yes we all agree that he’s up to something, but I think I can handle Ford on my own.”

“Which is great, but you know what’s also great? Having backup when you’re going into an unknown situation. And you may know Ford, but you know what? I got the wiggins enough to go all blue eyed. Twice. Angel got the wiggins enough to go to Willow—and I am seriously not thinking on the fact that Willow had Deadboy in her room, alone, but then she got the wiggins from what she dug up on the net. That is three for three in the wiggins factory, and even if you don’t need it, it’ll certainly give me some peace of mind to just be around.”

Really, there’s just a whole lot of wigging out happening.

Buffy huffed, pursing her lips, and the beginnings of the puppy dog pout started to form.

“Buffy I don’t even have to go into their creepy dark basement thing; I just have to be the guy who waits outside and listens for trouble!”

He grabbed up a stake in each hand from her bedside table, and shoved one into his back pocket before offering the other to her.

“You should at least bring one of these… we know vamps are going to be involved, so you never know when a Spike would be handy.”

Buffy huffed a small laugh, but took one of the stakes.

“We’re calling them spikes, now are we?”

Xander shrugged, but smiled all the same. Would that be a Freudian slip, or did that only count for penises? “You know what I mean—but I’m noticing a bit of acquiescence here, with the backup. Because you know I’m expert at attracting trouble, but I’m really good at listening for it, too.”

Listening for trouble was boring, but he knew there’d be some excitement, eventually. Buffy wasn’t exactly a quiet fighter; she was all with the grunting and the sassy quips and strong enough that hits were less hit-like and more thwack-, crash-, boom-like. It was like hanging out with a comic book heroine.

But so far it was quiet. She was taking a long time of it, too, but he figured when your childhood friend-crush was plotting with vampires against you, it’s going to take some time to get past the crazy.
Not that he’d be saying the c-word around Buffy anytime soon, but, you know.

Though it was getting pretty dark, so…

Curious, he peeked into the building—

The door was closed.

Was there a door there before? He supposes there must have, considering there was one there, now, and it was a big-normal sized door so it wasn’t like he just didn’t look down before.

And it made some sense that it was closed, though he honestly found open doors more useful, in a general sort of way, and he thought Buffy did, too.

So why was it…

He checked up and down the hallway, just to see if it was someone out here he hadn’t noticed before who closed the door, and then he poked his head back outside because it was also possible someone had gotten past him. He didn’t like the possibility that he’d failed at listening for trouble, but…

He frowned for a moment, baffled as to why such a large group of the vampire wannabe’s were coming now—

His eyes widened.

Nope, no, nuh-uh, those weren’t wannabe’s, and even from this distance he saw bleach blond hair and oh god he’d only ever seen one vampire lady wearing a nightgown before and—

Buffy. Good, good time to get Buffy.

“Buffy! Buffy there’s vampires!”

“Xander don’t close the—”

He stopped pushing the door closed to giver her a look, because hello vampires.

“—door.”

He opened his mouth to ask about that whole common sense thing they’d discussed earlier, then stopped, frowned.

“It’s still open, but… why isn’t there a handle on the inside?”

Someone slammed into him from behind, rude, and all he saw was a flash of purple sparkle in the edge of his vision before the door was slammed shut with their combined weight.

Or, mostly Xander’s weight, because jerking his elbow back to get purple-sparkles off of him proved that the guy was all skin and bone and gangliness and—

“A purple cape? Seriously? And the ruffly shirt thing?”

Somewhere down the stairs he heard Ford laugh, and Sparkles sneered and crossed his arms over his chest.

“What is it with you two non-believers? You can mock the cape but the shirt is cool.”
Xander raised an eyebrow and looked him over, doubtful.

“I’m not exactly Mr. Fashionable, but the ruffled shirts only look good on girls, what with the whole,” he cupped his hands in front of his chest.

“Xander, stop channeling your inner Cordelia! And how did you not hear the big metal door slam shut?”

Xander leaned over the railing to frown down at Buffy.

“I don’t know, why did you insist that I wait outside the building, rather than just outside the door?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because I didn’t think that one of my oldest friends would go all crazy evil!”

Xander paused on the steps. “Wait, my kind of crazy, or…?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “No, like evil crazy. You’re harmless crazy, and sometimes confusing crazy, but that’s not much different than you were before Halloween.”

“Oh, thanks for that,” but he was smiling—at least until he caught sight of the buxom blonde from earlier.

“Oh come on!” he threw his hands up in the air, “no one listens, Buffy, no one listens! Hell, you didn’t listen! You were there both times I said Ford was planning something, and you,” he pointed at Ford, “I told you two times that your plan wasn’t a wise one, and yet here we are. Presumably partway through your plan. Your bad, bad plan. If you don’t use your ears they’ll just fall off. I bet Van Gogh didn’t listen to anyone either!”

“Xander, that’s not how he lost his—”

“Wait,” Sparkles pointed at Ford, “You told him your big plan? You didn’t tell me, but you told him?”

“I didn’t tell him anything.”

“No, I still don’t know what your bad plan is.”

“He’s dying so he wants to be a vampire, so obviously that means trading me for the chance to house a demon.”

Xander opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head and pointed at Ford.

“Bad, bad plan. And now the vampires are here, so you dragged everyone else here into your bad, horrible plan, so really thanks for that.” He sighed. “Buffy, you sure know how to pick ‘em.”

“Hey!”

Xander started counting off fingers. “Angel the 200 year old emotionally constipated vampire, Owen the situation-stupid adrenaline junkie, that college guy who drugged you and tried to feed you and two others to a demon snake thing, and here we have Ford, your friendly childhood friend-slash-sociopath who’s looking to trade you, me, and a dozen vampire groupies for a chance to get dusted by you later.”

“She won’t dust me if she’s dead.”

“Do you not get the fact that she’s the hero of this story? She’s The Slayer, with capital letters, and
you think you’re going to beat her with vampires?” he turned to the groupies. “She’s pretty much Van Helsing, for you newbies.”

He would have continued, except then of course the door had to open with a horror-movie-esque squeak.

The door was open, which was great, and no one was coming through, which was also great, but the doorway was also in complete darkness, which pretty much guaranteed that something deadly was waiting there.

The Blonde—and Xander should probably find out her name, considering—was the one to make it up the first few steps, closer to the darkened doorway, when

“Kitten?”

“Oh my god.”

Buffy immediately looked at him, hell, all even vampire groupies looked at him, and that meant that, when Spike himself walked through the door, his eyes immediately fell on him. He blinked and looked back over his shoulder where Drusilla appeared.

“Oh, that’s your kitten? I remember him from Halloween.” Spike sounded downright approving. At the very least he was pleased. It was terrifying.

“Oh my god.”

“Wait, you know him?” Xander might have mocked Fords confused angry face at any other time, except it felt a little like his stomach had made room for itself in his throat.

Buffy, lovely, lovely Buffy immediately moved in front of him, but Xander wasn’t going to deal with just that, oh no, not with someone even crazier than he was right there. Not when Buffy had more than a dozen other people to defend in such a limited space.

There were suddenly many more vampires bursting into the room, and Xander heard Buffy dust three of them in quick succession as he scrambled through the now panicking groupies. Even through the screams and the mad scrambling, he heard Drusilla coo “Bring me my kitten, Spike, Daddy wouldn’t let me have him.”

And that freaked him out that he started hyperventilating, except vampires and he had his own stake, so he was freaking himself out with constant low laughter, just this side of manic.

He staked two vampires who were distracted with munching on the groupies, but then he found himself straightening and turning straight to Sparkles, who at some point had lost his cape.

“When the remarkable becomes bizarre, reason turns rancid. When you next feel lost, home will point the way.”

Xander blinked, and Sparkles’ eyes went wide.

“Seriously? Now? I have to do the crazy thing now?”

Xander lunged forward, shoving Sparkles aside, and the vampire he’d been aiming for dodged and ran.

Xander might’ve lost his balance if a hand hadn’t grabbed him by the back of his collar and hauled
him upright.

He might’ve thanked Sparkles for the save, except Sparkles was still staring wide eyed with his hands clutched to his chest, and once he was upright he kept going until his feet left the ground, and oh god that’s no good. No thanking would be happening for this.

“So that’s why Dru wants you, eh?” Spike shifted his grip so one hand was on his throat, the other holding his shirt in a fist, and Xander could’ve been happier without the perspective change. A grinning gamefaced vampire was a terrifying thing.

“‘Nother seer, eh? Explains some of what you—oi! No kicking!” Spike shook him, making Xander feel extra dangly, but he aimed another kick at him anyway.

“You’re as bad as Angel,” another shake, another kick, “I’m not any sort of seer! I’m just a little crazy!”

“Ha! ‘S first time I’ve heard someone say that, it’s usually the other way ‘round!” Spike grinned wider, and now Xander could see he had some blood on his fangs. Perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to annoy the vampire who’s got you by the throat.

“Aha, what big teeth you have,” Xander dug his fingers into the hand holding him by the throat, and because he’s apparently suicidal, continued with “is that an English thing? Because I’d rather avoid the whole ‘to better eat you with’ cliché—oh my god ow, ah, you can st-ah—”Spike loosened his grip on his throat, and Xander took in a deep breath.

“C’mon there’s, ah, no need for any choking, or for anyone to, guh, lose their head over this.” It was getting much more difficult to breathe, let alone talk, and the hand at his throat tightened a fraction when Spike started walking.

“Ooh, you’re a funny one, are you? Might be worth it to change you before Dru plays with you too much.”

“You’re going to change him?”

“Spike!”

Xander simultaneously wanted to glare at Ford for completely inappropriate jealousy and hug Buffy for her timing—urk.

Spike’s grip on his throat tightened, his eyes locked on where he assumed Buffy was doing—something, but from this angle he couldn’t see what.

“Everybody Stop!”

“Good idea. Now you let everybody out, including Xander, or your girlfriend fits in an ashtray.”

Xander gasped when Spike’s hand loosened its grip around his throat, and kicked weakly when he wasn’t set on the ground.

“Leggo.”

“You willing to let this one die, then? ‘Cause otherwise I think we’re at a standstill. You dust Dru, and I’ll have no reason to keep this one alive.” Spike shrugged, the beginnings of a smirk on his face.

“So how ‘bout this, Slayer. You take your boy and leave the snacks here for us, or you can take the happy meals with you and leave to boy to me ‘n Dru.”

“I’m serious, Spike.”
“So am I.” Spike ran his tongue over his teeth, eyes still locked to one place. “Boy’ll make a good vampire, I can tell you that much.”

“’Drather n’t,” Xander gasped. If he didn’t die, that’d definitely bruise.

“You didn’t even want to turn me!” Xander craned his head as much as he could manage to see, and only caught a glimpse of Ford, and a crowbar blurring towards his face before he was dropping.

Xander would have laughed at the squeak Buffy made just then, at the cut off shrieks and gasps around the room, except he was feeling a little loopy, and he was busy scrambling away.

“What the bloody hell?”

Xander also probably would have commented on that, except he was having trouble finding his mouth—his hands went to his neck to feel the damage, and passed through, because there was nothing there. Somehow he made it to the stairs (how, without eyes, he didn’t know), still feeling around where his head should have been but wasn’t, and half collapsed against the door when he finally found his voice—and his head.

“Xander! Are you—”

“I’m good! I’m good!” he laughed, because he couldn’t stop laughing, it was a thing he did now. He kept on laughing.

He thought he should probably feel more alarmed than he did, currently, but perhaps his sense of alarm hadn’t yet returned with his head. A thought occurred to him, and he grinned at where Spike had Ford trapped in a headlock, crowbar at his feet. It looked like Ford had lost consciousness.

Xander’s face was suddenly serious, and he said, “Beware of falling support beams, else you won’t have a leg to stand on,” before grinning again.

“I said it before, didn’t I?” He laughed, eyes bright, “I said, let’s not lose our heads! And I did!” and collapsed into giggles. Drusilla started to laugh as well, and Xander only laughed harder when Buffy gave him a wide-eyed look and said, “Get yourself together, Xander!”

He held his head to make sure it didn’t get away from him again, didn’t go In Between without him, and tried to calm down while Buffy renegotiated with Spike.

Soon the probably ex-groupies filed past him, most giving him a wide berth. “What is he, and how can I get that?” he heard Sparkles whisper to the Blonde on their way past, and that just set him off again. Buffy sidled next to him, still holding a stake to Drusilla’s chest, and gave him a concerned look. “Xander are you alright? Can you move?”

Xander smiled up at her, ignoring the hand Drusilla held out that was just shy of petting him. “A wise lady once said, ‘such order in the midst of chaos makes me woozy and disoriented.’ I think losing my head rather did the same thing.”

He was still laughing when he left the building, Buffy slamming the door behind her, and grinned at the ex-groupies whispering amongst themselves.

“That was crazy,” one was saying, and Xander caught her eye and grinned extra wide.

“Of course, it takes crazy people to make a crazy situation.”

“What? Bu I’m not—”
“’Course you are. But you can’t help it. Everyone here is mad. I'm mad. You're mad. It's only by chance n’ careful planning if you're not!”

“How do you know I'M mad?”

Xander grinned wider still, but felt it start to fade as some of the manic energy of the past few minutes started to wane. “Because you're here,” he explained, settling for a tired smile, “and everyone here is mad.”

Buffy touched his shoulder, extra gentle, and it was a relief that there was only sympathy in her face. If she’d gone back to being all concern-filled for his mental stability, he didn’t know what he’d do.

“I’m good, Buff,” he said as she pressed careful fingers to his throat.

“That’s going to bruise,” she warned him, and he shrugged before pulling her into a hug. He could deal with bruises later. After a moment she pulled back enough to look up into his face, and cocked her head.

“C’mon, I’ve got a good selection of ice packs at home.”

“You sure know how to sweet talk a guy.”

“Buffy! Xander! Xan—oh my—your neck—” Willow covered her mouth

“You guys are just in time.”

“Yeah, but you missed all the fun stuff. There were vampires, betrayal—and a guy in a purple sparkly cape. Like something out of a Shakespearian play.”

“What about the vampires?”

“They’re contained. They’ll get out at some point, though, so we should probably get going. We can come back when they’re gone.”

“We’re going to come back?”

Buffy turned to look back at the building. “For the body.”

Xander tightened his arm around her and cleared his throat.

“You know what I could go for right now? I think it was… Oreos and juice?”

Buffy smiled. “Oreos and Juice.”

Xander grinned and gave Buffy a soft shove towards Angel before grabbing up Willow under his arm. “Well, I’ve never had such a disgusting combination of food and drink, so I suppose you’ll have to show me how, Buff.”

She smiled.

“Just try to contain your excitement.”

Her smile turned into more of a grin, some of her pep returning as she reached an arm out to pat his head. “Just try to hold yourself together, okay?”
So yeah, more of this ‘verse for you :) I’m actually participating in Camp NaNoWriMo, so while I’m sorry about the extra long chap, I’m also not. Hope you enjoyed!
The Wiggins

Chapter Notes

Next chapter, yay! All notes and remarks about Alice in Wonderland and the Cheshire Cat can be found in the first chapter’s notes. Please note that I’m not doing every chapter, but I’ll at least be mentioning them. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Giles’ history as a bad boy derails what would have been a month-long freak out, and while Xander wouldn’t wish any sort of possession on anyone, he’s sort of side-ways happy about the whole situation.

Not like full, straight on happy, but all sideways-like.

And hey, there was a lot of learning going on, so the teacher part of Ms. Calendar—the part that’s not freaking out because she was possessed—should be happy.

He learned about how orderly taxes could be by snooping through Giles’ things, he learned that you should never, under any circumstance, summon a demon, he learned that aggressively hugging it out with Cordelia doesn’t exactly shut her up, but it does mean that their sniping at each other feels, at least to him, a bit more friendly. And hey, she complained loudly about his touchy-feely-huggy-ness, but there was some definite hugging back.

It also turned out that Angel-demon was stronger than whatshisface demon that Giles and his old group of buddies summoned, and that was a bit creepy but good, and Ethan Rayne seemed alternatively amused and afraid of him, which was also with the good and the creepy.

Hell, he’d even learned that he found tattoos on girls an extremely attractive thing, even when they’re demon-y possession type tattoos. Well, that part takes away some of the hotness, but that just confirmed that non-demonic tattoos are extremely okay.

Giles seemed only a bit shaken over it—impressive, considering his childhood friends were killed, his girlfriend was taken over, he was nearly killed, and he had to interact with Ethan Rayne again, but it seemed like he was pulling his English-ness up around him and shoving down his feelings with good old fashioned repression. Very healthy.

The fact that Ms. Calendar was doing the whole avoidy-thing with Giles wasn’t that great, but it was understandable. Not an understandable that he liked, but…

He tried offering to talk to her, once, as he was the current champion when it came to unwanted possessions—what with the hyena, and the cat, and the homicidal crazy soldier—but Ms. Calendar didn’t seem to know what to do with him.

Willow had taken to lightly poking, elbowing, and kicking him whenever he went off tangent, or when he went all blue eyed—though he was starting to recognize those for himself, so that was good
—but he could just as easily tell by the wigged, uncomfortably stiff look on Ms. Calendar’s face when he said something odd.

He didn’t know why she was so wigged, especially as he hadn’t even gone all blue-eyed on her yet; he’d confirmed with Willow, Buffy, and had even asked Giles in case he’d been around them and hadn’t noticed a lack of his girls.

That was unlikely, but Xander hadn’t ever actually been alone with Ms. Calendar before, what with him either having class with Willow or Buffy, so he wasn’t really sure where any of the awkwardness was coming from.

Even the after-school schooling he’d endured with Cordelia, Willow had been there to help with the teaching.

So he felt for Giles and his lady troubles, and he felt for Ms. Calendar and her post possession wigging, he was a bit happy he could now safely avoid library time with her sidestepping talking directly to him.

Though he thinks he prefers that to filling out little checkmarks in the hopes he’d find a little career-shaped box to put himself into.

“Are you a people person or do you prefer keeping your own company? Well, what if I’m a people person who keeps his own company by default?”

Buffy scrunched her nose at him. “Okay, maybe I need to be filling out your form; you are definitely a people person—not a lot of people person, but when they’re your people, you’re a people person.”

“Yeah, okay,” he rolled his eyes, “but I don’t think I fit into what they mean by people person. Do they even know what they mean by people person? Technically vampires are people persons, in that they enjoy being surrounded by, and getting close to people. They just also happen to prefer eating them.”

“So just mark none of the above.”

“There are no boxes for none of the above—that would introduce to many variables into their mushroom-head number-crunching world. Besides, I’d rather have an all of the above option to none.”

“I’m not sure if I’m sensing bitterness or insightfulness, here,” Willow said as she slid into a seat.

“You’re sensing a belief that there’s never a good answer to a yes or no question. What’s yes now might be no later, and what you’re asking might have a thousand variants of yesses and no’s in-between that you’re more likely to fit on.”

“Ah,” Willow nodded, “so it’s being bitter about not being able to ignore your own insightfulness. I’m still interested in what sort of career I could have, inefficient questionnaire aside.”

Xander scowled down at the paper, its as-yet unfilled check-boxes mocking. “I suppose it could be interesting, except one questionnaire when you’re a teenager won’t be able to foresee what you’ll be like even one year later.” He glanced at Willow, and checked another box, wrote a note next to it in the margin, “The Willow of right now might grow to be a teacher, or do something with computers, or might turn around and become a pop star or a witch or something. But that quiz won’t be able to tell anything about next year’s Willow—you might suddenly go evil and be more likely to be the next President, or maybe the Principal. Every adventure requires a first step. Trite, but true, even here… though as first steps go, a career week questionnaire isn’t my idea for a good start.”
“Hey… only, again with the bitter insightfulness.” Willow pursed her lips and looked down at her own stack of papers, looking much less enthusiastic. And now Xander felt like a huge downer.

“I aspire to help my fellow man… Check. As long as he’s not smelly, dirty or something gross.” Luckily there was always one person around to make you feel like the most cheerfully selfless person in the world.

“Cordelia Chase…Always willing to give a helping hand to the rich and the pretty.”

“Which, lucky me, excludes you. Twice.” Xander quirked an eyebrow, and grinned.

He was about to threaten some more hugging—public hugging, even--

“Hi Xander.” He blinked, one of Cordelia’s following was talking to him. Smiling, too. Expectant looking...

“Um, hi?” He looked to Willow and Buffy, but they looked just as baffled as he felt.

She, and actually the rest of Cordelia’s posse, continued with the expectant smiling thing they had going on. Cordelia huffed and rolled her eyes.

“Uuh, can I… help you?”

They all smiled prettily, and Xander started to suspect demonic possession as the most likely culprit.

“Well, do you have anything to say to me? To any of us?”

“…Like what?”

“Any… advice, maybe?” they said it with a certain sort of expectancy.

His eyebrows went up, and he gave Cordelia a quick look, but instead of looking amused like she would have if she’d put them up to this, she just looked impatient and bored. Willow and Buffy were no help when he looked to them, only shrugging. Buffy was giving the girls a look like maybe she was also considering the demonic possession angle.

“I suppose ‘experience teaches best’, ‘learn by doing’, and similar clichés have merit. Take their advice; I'm kind of busy with the whole,” he tapped on the questionnaire. “I don’t know what else you’re looking for here, and if you’re looking for advice on this thing, I’m happy to tell you that it doesn’t at all work that way.”

“Nothing else? Nothing more…” the staring deep into his eyes thing was freaky weird, “…significant?”

Xander scowled. He was already feeling irritable enough from the quiz, add on to that Cordelia’s inherent Cordelia-ness, but now this on top of all that?

“I’ve heard self-reliance is a virtue. Now you've heard it.”

Their smiles fell, and Cordelia sighed, loud and dramatic.

“Ugh, I told you his crazy thing was entirely random. You should know to trust what I say over Becky when she thinks she’s right. It’s too much to hope for anything resembling consistency with this loser.”
“Oh, Cordy, don’t you know there’s an infinite amount of hope, but not for any of us here in good ol’ Sunnyhell.”

“Ugh, speak for yourself. If anyone will end up hopeless and stuck in their hometown, it’ll be you.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and flounced off, her followers doing their thing, now full of giggling annoyingness.

Xander took a deep breath. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts. Keep thinking the happy, happy thoughts.

“If murder always a crime?”

But it turned out that Cordelia and her wiggy followers were the least wig-worthy thing to happen, and that was big with the worry-making as nothing much else happened.

Buffy was feeling left out about the whole career week thing, what with being The Slayer, and it wasn’t helped that Giles was turning his helpless feelings for Ms. Calendar into laying it on with the Slayer training. Willow would have been feeling all happy and relatively confident over the career-deciding quiz, except something Xander said seemed to have convinced her that whatever result she got would be so totally different from what she’d actually end up doing, and now she was worried that she’d get too good a career.

Telling her that that wouldn’t happen didn’t get her to relax, and neither did reminding her that she was only going to get smarter.

But Xander didn’t have anything more annoying than Cordelia to deal with, and he was getting all shivery with the foreboding feels. Feelings, of the emotional variety, as he wasn’t up for feeling up any sort of foreboding figures. In fact he should probably take a break from girls in general, for a bit, at least until the bad luck of dating a life-sucking mummy wore off.

Because that kind of bad luck wore off, right? Right. It definitely did.

It had to.

But the feeling just got worse as the day wore on, and it didn’t help that more people at school were saying hi to him than he’d ever been said hi to before—

It was all just very odd, and everything was giving him the strong impression that something big was going to happen—maybe not necessarily a bad thing, but it wasn’t going to be a goody-goody kind of thing for sure. *That* at least wasn’t in the cards, all seer-like imagery aside.

So Xander kept his freaking out indoors that night, bored enough to start cleaning his room, which might actually be apocalypse-heralding, but unwilling to head out into the night. Well, he cleaned his room until his mom woke up, cranky, at which point Xander moved to sorting through the junk that had accumulated in the basement. Really, it wasn’t used for much beyond storage and laundry, which kind of sucked since he, Jesse, and Willow had spent many a rainy day roaming the Harris House Basement.

It kind of hurt thinking of that, thinking of the fact that Jesse was dead, had been staked by Xander, actually—

Thought really he’d only been holding the stake, while Jesse mocked him for his general life failures up to and including his inability to stake Jesse, up until one of the running and screaming masses had
pushed Jesse off balance, and… well.

Xander had liked that shirt, but with best friend vampire dust all in it, it got burned in his back yard with much ceremony and an appropriate amount of man sniffing.

But regardless of if he held all the sought after bragging rights that came with dusting Jesse, finding the two ‘sword’ sticks they’d dueled with brought back some good and pain-tinted memories.

But hey.

He wasn’t bored.

The next day the warning tingles hadn’t gone away, and he thought it was only partially likely that it was due to Career Week suckage. Snyder had one more thing going against him making it mandatory.

That Cordelia managed to get two careers so terribly in line with her more vapid personality—as even Xander could admit she could be serious if she put her limited brainpower to it—somehow had the day starting off in the worse sort of way.

“Personal shopper or motivational speaker. Neato”

“Motivational speaker on what? Ten ways to a more annoying you? Then again, you aren’t the brightest star in the sky, but you certainly shine at one thing.”

Cordelia scoffed and flipped through the class list.

“I’m the brightest star you’ll ever get close to, that’s for certain, so I’ll take that as the compliment I’m sure it’s meant to be. But look here, you’re…” she trailed off, smirking. Uh-oh. “Well I’m sure that’ll be appropriate for your particular skill set, Mr. Shine-at-one-thing.”

“What? What?”

Cordelia left him to stare at the sheet, laughing as she walked away, not even realizing how horrible Xander’s week was going to be. They were, quite literally, the two worst possible careers for him.

It could only be worse if they had written Harris, Xander, Seer and Circus Freak.

“Wouldn’t you two say you know me about as well as anyone else? Maybe even better than I know myself?”

“Better,” Willow agreed. “Even with the newfound crazy.”

“Maybe even better because of the now normal amounts of crazy.” At Willow’s frown, Buffy shrugged. “Hey, he hasn’t done his blue-eyed impression on me yet, only on the random unsuspecting masses of the school.”

“Okay, yeah, whatever,” Xander waved his hands to get their attention back on track, “but when you look at me, do you think therapist?”

Willow frowned. “Your parents want you to go to therapy?”

“What? No, this is the school thing—”
“The school wants you to go to therapy?” Buffy looked impressed. “I burnt down the school gym, and I didn’t have anyone pushing me to therapy.”

“Instead you got expelled.”

“That is so not the point! And no one’s making me go to therapy! What I mean is, can you picture me as a therapist? Or a prison guard, for that matter, because they just put up the assignments for the career fair. According to my test results, I can look forward to being gainfully employed in the growing field of corrections, or else listen to crazies and their problems and give them advice of the emotional variety.”

Willow, great friend that she was, started to laugh. Buffy wasn’t much better.

“Well, at least you’re on the right side of the bars.”

“And therapy?”

Buffy shrugged. “And you’re in the right chair for that one, too.”

“Ha, ha, very funny. But do you know what I think of when prison guard mixes with therapist? I think insane asylum.” He nodded when that stopped them laughing. “Yeah, exactly. I’d like some real distance between me and asylums—and therapists, actually, but for the next four days I’ll be splitting my time between a psychologist who might diagnose me as a violent crazy, and a guy used to keeping struggling people confined. And you can keep on laughing, missy, because they assigned you to the booth for law enforcement professionals.”

“As in police?” Yeah, Buffy had tons of fond memories of the police.

“As in polyester, doughnuts, and brutality. So keep your laughter to yourself while I try and figure out how to keep my crazy internalized like any normal teenaged boy.”

“Ooh… Well, I’ll just jump off that bridge when I come to it. But hey, it was you who was all about how this test isn’t the be-all end-all of our futures. So I guess there won’t have to be any bridge jumping for any of us.”

“Eh, I’m still worried about the whole therapist-talk thing.”

Willow slung her arm around him to give him a half-hug, and Buffy gave him a pat on the arm. “I’m sure you can pull off eccentric more than crazy.” She sighed. “Meanwhile I should go report to Giles. He’s on this Tony Robbins hyper-efficiency kick. Expects me to check in every day after homeroom.”

And then she was off.

He and Willow untangled enough so that they could walk arm-in arm rather than in the inefficient-for-walking half-hug.

“Before you ask, I checked your name, too.”

“Oh? Which seminar was I assigned to?”

“That’s the thing, you weren’t assigned to any. There was just a blank nothingness next to your name.”

“But I handed in my test. I used a Number 2 pencil.”
Xander shrugged. “I know you will, but I wouldn’t worry about it. You’re smart enough that you probably have a dozen jobs you’d be great at, and there wasn’t exactly a lot of room on those sheets. I wouldn’t be surprised if you got carted off to some secret seminar, one that’s only for people with more potential than they know what to do with.”

Willow still looked worried, but at least now she was smiling.

“You know you might not be bad as a therapist.”

“Um, no.”

Willow shrugged. “Well, you just did some reassuring, therapy-like talking just now.”

“O…kay, but you’re very much with the not crazy.”

And the distressed look was suddenly more disapproving. “Normal people hire therapists, too, you know.”

“Maybe, but you definitely don’t think ‘mentally sound’ when you hear someone needs therapy.”

“Who in Sunnydale doesn’t need therapy?”

Xander opened his mouth, closed it.

“Ah.”

Of course Tuesday morning comes with Xander leaving the house with a pair of wire cutters in his pocket—he hadn’t even noticed picking them up.

He caught Giles and Buffy as they were leaving the school—Snyder wouldn’t be happy, but then she was leaving with a staff member—and wished them luck with the whatever-the-vampires-want hunting.

Buffy smiled, Giles cleaned his glasses, and they all agreed to meet up at the library later.

Willow, of course, hadn’t taken the blankness next to her name as an excuse to skip out on career week, and after a riveting conversation with Snyder about how at-school Buffy totally was Xander had to make his way to Mrs. Chistler to learn about psychobabble and the wonderful world of soothing other people’s crazy.

Because obviously he was just the person to do that.

There’s five other people who were assigned this section, people he knows but doesn’t actually know, and more than a few of them look pleased to see him there.

This does not make him feel welcome.

Generally, unless it’s Buffy or Willow, people looking pleased when he enters a room means something bad is going to happen. He thinks if he said that to Chistler she’d probably only consider him paranoid, maybe catch on that he maybe, just maybe, had self esteem issues.

He keeps quiet just to be safe, stays quiet when Chistler enters the room, and does his best to look awake, if not interested, and certainly not crazy while she gives an outline of what, exactly a job in therapy would entail.
He misses probably 80% of what she says, so focused on not appearing crazy, but his fellow inmates—ahem, students, they seem perfectly happy to ask questions when she gives the opportunity.

And, kudos to her, she answers interestingly enough that his mind doesn’t drift.

So even though he’s fairly certain she’d explained these parts already, she went over the average wage—and hey, hourly pay isn’t that bad, though getting a client base seemed like foot-in-mouth tendencies like Xander’s wouldn’t help—and how long it took to become a therapist—many, many years—and then explained that there are two main types of therapist. Which was neat, no lie, but also… ehn.

“The difference between a psychologist and a psychologist is a matter of learning… a psychologist doesn’t have medical degree, and is more concerned with thoughts feelings and general mental well being, and also cannot prescribe medications. I am a psychologist and may refer patients to psychiatrists if I believe medication may be needed. A psychiatrist directs attention to disorders and chemical imbalances… Hannibal Lecter is a psychiatrist,” she explains with a smile, “and has a medical degree and so can prescribe medication.”

And then Xander has to open his big fat mouth.

“Is that your way of reassuring us you’re not a cannibalistic serial killer?”

She raises an eyebrow at him and smiles. “I’d like to think that’s a given.”

Xander shrugs, and wishes he’d managed to keep his mouth shut. “Well, you never know. One day you might be walking around in the sun, full of logical morality until one night you wake up to dirt in your face and a demon riding around where your soul used to be, and suddenly it’s all okay to attack people and really I should be shutting up right now.”

Chistler blinked at him, looking stunned.

“Well I’ve never heard mental instability described that way before, though I personally wouldn’t tell patients that they’ve been… possessed.”

Xander laughed, hoping it didn’t sound half as nervous as it probably did, because Hellmouth blindness was strong in Sunnydale residents, but Chistler wasn’t even a townie.

He really needs to keep his mouth shut.

And he does—at least until he gets up, walks to the door, and grabs the arm of the guy walking past.

“Be careful of ankle biters, or there will be longstanding consequences ahead.”

The redhead looks surprised, but not nearly as shocked as some people were when Xander did this, so he got points when he nodded after a thoughtful moment.

“Okay, good advice. Any idea on what those longstanding consequences could be?”

Xander shrugged.

“Eh, this one’s not so clear. Do you know any kids with rabies?”

The guy returned the shrug. He was very chill, which was a welcome change to, oh, everything else.

“Not that I can think of.”
“Xander?” he flinched. Right. Mrs. Chistler…
“Good talk.” Xander nodded and turned back into the classroom, big smile on his face.

“Yeah, sorry about that, I just had to—”

He turned back around and, joy of all joys, Cordelia Chase.

“Be wary of what’s given freely; do look a gift horse in the mouth, else you’ll find it full of maggots.”

Cordelia’s nose scrunched, and he felt a mirroring expression on his face, because ew. He let go of her hand and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth in the hopes that it’d somehow erase the fact that his mouth had said it.

“Ugh, disgusting!”

“Could I really not find a better way of putting that, really?”

“You have totally just put me off lunch…” she paused, looked considering.

“Then again that might just help me lose that extra five pounds…”

Xander snorted. “If you lose any more weight you’ll drift away on the next strong breeze—oh, wait, is that supposed to be a bad thing?”

“Funny, Loser. Just for that you’re buying me lunch.”

“Ha ha ha, the girl has finally found her sense of humour. I’m not buying your—wait, it’s lunch?”

Xander darted back into the room, grabbed up his bag and smiled extra wide at Mrs. Chistler.

“Sorry for the interruption, but hey! It’s lunch! See ya!”

And that was what his escape looked like.

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Because he was stronger than that, he didn’t buy Cordelia lunch.

And because he was also weak, he was glad to see that she didn’t seem to actually expect him to buy her lunch.

But the rest of the day seemed well enough—he even figured out that the best plan for Mrs. Chistler was absolute silence.

She asked questions and he either nodded or shook his head or shrugged, and any time he thought he might say something he popped a cherry candy in his mouth to suck on. For some reason Willow had a bunch of them, and he guessed that the same circumstance that landed her with candy probably also explained why she didn’t seem all that hungry at lunch.

But hey, she’d shared her spoils, and she’d explain eventually.

They all inevitably landed at the Library after school was out and, equally inevitable, Giles laid out the most recent disaster story.

Really, can’t the walking dead let stationary dead guys lie with their crosses in peace?

Apparently not.
When Buffy started to make her great escape—and would that a lack in the book area could get you out of more than demon-study groups—Xander pulled the wire cutters from his pocket and threw them her way.

She caught them, which was good because Xander wasn’t much with the aiming. And that was when he was entirely aware that he was throwing things.

This time, not so much.

“Umm, thanks?”

“Can you get those to Angel,” and because Buffy’s eyes widened in the no-it’s-a-secret kind of way, he added, “you know, next time you see him, because you’re more likely to see him, and that’s great because I don’t like him, and he doesn’t like me, but you and he are all like,” he crosses his fingers, “and he’ll totally need those at some point so yeah?”

“Ah, r-right, Buffy, you should go, gather your strength for tomorrow, and um, go.”

Giles’ easy acceptance from earlier was starting to turn dimmer with some realization crossing his face, so it was good that Buffy was finally out the door.

The doors swung behind her, and Xander sighed.

“Well I suppose we’ll have to get our own snacks, now.”

At the look that Giles gave him, he shrugged. “Ho-ho’s are part of my cognitive process!”

What wasn’t good for any sort of process is Buffy getting attacked. It was par for the course, but the non-vampire attacks weren’t… they just weren’t. They also didn’t have Bowling-league names like the Order of Taraka.

“Where there is one, there shall be another, and another. They won’t stop coming until the job is done.”

And Buffy was getting her Seriously Wigged face happening, which only came about from Giles’ talks of Doom coinciding with Angel’s talks of Doom.

“Yeah, well, at least there’s only three of them, and Buffy took out one already!”

“Did you not hear me? They won’t stop coming.”

“Uh-uh, I heard you very clearly, you said where there’s one, there’ll be another, and another, that makes three.”

Giles sighed and rubbed at his eyes.

“Xander, the only one here who says anything remotely prophetic is you… and I’ll not have you looking at me like that. Whether your words are truly prophetic or simply terribly, terribly convenient…”

“That’s it—Buffy, give me back my wire cutters! There is no future-seeing happening!”

“Too late,” Buffy smirked.

“You—really?” Giles shook his head. “Regardless, your resistance to the possibility, that is not the
concern right now. Each one of the Taraka works alone, his own way… some are human, some are not. You won’t know who they are until they strike—”

“And you are making this very wig worthy Giles, but how about we don’t make the much stronger than everyone in the school slayer paranoid… you know, it’s almost like you don’t know that the school is full of sanctioned strangers.”

Willow nodded. “Chock full, even.”

“Oh god,” Buffy looked at the doors, the windows, “they could be any of the people brought in—”

“When they were asked what, months ago about whether they could make it? Talk about taking your time on a contract... Besides I doubt these Taraka guys are well enough known in a field outside of assassination that Snyder would invite them…” he trails off, and tilts his head at Willow. “I dunno, do you think Snyder would invite an assassin to career day?”

She grimaced and shook her head. “I don’t think he could take the temptation.”

Giles stared. “I’m sure—you aren’t suggesting that, that Principal Snyder would…”

Buffy frowned, but looked significantly less with the freak out. “Well, not to give logic to the baddies but they tend to leave the daytime madness to Snyder. And Snyder’s pretty bad, but not this Order of Taraka kind of bad.”

“Oh,” Giles cleaned his glasses, “yes, quite.”

Apparently, despite Xander’s patented words of don’t-freak-out-now wisdom, Buffy decides to go and hide herself away the next day.

So that’s great. Really.

What makes it better is the combination of being asked to go to Buffy’s place by Giles despite his distinct lack of transportation—

“I don’t know, get Cordelia to drive you.”

Thanks, Giles.

—and the distinct feeling of wiggins that’s going on.

Cordelia takes surprisingly little convincing, but is predictably complain-y the whole way there.

“What am I, mass transportation?”

“That’s what a lot of the guys say, but it’s just locker-room talk, I wouldn’t pay it any mind… of course, these are also the guys who’d fall over themselves for a date with you, so…”

“Ugh, guys are so pathetic when they grab for attention like that. Like sometimes I don’t even know why I bother with all these guys just throwing themselves at me.”

“The proper order of things is often a mystery to me, too.”

She rolled her eyes, and very distinctly did not help Xander find his way into Buffy’s house. It was actually distressing that he found a way in after only a few minutes, though; he’d have to tell Buffy she should work on her security or something. Not everything needed an invitation, after all.
“Buffy could be in trouble.”

“What if she is exactly? What are you going to do about it? In case you haven’t noticed you’re the crazy lameness and she’s the slightly saner superchick.”

“At least I’m the crazy lameness who cares, which is more than I can say about you.” He turned away and left Cordelia to close the door behind her, calling up the stairs for Buffy.

He checked her room—empty—and started pulling open doors.

Empty mom’s room, empty bathroom, full linen closet—

The door slammed downstairs.

“Xander the maggoty horse is here! And he’s got free makeup!”

He reached the bottom of the steps just in time for the door to be shoved open and for Cordelia to scream directly into his ear.

“Oh my god he is maggots!”

A creepily average looking guy with a box of lies stood in the doorway, his maggoty worm things spilling out around him and across the floor towards them.

“Are there any other ladies in the household?” he asked, worms crawling from his nose, his ears, his —

“Oh my god why did I have to be right? Why can’t I be right about other things than maggoty horrible things?”

The guys expression didn’t change, but there was movement under the guys shirt, a sort of swelling like he was going to burst—

Oh god. Is it possible to have a heart attack before you’re 20?

Xander grabbed Cordelia and turned to run, part of him thinking logically that they should head to the basement, where convenient things like power tools and bug-spray are kept, but the greater part of him thought go to Buffy go to Buffy…

But all of him, all of his sane parts and all of his crazy parts and even all of his absolutely everything parts, all of him was in agreement in the wanting to be away from possibly exploding bug guy.

They ran and

The only way he could describe it would be to say poof.

Xander pulled the waste bin Giles kept by the table and handed it to Cordelia, after which she quit screaming to throw up into it.

Buffy squeaked, Willow squeaked, Giles went all English and ‘good heavens’-y, and the new girl in the crop top came at him with a freaking axe.

One of these things is not like the others.

“Oh my go-”

“Oh Kendra don’t-”
“Xander how-”

Which was much with the good since otherwise he’d totally have an axe to the chest, Except he un-
oppoofed to have a Spike in his face.

Well, it could be another slicked bleach blond guy with a thing for leather and dark places, but he
didn’t have much hope that the guy facing a distressingly bound up Angel could be someone other
than Spike.

So basically the Poof thing is entirely useless and the worst thing to happen to him since ever. Maybe
it was a sentient power thing. Maybe it was trying to kill him.

Probably-Spike had stopped what he was saying due to Angel’s big dumb face going all surprised,
started to turn…

Xander backed way the hell up, kept his hands in front of him—wished dearly that he kept stakes in
his back pocket during the day. But he didn’t. Because you don’t see vampires during the day.

Unless you poof yourself into their dark, vaguely warehouse-y looking lair.

Though, kudos to them, despite the whole warehouse look and the distinctly lackluster lighting, there
were pillows and furniture and blankets and everything looked rather homey… Vampire homey, but
then they were vampires, so…

Spike—of course it’s Spike—looks surprised and confused to see him, which really, he can’t be
more confused to find Xander there than Xander was to be there, and he would have continued
backing up right out of the scary vampire’s lair if he hadn’t been blocked by a body behind him.

If arms didn’t wind around his torso.

“Kitten.”
It startled a laugh out of him, and once that first laugh got out it was like a dam broke. He tried
covering his mouth with his hands like that’d stop it, but it didn’t, and it just made the whole situation
much more ridiculous.

Spike looked confused, Angel looked confused, Xander was giggling, and he was getting hugged
from behind by Drusilla.

“Where’d you come from, then?”

Xander kept his hands firmly over his mouth, shook his head and shrugged. Tried listing to the side,
out of the arms holding him, but he might as well have been trying to slide through a fence; some
give, but mostly with the strong resistance.

Spike walked forward, stroked his fingers over Drusilla’s hands; over his shoulder, Angel was giving
him a warning look. Yeah, like that was helpful.

Fingers done up in chipped black polish walked up from where they were to tap over Xander’s
hands.

“Drop ’em.”

Xander shook his head. No. Nope. Not going to happen. Talking was literally the worst thing he
could do right now.
Spike sighed.

“Guess we’ll have to do things the hard way then.”

Spike’s grip on his wrists was distressingly solid when he wrenched his hands away, and while he was glad he didn’t start laughing in the vamps face, hands removed meant talking was happening.

“There’s an ugly name for those who do things the hard way.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“Would you believe me if I said it would be Spike—oh my god can I please have my hands back? They’re literally the only filter I have!”

But Spike, instead of eviscerating him, was laughing. Which was both relieving and also much with the freaking out, because last time Xander saw him even remotely pleased looking it was when he was talking about turning Xander into a vampire. That really couldn’t happen.

“Hoo you’ve got a set of brass bollocks, don’t you pet?” he leaned to look past Xander to Drusilla. “I rather forgot what a treat your kitten is… but that doesn’t answer my question, boy,” and attention was back on the Xan-man. Woo. “How’d you end up here, hmm? ‘Sinteresting you can lose your head like you did last time, but it looks like you’ve landed yourself in more trouble, now. Maybe with the same ability, hmm?” The pressure on his wrists slowly increased.

“Ow, ow, ow, okay already! There was a bug guy who was about to explode, so I left to find Buffy and I did and she was with Willow and Giles and a crazy girl with an axe who tried to kill me so I left and here I am, that’s my whole story, ow seriously I have nothing else to say, ow, ow, ow…”

“I somehow doubt that. But that doesn’t explain how you bloody well ended up here.”

Xander shrugged as well as he could. “I dunno, I dunno! But I showed up in front of Buffy… and Willow and Giles, actually, so I guess Angel’s like the fourth person I’d go to when there’s a situation where someone’s trying to kill me?” He leaned to the side a little to give Angel an unimpressed look.

“If that’s the case, then can I just say thanks a lot, Deadboy. Good to know you’ll be tied up and gagged and in another deadly situation when you need to get your brooding hero on. Man, I gave you wire cutters!”

Xander turned back to Spike and grinned.

“Paths that end in trouble are all the same – they only appear different when you don’t know where they lead.”

Xander blinked and tried pushing himself away again. “Well that’s more uselessness, see? I’m no use, I don’t say anything useful, and you should pity me and let me go, I’m just, I’m not worth it to kill and—oh my god can you please stop doing that?”

He stared at Spike—he had no choice, really, as after Xander had done his blue-eyed thing he’d gotten even closer and used his index fingers and thumbs to pull his eyelids wide. He was now looking deeply into first one, and then the other. Xander found he really didn’t like having his eyes on display like this.

His hands were now free to push ineffectually against Spike’s chest and shoulders, and once it became obvious how not-noticing he was of that Xander moved to try prying the hands from about
his waist. But that only got him more trapped hands, this time courtesy of Drusilla.

“Spike, I want my kitten now…”

“Mmm, soon, pet…” Spike grinned over his shoulder at Angel. “You and seers, honestly,” he laughed, and turned back to Xander with a pat on his cheek. “You know Angelus threw away all that superstitious rot he learned when he was living, but y’know there was just sommat ‘bout the seers that got to him. Bet he got all excited about you, goin’ all conveniently blue-eyed anytime you have something nice to say ‘bout the future.” Xander’s teeth clacked when Spike chuckled him under his chin. “Right chuffed, I bet. Shame you aren’t a couple years older, pet. Lose some of that gangliness…” he trailed off, but shrugged and went game-faced. “You’ll do fine, though, don’t worry ‘bout a thing. Good ol’ Spike’ll make sure you’re well fed.”

Xander threw his whole weight backwards and breathed up to kick Spike solidly in the chest.

Neither Spike nor Drusilla were expecting it; Spike fell back with enough force he landed on a still bound up Angel, and Drusilla lost her grip.

There was a brief moment when it felt like Xander’s stomach resided somewhere around his throat, and there was a flash of pain on his cheek where one of Drusilla’s nails nicked him, and he only had a brief moment to feel sorry for leaving Angel—wherever this was—because he was recognizing that feeling.

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Cordelia jumped when he appeared in front of her—and then there was the sound of a gunshot, and he thinks they’re on the same page when it comes to guns, so he grabbed her up and headed into the nearest classroom, closed the door, and no really his ‘super’ powers were trying to kill him.

The gun missed, so Cordelia was going to finish the job, because that was not a happy face. She slapped him, the cut on his cheek stinging to life.

“Okay, ow. What was that for?”

“You made me throw up!”

“Wh—not on purpose! I saved both of our lives!”

“Oh, right, that’s likely—”

“Fine then I saved us from getting covered in wormy maggot bugs! Maggot horse, Cordelia, Maggot horse!”

“And you made me throw up! In the Library!”

Xander threw his hands up.

“Okay fine! But wasn’t it you who was talking about losing weight. You’re welcome!”

“Oh you did not just comment on my weight. And weight loss does not mean having bits of me cut off! After you disappeared—which is super freaky by the way—I almost had my head chopped off!”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, and what are you even complaining about? That axe was this close to burying itself in my chest! If I hadn’t disappeared I’d be dead!”

“If you hadn’t disappeared she wouldn’t have had the time to come after me!”
“Well sorry for surviving nearly getting axed in the chest! I should have left you with the bug guy!”

“You are exactly that sort of guy, aren’t you, you coward.”

“Except I didn’t, moron.”

“I hate you!”

“I hate you!”

Her lips were soft, as was her hair, her skin. Cordelia’s fingers twisted in his shirt, nails points in his back, and she was just so… she just felt so… And her perfume…

They wrenched away from each other, panting.

Xander glanced at the door, because Cordelia’s lips were looking very kissable, and that was just too weird for the moment.

“It’s ah, probably over. The, uh, shooting thing.”

“Uh-huh.” Cordelia nodded. Looked down at her hands, scrunched her nose.

“Ew, you got blood on my hand.”

“Yeah well you got slap on my face.”

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“She was definitely one of the Taraka gang, Giles, and way gun-happy.”

“Xander’s back from his freaky disappearing act.” Cordelia led the way into the Library, walked directly past Willow wrapping up Buffy’s knee, Giles on the other side of the desk with a first aid kit, and—

He stopped.

“Am I going to have to run?” He looked between Buffy and Axe-Wielding-Girl, “Or are the sharp and pointy things going to stay away from soft and vulnerable things. Like me. Also I’m assuming that it wasn’t actually The British soccer fan association who sponsored career day, as generally they prefer fists to guns.”

Willow tied off Buffy’s bandage and left her to pull down her pant leg, instead moving to give him a hug. And damn if it wasn’t weird that Willow was just a bit shorter than Drusilla—that wasn’t a comparison he’d ever wanted to be able to make based on a hug.

“Are you okay? You went all appear-y and disappear-y, and, um, I think you startled Kendra.”

“A name! Names are good. If she’s still around and even using a name, does that mean we’ve also had the talk about not killing people—specifically me?”

“Yes Xander, your soft vulnerable you bits are safe. This is Kendra. Kendra, this is Xander, he’s on the don’t-hurt list.”

“It’s rather complicated, but she’s also a slayer.”

“A slayer, huh? I like that in a woman—well, before now I’ve only known the one, but she certainly
brings excitement to the party, so.”

Kendra moved her hands behind her back, and looked down.

“I-I hope… I thank you. I mean, sir…”

Giving Willow another squeeze, Xander let her go and pulled Kendra into a hug instead. “Hey, if you’re worried about nearly killing me, don’t, okay? Focus on the part where you didn’t actually… okay, you’re really stiff right now.” Xander let her go, and stepped back from her. “So, no hugs? Or…” he turned to Buffy. “Are Slayers actually non-huggable, and you’ve only been humoring me, or what?”

“Nope. I like your hugs just fine. Maybe not your pep talks, since it was totally the cop lady Snyder brought in who tried to kill me, but your hugs are just fine.”

“Loser, she still thinks you must be part demon.”

“What? Why?”

“You remember when I was asking if you were okay, with the appearing and disappearing…?”

“Oh, ouch. Way to hold a completely involuntary disappearing act against a guy.”

Giles looked up from his books. “Completely involuntary? I think you might want to explain that.”

Xander shrugged and moved to sit across from Cordelia. “Well how much did Brainiac here tell you?”

“Well she mentioned something about a maggot horse—”

“I’ll never trust free samples again!”

Xander gave her a flat look. “He was a weird bug guy, with weird maggoty worm things coming out of him,” he turned to Buffy, “and by the way you might want to up the security at your place, and maybe get an exterminator at your place.”

“Ew, it was at my house?”

“So you basically told them nothing. Great Cordelia.”

“Right, like I was supposed to remember all the details after throwing up and then finding a bug in my hair.”

“The throwing up was not my fault!”

“Xander, Cordelia! This is not the time for your inane bickering.”

“Yeah okay, if the bug Cordelia found looked like a weird maggoty worm thing, then that’s what the Assassin guy looked like.”

“You and bug people, Xander. What’s up with that?”

“No, but this dude was completely different than Praying Mantis Lady; he was a man of bugs, not a man who was a bug. And he was going to explode into what I assume would be more bugs, so I grabbed Cordelia planning on heading for your basement, only…”
“Poof.”

“Exactly, and then I was here, and you all were here, and you all saw what happened—”

“Poof again.”

“Right, two for two for Willow. And I guess since you guys were all here, I went to the next, next, next best thing, so I showed up where Angel was—”

“Angel?”

“Yes, Angel, and I swear I only have like one more bit of creepy horribleness to tell you, so can we just stop with the interruptions?” Buffy say back down.

“Thank you. So after poofing away from bug guy, and poofing away from axe—Kendra, sorry about that, then the whole poofing thing kept with theme because Angel was all tied up and gagged at Spike’s lair—”

“Angel is what?”

“You went to Spikes lair?”

“Spike the vampire Spike? The one who wants to kill Buffy?”

“Why didn’t you bring Angel with you?”

“Because Spike and Drusilla were there and I have strong feelings against being turned into a vampire!”

So Buffy was angry with him for not mentioning Angel being tied up immediately, and also for not actually knowing where he was being kept address-wise, Giles was torn between talking nerdy-Slayage with a very quiet Kendra, Willow was splitting her time between worrying about what it means that he can still go poof and telling him about her new computer buddy Oz who apparently got grazed by a bullet.

Also the spell or whatever to make Drusilla strong again would be happening tonight, and it turns out Angel is exactly the one ingredient they wished they didn’t have, since it’d be Angel’s sire-y powers that’d make the crazy vampire lady powerful.

And now Buffy felt entirely just in being angry he hadn’t managed to also grab up Angel while trying to save his own bacon.

So that was great.

He also wanted to know who this Oz character was. Willow had been hanging with the guy for nearly three days straight, and he was only hearing about him now! If Willow liked him that was great, that was grand, it meant that awkward not-just-friends feelings could be put aside or moved past, but Xander wanted to meet the guy before anything got, you know, serious.

There was a crash—

“Is everything alright?”
“Yeah it’s OK! Kendra killed the bad lamp.”

“Sorry!”

—and it was getting weird how normal crashes in the library were getting.

He flipped to the next page in the book Giles had gotten them, and oh, yeah, that was the guy.

“Oh, here we go, I am the bug man, coo-coo ca-choo.” He checked the page with yet another book—and wow he was going to be so great at cross-referencing next year the teachers wouldn’t know what hit them—“He can only be killed when he’s in his disassembled state.” He grinned and looked to Cordelia. “Disassembled. That means when he’s broken down into his little buggy parts.”

She pinched him. “I know what it means, dorkhead. Keep it up and I’ll disassemble you into your little buggy parts.”

“Oh, you slash me with your words. However will I survive such wounds?” He rolled his eyes and headed to where Buffy and Kendra were having quality Slayer time, checking and sharpening weapons. He thinks he remembers seeing a book on demon bugs in there—or was it behind Giles’ desk? He checks there first, nope, so he heads for where he’s now more certain the book is.

“How the anger gives you fire? A slayer needs that.” Ah, classic Buffy education. Feelings! Feeling everywhere!

When he opened the door to Giles’ little back office, Kendra went back to studying the floor, Buffy gave him a small smile, and there was indeed an arrow in the bad lamp. He reached between them for the book and nodded to the lamp.

“Huh, I hope the lamp deserved it.” Kendra looked up at him only long enough to glare for a moment, before looking back down again. The knife she was holding up didn’t move. “Nice knife.”

“I still don’t think you’re entirely human.”

“Well that’s your opinion, then. Just so long as you don’t try slaying me again, I don’t care if you look at me and see a blue-polka-dot monkey.”

That at least got her to look up at him, and even got eye contact. “I don’t think you’re a monkey. I just… don’t…”

“She just doesn’t know quite how to look at you is all, Xander,” Buffy finished for her.

Xander nodded, and ducked his head to regain some eye-contact with Kendra.

“Look straight ahead. Or askance – whichever way you choose, you must always look in the right direction. That’s rather hard to do when you won’t stop looking down.”

“Wha—Xander, you did not just go blue-eyed for her before you went blue eyed for me!”

“What? No I didn’t.”

“Buffy, what are you talking about? His eyes are… are brown?”

Buffy blinked and raised an eyebrow. “That sounded very blue-eyed is all.”

“I’ll take that as an entirely neutral remark. Besides, I’ve gotten better at knowing when I’m doing the blue-eyed thing.”
Kendra looked to Buffy, confused, and since she didn’t look at him Xander figured he was free from explaining-ville. He tapped the demon-bug book and started backing out of the room. Kendra was adorable in an accented, stake-y sort of way, but she’d made it pretty clear she didn’t like him, so.

“I’ll leave explanations to Buffy, then, and get back to the research part of things.” He pointed at Buffy. “Just remember that Seer is not a word that at all applies to me. We do not use the S-word anymore.”

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Buffy and Kendra left soon afterwards, apparently to talk to some skeezy sort of guy, and when only Kendra returns it’s lucky that Willow figured out which church Spike was likely to use.

As a Slayer, Kendra does her thing with the leaping into action and taking down bad guys, and wow is it ever impressive seeing two slayers going at Spike.

Buffy definitely ups Kendra in the sassy quips section of the game, but she was holding her own fairly well.

Giles and Willow attack one of the really big vampires, so Xander does what he does best and lets his mouth run.

“Hey Larva boy! Yeah that’s right I’m talkin’ to you, you big cootie.”

And then he runs.

Bug-guy in his frighteningly average man-suit smiles and follows, even after Xander closes and locks the door behind him.

Bugs started pushing their way through the space under the door, right into the liquid adhesive Cordelia spread out, and the whole thing sounds weirdly like a huge mess of pop rocks.

He doesn’t think he’ll ever eat pop rocks again.

When they start crushing all the trapped bugs it sounds less so.

He very carefully doesn’t think about how attractive Cordelia is when stomping bugs.

Back in the main part of the church—nope, turn around, turn around now because that was definitely Spike right there holding onto a guy in a red top and track pants and Xander would really appreciate not being seen.

“Xander, wha-mph!” Cordelia doesn’t do anything so un-ladylike as bite his hand, but she does elbow him sharply in the side to get his hand from over her mouth. “Jeez, you could have just said something, and look the Billy Idol wannabe is gone—whoa!”

Kendra grabbed them both by the arm and dragged them closer to Giles and Willow, moving to stand in front of the group. “Look out!”

Xander thinks that it’s probably not the worst thing Spike has done, but burning down a church is still pretty bad. It’s a bit ominous, even that Xander can see that Drusilla has a bit more colour in her cheeks compared to when he last saw her.

When Buffy throws a silver thing at Spike from across the room, it might be karma that has it clang against the back of his head, toppling him into the pipe organ, Drusilla in his arms.
It’s maybe not the best time for Buffy and Angel to be doing their goo-goo-eyes thing, but Buffy was still at least a little bit annoyed at him for the leaving Angel behind thing, so he keeps his mouth shut.

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Xander smacks Angel when he explains what actually happened to get him in Spike’s clutches, about Willy and Kendra locking him in a cage, and not being able to get out…

“Wire cutters, Angel, wire cutters! My god nobody listens!”

Cordelia elbowed him. “Hey, I did. Maggoty horse, remember?”

This time it’s Buffy who elbows him.

“Seriously? You went blue-eyed for both Spike and Cordelia, but nothing for me? I’m feeling seriously left out over here. Is there some sort of authority on significant advice-giving I need to beat up?”

Xander shrugs, and smiles.

“I dunno Buff. Authority must be obeyed, or it must be overthrown!”

“Oh dear.”

“Not you, Giles.”

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Buffy is escorting Kendra out of the school, and Xander is scrambling to clean up the, ah, mess he and Cordelia had made the day before.

When she caught sight of him, she did an about face to head back the way she came, so Xander had to do some running to catch up.

“We need to talk.”

Being in an empty classroom probably wasn’t the best setting for this conversation, but at least it was the Home Economics room instead of the Science lab.

Hahaha, nope, no chemistry would be happening in this room, no sir’ee.

“Okay, ah, here’s the deal: We don’t have to run every time we see each other in the hall

“Right. Ok. Why shouldn’t we run?”

“What happened—there’s a total explanation for it.”

Cordelia pursed her lips.

“You’re a pervert?’

“Me? No, I was going to say I’m crazy, and apparently it’s catching, but me?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I seem t recall I was the jumpee, my friend.”
“As if! You’ve probably been planning this for months.”

“Right, I hired a Latvian bug man and a sociopath with a gun to kill Buffy so I could get slapped and then kiss you. I hate to burst your bubble, but you don’t inspire me to spring for a dinner over at Bucky’s Fondue Hut!”

“Fine. Whatever. You know, the point is don’t try it again.” And people thought Xander was the crazy one?

“I didn’t try it! Forget about the bugs, or the vampires, or even trying to play it sane for a therapist, OK? The memory of your lips on mine makes my blood run cold.”

“If you dare breathe a word of this…”

“Like I would want anyone to know!” The idea was laughable. Him and Cordelia Chase? Pffffffffftttttt.

“Then it’s erased.”

“Never happened.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Good!”

He glared, she glared, they were standing there glaring, when Xander noticed just how close to each other they were. He could smell her shampoo, they were so close, and her lips were right there, and…

Oh god, kissing Cordelia was great.

Screw everything else he’s done in his life, he was so going to hell for this.

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Chapter End Notes

CampNano wordcount is at 35,656, so I am so ahead of the game!
I’ll be camping for the next two weeks starting Saturday, so updates will depend on how consistent the Internet connection on my phone is.
Let me know what you think, and have a lovely day :)
Next chapter, yay! All notes and remarks about Alice in Wonderland and the Cheshire Cat can be found in the first chapter’s notes.
Please note that I’m not doing every episode, but I’ll at least be mentioning them.
Enjoy!

Tea Time

Chapter 4— Tea Time

Ted’s little pizza things are amazing, and light up a buzz in his chest that has him laughing for no reason.

It’s lovely.

Ted’s lovely.

Really, just everything is lovely.

Though Xander doesn’t really like the word lovely, so he’d find a better word for it, later.

The buzz lasts well into the next day, and he’s pleased enough to keep quiet in his classes even when they use the wrong word, or when he has questions about what exactly they mean when they say things one way and not another, and if they perhaps meant things in an entirely different way.

Willow seems pretty pleased, too, especially when Ted’s at school and gets her the nerdy computer program or whatever she wanted and really Xander does—not, doesn’t get why Buffy doesn’t want to play Mini-golf with the guy.

Because who didn’t love mini-golf? Wasn’t even like they could stake vampires during the day, either.

The picnic is a great idea. Great food. Really great food.

Ted’s smile gets kind of strained when Xander greets Joyce with a hearty hug, and because Xander’s an accommodating guy he sticks to hugging his girls after that. Ted’s smile still seems a bit strained, but Xander’s got one arm around Buffy and one arm around Willow and he’s all set. He’s worried about Buff, though. She usually eats more than he does, keeping up with her Slayer metabolism, and she hardly ate a thing. Might be from the vaguely biting but surely friendly remarks from Ted.

The buzzing feeling in his chest is like a subsonic purr to his emotions, makes it a bit hard to take her disgruntlement as seriously as he usually did. But when it’s her turn and that disgruntlement turns to an unfortunate kick in Slayer strength—fair, no one likes school-grade comments, and you really didn’t need to be giving the athletically-gifted tips on anything even remotely athletic, Ted must’ve forgotten that—he catches the ball and holds it up over his head with a grin. Even showing up where the ball was going to be, it was very close to clipping his collarbone.

“Gonna have to aim better than that if you want to hit me, Buff!”
Joyce and Ted are glancing behind Buffy with some confusion, but it’s Buffy and Willow’s slightly wide-eyed looks that remind him that he was supposed to be sticking with the group, probably.

He tosses Buffy’s ball back to her, and walks back laughing because he hadn’t even noticed he’d gone all poof to the In Between. But hey! This time he hadn’t poofed into a mortally perilous situation, so it was all good.

“Guess I’m re-doing that one.”

Joyce waves a hand. “Ah, we won’t count it.”

“We won’t?” Xander laughs because Ted sounds utterly gobsmacked. “It’s only miniature golf!”

“It is, but the rules are the rules. And what we teach her is what she takes out into the world when we’re not there, whether it’s at school or an unchaperoned party.”

Xander giggles again at that and raises a hand. “Then I volunteer my next turn to Buffy, since it was me on the court that obviously startled her. Aren’t there rules against that, too? Hmm, does that make me disqualified?”

“Xander you don’t have to do that.” Xander pulled her into a hug, because that’s what she said, but her expression was all with the thank you’s.

“It’s okay. Croquet’s my game, anyway. Just you and the hedgehog and the swoosh of a flamingo through the air,” he lets go of Buffy to mime a swing. Joyce looked a bit confused, and Ted’s smile was getting stiffer by the second, but he got laughter from Buffy and Willow so obviously he was doing something right.

“But she won’t learn anything that way.”

Xander shrugged. “Eh, lessons are still being learned, just not ‘the rules are never wrong and should never be questioned.’”

Buffy smiled and pulled him back into a hug. “It’s good to know I’ve got friends around to help me play the great game of life, then.”

“It’s a better lesson, even,” Willow offered up, though it didn’t seem to make Ted look any happier. Joyce, lovely woman that she was, looked fond.

Buffy made her shot and, happy Slayer that she is, makes it a hole-in-one. She bows to their applause and skips around the castle to collect her ball. Ted, friendly guy that he is, follows after him.

Xander smiles, then looks down, then smiles at Willow.

“I need to sit down,” he says, and then does.

The ground is hot, the best side of sun-warmed, and he’d lie down entirely to enjoy it if Willow weren’t looking concerned.

“It’s okay, I’m okay, I just can’t…” he almost says can’t see my legs, because he can’t with the world pulsing around him, but just on the cusp of saying so he thinks his legs might go In Between if he voices the thought—voicing them makes them more real, you know—so instead he finishes with, “feel my legs. They’re there, but lacking in the feely. Only oh, there they’re back. Oh, hey Buffy.”

Buffy and Willow were crouched on either side of him quite suddenly, but they looked like they’d been there for longer than a moment.
“Xander you’re worrying me, here, drink some water.”

He took a long drink from the water bottle offered to him, and somewhere above him Ted was saying something about heat exposure. Ha. That wasn’t it.

“It’s okay, it’s okay! I’m right as rain! Fierce as fowl,” he giggles, “though less of a canary and more of a ca—ow!” A thought, an idea, and oh it was a brilliant one. He grinned wide. “Willow, buffy, you remember that thing? That thing we had to do? Well I think we should do it?” He waits until he gets them nodding, and adds, “that thing with cats.”

“That thing with—Oh of course! We should go do that thing, um, with cats.”

“What thing? What cats?” Joyce hands him another water bottle, concerned and confused and curious and probably a whole bunch of other c-words. But not that one. No, how could you even think that?

Xander cracked the bottle open and held up a finger. “Only the one. One singular cat. Buffy and Willow promised me they’d help me find one for a crazy relative of mine.”

“A crazy relative?”

Xander shrugs. “She’s relatively crazy. She wants one cat, one kitten even, but there are many reasons why she can’t, so Buffy and Willow promised to help me find the perfect one.”

“Oh I don’t think you’re in any shape to…”

“Oh of course I’m not talking about immediately, Mrs. S, but Buffy and Willow are going to help me get home and rest up so we can go. I didn’t think the heat would get to me like this,” he tuts at himself, shaking his head while his girls got him standing. “But really, she’s less relative and more really crazy, and I thought we’d have more time after golfing in the miniature. But we’ve got to go see a man about a cat.”

“I’m not sure if that’s quite how it goes, Xander…”

But thankfully Joyce’s face clears and she nods while Buffy and Willow help haul him away. Ted doesn’t look even remotely pleased anymore, and Xander’s not sure why. They had a lovely picnic, some fun at the mini-golf course, and Ted should be happy to be getting some alone time with Mrs. S. Xander regaining feeling in his legs and Buffy getting to escape her weird dislike of Ted made it a win-win-win.

Honestly, some adults just didn’t know how to see the silver lining.

Then again, he considers, those that did tended to mine it for all it’s worth, and that’s not actually what a cloud’s silver lining is for.

Ted gave them cookies, though, so that was a plus!

~*~

“So what’s up with the sudden loopyness? Another Cheshire related problem?”

“Hmm?” Xander rolled his head to look at Buffy. “Why assume it has anything to do with the Cat?”

It was Willow who answered.

“Well wasn’t that what you were hinting with the cat talk—well, not actual cat talk, but the talking of cats?”
“Oh, no, I’m totally serious about getting a cat. The talk of cats was mucho serious-o. The thing with my legs—no clue. Maybe I’ll learn to float. You mentioned floating before, so maybe that’ll be a thing I do now. Floating, hmm… not sure how that’ll, heh, fly with my parents.”

Willow jostled his arm and his left leg went numb. Not enough to make him teeter more than he was, but enough that it was uncomfortable.

“But is it actually something to do with your...” With her free hand, Willow made a loose claw with her hands and batted at the air. If they weren’t in public she might’ve meowed.

“I don’t know. Don’t think so. Maybe it really is the heat that’s making me a bit loopy, maybe not.”

Buffy shook her head. “We can figure that out when you’re not loopy. What I want to know is why you need a cat? Do you actually have a violent-crazy relative like you were babbling earlier?”

They found a bench in the shade to sit at, one a fair distance from the mini-golf court, and Xander started rubbing feeling back into his legs.

“Naw, not relative in the sense of blood relation, but relative in that she’s regretfully relevant to my life right now. How effective an actual cat will be will be relatively easy to figure out once we get the cat to her, but for right now I’m hoping that she’s the right sort of crazy to accept the cat rather than take exception to it.”

While Buffy got the confused wrinkle between her brows, and Willow frowned and started mouthing what he’d said, he wiggled his feet and stretched his toes out straight, flexing.

“Are you…” Willow trailed off, so Xander waited patiently for her to find the words she was looking for. Give her enough time to get her words straight, and Willow was the smartest person in the world. Probably.

Smartest person in his world.

“…Drusilla? Are you talking about Drusilla?”

Xander snapped his fingers and pointed to Willow. “Gold star!”

“But why would she want a cat?”

Xander shrugged, some of the buzz in his chest lifting. Not all of it, but some.

“I dunno, but she keeps calling me ‘kitten’, so maybe a cat will distract her. Or she’ll think the cat is me.”

“I think you’re confusing crazy with stupid, here.”

Xander shrugged again and gave Buffy a smile. “Or maybe all it’ll do is remind her what an actual feline looks like, and she’ll stop calling me ‘kitten’. I think we should find a stray. There aren’t so many in your neighborhood, Buff, but my neighbors let their equipment-having pets out and act surprised when they breed with their wilder brethren.”

Willow still looked puzzled, but nodded. “It’s true. If you see a cat on Xander’s street it’s got a better chance of being feral than owned. There are always posters up for found cats…”

“…Only there’s not so many missing cat posters.”

Buffy’s confused wrinkle turned into a concerned, darn-but-it’s-cute wrinkle, and she tsked.
“Aw, but cats are so cute. Why do you get to find the cute little harmless things on the street when all I ever get are vampires and demons? I’m not so sure this plan to get Drusilla off your back will do anything more than poke at Spike, but I’m all for poking at Spike.”

Finding the cats: easy.

Catching them…

Not so easy.

Even Buffy with her Slayer strength, speed, and ridiculously good reflexes couldn’t catch them when they decided to forgo giving disdainful looks for running away.

When they finally did catch one—grey, white and splotchy orange and glaring with vampire-yellow eyes—it wasn’t quite dusk, but it was nearing it. Xander held the cat by the scruff if its neck, one arm supporting its back legs.

Buffy hummed and scratched the thing between its ears. “It’d be neat having a cat around the house. Y’know, I’ve never really brought up the topic of pets with mom—aside from the near mandatory little girl wish for a horse, but I bet I could convince her that we could take in one of these guys. It’d be good for my health, even, what with the fur and the cuddling and the softness…”

“…And the litter box and the hairballs and the puking and the grooming?” Willow raised her eyebrows. Buffy scrunched her nose; Xander knew the feeling. Willow had brought up very similar points when Jesse and him had grand plans of dog ownership.

“Okay, so maybe the cat thing would be possible if it was cute and cuddly and could clean up all its own messes… like Xander.” She smiled and ruffled his hair. “Maybe not as soft…”

“…but much cuddlier,” Willow hurried to assure him.

Xander rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, let’s just hope Drusilla finds this little ball of claws is better to cuddle than I am.”

“I think we can all hope this guy hocks a hairball in one of Spike’s boots. But how exactly do you think we’ll get this guy to Spike’s place? You said you don’t know where his place is…”

Xander smiled.

“Do you remember that guy you and Kendra talked to…”

Fair enough, Xander always felt second-hand nerves when Buffy leaned against the bar.

Willy looked nervous when Buffy leaned against the bar.

“...and second-hand nerves when Buffy put on her Extra Perky Blonde face.

“You uh, ah I mean there’s no hard feelings right? I-I mean with Spike, I mean it was only a deal, y’know? Only a bit of cash between friends—not to say I’m any friends with Spike or his freaky bird, oh no, I’m getting my hands clean of that sort of thing, it’s just I’m still your good pal Willy, right? ‘Cause friends, they don’t beat up friends, y’know?”

Buffy reached across the bar and yanked him close by his shirt, in full Slayer Danger mode. Xander
held the hole-punched box steady as several demon-y types rushed past, but didn’t hear anything from the catnipped kitty inside and figured he hadn’t jostled it too much.

“Let’s make this short then, and I won’t have to pummel you. We need you to do something for us.”

Willy nodded. “Yeah, yeah, yeah you know I’m always here to lend a helping hand, what do you need?”

Xander stepped forward with his box and a smile.

“Need you to get this to Spike and Drusilla.”

“You—” Willy stared at him, jaw hanging. “I’m not doin’ nothing that’s gonna get me into it with those two again, I’m definitely not sending them something living from the Slayer!”

“It’s just a cat.”

“Just a— is that supposed to be code for something?”

Xander set the box on the table and cracked the top enough for Willy to look inside. Willy leaned as far back as Buffy’s grip let him.

The cat popped a paw through the opening, shredded bits of green in its pads. The paw disappeared back into the box, and Xander closed the lid.

“Oh it’s an actual cat.”

“Yep, actual cat, specifically for Drusilla in the hopes that she’ll get over this whole kitten thing she’s got going on.”

Something clears in Willy’s face. He points at Xander.

“Oh you’re the guy!”

“I’m a guy, sure.”

“No I mean you’re the See— urk.”

“He doesn’t like the S-word, Willy, and you’re wasting our time. I’m feeling pretty Slayer-ly right now, and that’s one S-word you won’t like. So you, box, Spike, okay?”

Willy nodded, eyes darting between Buffy and Xander, and gave a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, of course I can get the box to Spike, no problem! And I didn’t mean nothing with the S— the S-word talk, only I was hearing you’re the guy to get advice from, s’all. Speakin’ of, you don’t have any words of wisdom for your good friend Willy, do ya? Hey, hey, hey, just wondering! No harm meant!”

Xander grinned and slid the box across the bar to Willy when Buffy shoved him back.

“Don’t know if any advice I give you will do you any good, seeing as how no one listens to it.”

“Oh no, I’d listen, I’d listen real good.”

Xander smiled at Willow, cocking his head at Willy. “Isn’t it just killing you that you can’t correct his grammar like you try correcting mine?”
He blinked and turned to Willy. “Xander don’t you dare—”

“Your next deal may leave green in your pocket, but at the end of the night red will spill fountains from your throat. Be wary of the Sheep-faced Badger. Ow!”

Xander rubbed the back of his head, frowning at Buffy. She raised her hand again and Xander dodged back from the blow.

“I told you not to dare and you dared!”

“Buffy! If I had something to say to you I’d say it!”

Willow started pushing them both towards the door, ignoring the looks they were getting from the people and non-people at Willy’s Bar. “Guys, this is not the place!”

“Hey, thanks Blue Eyes! I’ll listen, I swear it! And I’ll get your cat to Spike safe ’n’ sound!”

Xander raised a hand in acknowledgement at the door and let himself be pushed.

The next day at school Buffy filled them in on Ted weirdness—weirdness of the threatening variety, weirdness that she’d been chewing on since the mini-golf course.

“You should have told us earlier Buffy, but, I mean, it just seems like you want him to be corrupt or something…”

“The guy lost his senses over mini-golf—if Xander hadn’t gone all loopy, I bet he’d have continued with the backhanded comments and behind mini-castle threats!”

“So he’s a little uptight, last I heard that’s not a slaying offense… though if it is, why haven’t you dusted Snyder?” Xander took another bite of cookie and shook his head. “Chop, chop missy, can’t get lax on the job…. Don’t give me the look, I’m on your side here.”

Buffy sighed. “You sure you don’t have any bit of Xander-advice to give?”

“I can see now why you feel like you need it so badly,” Willow nodded and took a bite of her own cookie. Damn these things are good!

“Sorry Buff, control over this aspect of my newfound crazy hasn’t exactly happened overnight. Most I can do right now is recognize when it’s happening—which is good, as now I can at least cover my mouth next time I try giving advice to a Baddie.”

“I just wish you could skip the Baddie advice and stick to the Goodie advice giving. You might not be all S-word-y, but everyone in school’s noticed that your blue-eyed advice is something to listen to.”

“Huh?”

Willow nodded and gestured behind him.

He turned to look and waved back at the group of upperclassmen.

“Everyone makes a point to say ‘hi’ to you at some point during the day now in the hopes that you’ll go all…” she wiggled her fingers.
“I thought that we were using that gesture for my disappearing acts?”

Willow shrugged, then tapped one finger to her temple. “How about that for your eyes?”

He was about to respond when Cordelia walked past.

“Hey, Cordy, nice outfit.”

“Oh, very funny.” She cocked a hip at him. He frowned.

“Not really.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nice outfit?” He was really not seeing the joke. Or the implied insult. He was usually very good at noticing his own implied insults.

“Why don’t you just keep your mouth shut?” Xander very carefully didn’t look to see how Cordy’s skirt swished while she walked, instead looking to his girls.

“Would you guys excuse me for a sec?”

He admired the swish while he caught up to her, but…

“What’s wrong with you?” She sounded annoyed, but not annoyed enough to shrug off the arm he put around her shoulders, so for once Xander tried being the more reasonable one.

“I gave you a compliment.”

“In front of your friends, they’re gonna know! And this arm thing doesn’t help! You’re just lucky everyone knows you do it to everyone!”

“Know what? And what? I don’t…” Xander remembered that he had side-hugged Buffy and Willow, and had done so to Tracy when she’d measured out enough Potassium Chloride for their experiment, and to Adam in gym class, and to Giles when he’d gotten one of Xander’s movie references, and to… “Nevermind that second part.”

“Please! It’s too traumatic for me to even say it!”

Xander stopped. Cordelia turned to look at him.

“That we kissed? That’s what this is about?”

“Ugh. Even now that you’re half-popular…” she trailed off, disdainful.

“I’m not gonna tell, they’re not gonna know. Not your friends, not my friends. Besides, it was a total fluke.”

Cordelia nodded. Man did she look nice.

“Total fluke.”

“… You wanna go to the utility closet and make out?”

Cordelia rolled her eyes and elbowed him in his side. “God, is that all you ever think about?”

Xander waited a second, two, three while Cordelia blinked, and considered and…
“OK.”

Buffy had to be home at 6 sharp for dinner with Ted, so they didn’t hang out long after school.

The little redhead guy and a guy Xander recognized as Cordelia’s boy toy from last year stopped him on his way home. He thinks his name was Devon… something like that.

They had a crazy black and white striped Bus/Van thing behind them, very Beetlejuice, and Xander nodded towards it.

“Nice ride.” Somehow the paint job slid right past tacky and right into eclectic and neat. Eclectic or some other word that might translate weird into cool.

Little Red Head smiled. “Thanks.”

Devon nodded. “Yeah, man. My buddy says you’re cool, so you want to hang sometime?”

Xander looked at them curiously, wondering if this was like what Willow had pointed out to him, but Devon didn’t look like he was expecting anything, and he’d already given his advice to the redhead. So he shrugged.

“Sure, just not tonight.”

“Plans?”

Xander smiled.

“Vampire hunting.”

The best jokes were the ones that were actually truth, as Xander had promised to go hunting for minions so Buffy could do her dinner thing in peace—she could to the true patrolling later in the night, and in the meantime Willow was looking into Ted’s past through the magic of the World Wide Web.

Devon nodded. “Quality time with the video games, huh? Fair. Next time we’ve got a meet up you should come.”

“Sure thing,” he gave a look to the redhead, raising an eyebrow. He shook his head.

“The only ankle biter I’ve been in contact with is my baby cousin, and he hasn’t gotten his baby teeth in yet.”

Xander shrugged and went on his way, planning on grabbing up a couple stakes from home before wandering through the night.

Wandering was cut short, however, as soon after his third (hell yeah!) dusting, he was grabbed from behind and dragged through several back alleys.

It made him think he should actually get on that whole practicing thing, as going poof would be a great thing to do right now. Except he wasn’t.

He’d thought it must be a fear thing, or an imminent danger thing, but—well, no, he was actually a bit more curious as to why he was being grabbed instead of killed, being dragged instead of knocked
out, being—oh no.

He’d like to say once you see one abandoned warehouse, you’ve seen them all, but while he’d never seen the outside of it he was starting to think that—

Okay, inside is definitely being recognized, definitely not just any abandoned warehouse, and sending the cat had probably been stupid. Definitely had been a stupid idea.

Was Ted’s food drugged? Because that’s what he was using as his excuse as to why he’d thought sending Spike and Drusilla a cat with a note was a good idea when it was obviously a bad, bad idea. Bad idea, bad plan, just bad all around. Could he give himself advice? He should. It wouldn’t be fair if he couldn’t give and take his own advice.

Because there was Spike, sat with Drusilla in his lap, the grey-white-orange splotty cat in her arms, batting at something in her hand. In his free hand, Spike held a note.

“’Here is a kitten,’” read Spike, “‘since you don’t seem to know what one is. Make sure it eats daily and is kept clean. Please leave me alone.’” Spike looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “You signed it, ‘Not Yours, Xander.’” He nuzzled into Drusilla’s neck. “Kept all polite and everything.” He flipped his fingers at the fledgling holding him, and Xander was brought closer.

Xander tried thinking poof-y thoughts, hard, while smiling dopily. “haha, well you know it was Willow who said it’d be in bad taste to include the part where I hoped the thing clawed you, so, ahaha…”

Drusilla tsked and gave him a stern look. This close Xander could see that the thing she was playing with the cat with was a dead rat.

“Bad Kitten. She’s Gregoriallise, not an it.” She made a clawing motion with the hand holding the rat, and a dribble of… something dribbled down. Probably blood, but oh, no, that was definitely something gross and organ-y dangling down like a string.

Xander scrunched his nose.

“You’ll get your clothes dirty doing that.”

She dropped the rat and examined her hand, tilting it this way and that.

“I like my white gown, but red is such a pretty colour… pretty.”

At a loss, Xander glanced at Spike. He ignored Xander for now; instead he pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and cleaned off Drusilla’s hand. Drusilla gave Xander a look that made it clear she expected him to say something. If only he knew what the right something was.

He shrugged as best he could with his arms held behind his back.

“When life gives you white roses, paint ’em red.”

She seemed to consider this before looking to the ground.

“But what of the petals that fall to the ground?” her lower lip trembled. “my flowers always die…”

He tried another shrug. He really hoped she didn’t start crying, as he had exactly 0% success rate at anything when confronted with a crying girl. Vampire girl or no, so far this conversation at least made sense! “Only forever never dies.” He tilted his head and elbowed the vampire behind him when she leaned in to give his neck a sniff, and tried giving Drusilla one of his patented Please Cheer
Up grins. “C’mon no crying now, please? Your eyes’ll get all smudged up and puffy if you do, and who’ll want to have tea with you then?”

Drusilla smiled. Spike gamefaced.

“How d’you know about the tea?” he jerked a nod at the vampire holding him and Xander was promptly shaken, growling at him when he kicked back in response. The kicking was probably why Spike wasn’t getting up to shake him himself.

“What do I know about any tea!”

“My Kitten wants to have a tea party with me!”

“Why the bloody hell would you mention it then!”

The vampire behind him shook him again, and this time when Xander kicked back he felt something give under his heel with a crunch. He was dropped while the vampire behind him staggered, her knee bent in an unnatural way.

Eugh. Buffy always dusted them before injuries like that happened.

In no way graceful, Xander staggered himself to keep balance, half-skipping to keep out of reach of another vampire when he finally had the state of mind to pull the stake from his back pocket and dust the vampire with the broken knee. He kept the stake in front of him as, despite it being a total fluke, the fact that Xander had managed to dust the vampire lady who was all with the shaky-shaky apparently made him someone not to lunge towards. That was good.

Spike was still all grr-faced though, so Xander decided that he had better figure out fast what made tea so threatening.

“Okay let’s just calm down, okay? I mentioned tea because some friends of mine love teatime, okay? She looked like she was going to cry, and now she doesn’t, so it seems like it worked, but I only mentioned tea because my friends…”

Xander trailed off, confused, and frowned. “My friends… but they aren’t…I don’t have…”

For a moment he can remember very clearly that he’d stopped by to visit the Dormouse and the March Hare and the Hatter for teatime, remembered pouring scalding tea down Hatter’s throat and laughing when it came out his sleeve to fill the March Hare’s chipped china cup. Laughed when the Dormouse scalded her tail dunking her biscuit in. But was that yesterday, or…

No… no.

Xander shook his head. Wonderland was rooted deep, and every time he thought that he had ripped the last bit of non-memory free, or at least reached the end of what he misremembered, he found another piece, sometimes of the same memory, sometimes of something new, always a bit saddened with the loss of something he never had, but did. Of something he wanted, but didn’t.

The friendship he had with Willow was reminiscent to the one he had with Rabbit if not wholly the same, and Buffy’s brash confidence put him in mind of the March Hare and the Hatter, and even Giles made him think of the Mock Turtle, with his turtle shell and bull horns, as like to retreat as to attack… but even more likely to talk. But talk was good, if confusing, and less violent, but talk also set Wonderland to swaying in his thoughts, brushing vibrant leaves powdered with Something Else
on the inside of his skull.

He missed Wonderland.

Drusilla clung to his arm and dragged at him, pulled him closer to the chair where Spike sat. He still didn’t look happy, but he wasn’t all fanged out anymore, so…

Xander pursed his lips and resisted being pushed down into Spike’s lap by leaning hard to the side.

Drusilla plopped back down into Spike’s lap instead, but kept her grip on his arm. Her grip was much stronger than it was when she’d hugged him from behind. This close, and with Spike to compare against, she was also looking much better, colour-wise. He was at once glad she was feeling better and wishing she could have waited until Xander was far, far away to feel better. Or waited until she was far, far away, either way.

He guessed the thing with the dead guy’s cross and chains and Angel’s blood worked after all.

Spike’s hand gripped the back of his neck, and Xander flailed.

“You’ll have to tell me about these friends of yours later, but for now I’ve got two bones to pick with you right now, and it’s up to you if that stays figurative, ya hear me?” his grip tightened, the hair at his nape being pulled, and Xander flailed harder.

It was about as effective as it was the first time.

“For one, if my Dru wants you as her kitten, she’ll get you as her kitten, so you better be ready to purr for us real nice. Greggie’ll keep the place rat free, ta for that, but what my Dark Princess wants, she gets. We clear?”

Xander squirmed a bit and grimaced. “I’ll probably have some words on that when you don’t have a hand on my throat, but yeah, clear, super clear, crystal even.. only, uh, Greggie?”

Drusilla smiled beatifically up at him. “Gregoriaallise.”

Xander blinked. “Girl cat Gregoriaallise, aka Greggie, probably also responds to Greg. Inasmuch as a cat responds to any sort of name… Great.” Spike gave his hair a tug and he winced. “No, no, it’s great! Lots of marvelous G words in there—and hey, there’s lots of great words that start with the letter M, too, like Marvelous, Magpie, Magic—”

“Mayhem, Madness, Malign, Malarkey!” continued Drusilla with a laugh.

Spike hummed and quirked an eyebrow.

“How ‘bout Murder, Masochist, Medieval torture like the Iron Maiden…”

“Haha I’m thinking Moron, like I’m a moron please stop listening to me and let me go?”

Drusilla cuddled his arm close and ran her fingernails lightly on his cheek. “Kitten must stay for tea…” one of her nails dug in deeper, an inch from his eye. “You mustn’t make Mummy cross, now…” She pulled her hand away to suck red from a fingernail, and smiled when a drop of red landed at the corner of her mouth. With her draped across Spike’s lap and Xander being held over her, his blood dripped down. He scrunched his eyes closed when Spike used his grip to tilt his face closer to put his mouth on the small cut.

It was a little like when Xander used to have his scrapes kissed by his mom or Willows mom or
Jesses mom, except this wasn’t a perfunctory peck, and they certainly hadn’t ever used tongue. He’d never had a wound licked, and he’d certainly never had a wound licked by a tongue that was closer to room temperature, and really he just really had an issue with this licking thing they had going on. He kept his eyes scrunched shut.

“Okay hahaha I guess you had a second thing, a second bone to pick? You wanted to talk about? Because I actually have less of an issue with bone-picking than I do with blood-licking, especially when it’s happening to me, on my face, and seriously can you please stop!?”

Spike stopped, thankfully, and smirked.

“Hear that luv? Our boy’s all polite like, still says please.” The smirk fell from his face. “Also good enough to keep us on track, he is. You said to beware of falling support beams, not,” Spike shook him hard enough he had to clench his teeth to keep from biting through anything important, “not a bloody pipe organ!”

When the shaking stopped, Xander nearly opened his mouth to ask what the hell Spike was on about, when he remembered. Beware of falling support beams, else you won’t have a leg to stand on. He looked at Spike, seated as he was, and his eyes widened.

Spike snorted and gave him another shake.

“Yeah you bloody Poof, I haven’t been sitting because I bloody well want to. Left the one church before it collapsed, didn’t I? But it’s the fucking pipe organ in the next church that leaves me with one cracked leg and another dislocated. Won’t have a leg to stand on, my arse. Oi! Wot you laughin’ at?”

Xander wished he had a free hand to cover his mouth, but the giggles kept coming. He had heard second hand how the few people who got his blue-eyed advice used it, but most of it was vague or confusing or—

“It was literal!” he laughed. “It would have left you without a literal leg to stand on!”

Spike scowled, but the corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

“Git, I’ve still got one leg workin’ though don’t I? Shut your gob before I have to use it to kick your giggling arse.”

That, at least, got him quiet, though he couldn’t keep his mouth from twitching up into a grin.

It faded somewhat when Spike returned it. It was a bit surreal to be laughing with a Master Vampire holding his neck, a Crazy Vampire keeping his arm hostage, and knowing he should probably be in a piss your pants level of fright after the whole kidnapping thing. Especially since Buffy was doing her Mom ‘n’ Ted dinner thing, and Willow was getting her investigation pants on, and he had at least until Lunch tomorrow for Buffy and Willow to get really worried if he didn’t show up.

Spike pulled him closer to lick his face again, then shoved his face down so Drusilla could do the same. He’d thought tongues in general were weird body parts to have for things other than eating, even after Cordelia had shown him how much fun two tongues could have, but he didn’t think he’d get used to vampire tongues anytime soon.

He hoped he wouldn’t have any reason to get used to them.

“What do you think, poodle, is it teatime yet?”
Drusilla clapped her hands together, smiling wide.

So teatime wasn’t actually all that bad.

Certainly wasn’t like tea time with his (no really stop thinking they’re real) not-real, never existed ever friends in Wonderland, but he thought kind of creepy dolls and interesting conversation with a lady who could eviscerate him with a gesture were more survivable than, well…

The half memories of Wonderland, of teatime with the other crazies of Wonderland, all made him think that the only way to survive there was to be the powerful sort of crazy that the Cheshire Cat was.

And from what he was half-remembering, the Cat was actually somewhat more kickass than the other Mad personalities that made up Wonderland.

Xander as himself probably wouldn’t survive a tea party in Alice’s land of make believe.

He had to fake drinking his tea, though; as the cup was filled with murky sort of swirls that made him think it wasn’t milk and sugar that was added to the beverage.

Spike had limped to the frilly, fluffy, lacy bed with help from a makeshift crutch, and was splitting his attention between watching their tea party and reading a book. Beside him was a coiled up bunch of rope.

Any time Xander started looking towards the exit or started shifting in his chair, Spike would casually put a hand on that rope, his earlier threat coming to the forefront.

Xander stays for tea willingly; Xander doesn’t get tied to a chair.

Not tied to a chair, Xander has a better chance of finding a way to get out of the lair of the dangerous and unstable vampires. Also, he thinks adding rope would make conversation flow much less smoothly.

Odd as it was, dangerous as it was, and even with gross tea, Xander was finding this whole, whatever you wanted to call this experience, enjoyable.

He thinks he’d probably be much less calm if he wasn’t almost entirely certain that should anyone try snacking on him or killing him or generally being excessively violent towards him he’d go poof to the In Between. Oh, his heart still beat hard enough to make Drusilla coo over him, and he was entirely certain that at any moment he’d find himself in mortal peril of some sort, most likely Spike and Drusilla related, but it wasn’t so bad.

Relaxing, in a way.

Drusilla talked about the stars and the moon whispering secrets in her ears, which Xander thought was interesting but only understood parts of, and Xander responded by telling her about the dark spots between the stars that he somewhat remembered, sometimes knew everything about before he remembered that he didn’t, actually. She seemed to understand about as much as he said as he understood what she said, which was a welcome relief. He loved his girls, he really did, but when he didn’t but did remember something of Wonderland, of something he had but hadn’t experienced, or made the grave mistake of quoting Alice…

They didn’t say anything, mostly, but they also didn’t know how to help him when he gets sad over
a girl who was and wasn’t his best friend, who did and didn’t exist, who wasn’t dead but wasn’t alive, either, and who he missed terribly.

Drusilla makes a questioning noise at the back of her throat while refilling Miss Edith’s cup—Xander doesn’t care how the cups are emptied when he’s more than certain he doesn’t want to know, makes sure he doesn’t look at the dolls for too long.

He’s very, very sure he doesn’t want to know.

He balances his cup and saucer on his finger and spins it while he figures out how to say what needs saying. The trick isn’t actually that hard to do, for all that it looks precarious and impressive. The Hatter had shown him how ages and never ago, and Spike probably wouldn’t be looking so impressed if he knew what would happened to you if you broke one of the hatters cups, or wasted any of his tea.

Hatter had put a lot of thought into making his cups just the right sort of cracked and broken.

“Have you ever missed someone who never existed before?”

Drusilla shook her finger at him. “Little Alice has missed her chance at tea. Shoo, shoo! Banish her to the far corner of your thoughts ‘till she has learned her manners!”

Spike put down his book.

“Alice? Thought she was who you were looking for when you were all furry, before?”

“I dressed up as the Cheshire Cat for Halloween, and I still remember Wonderland and Alice because of it. From the book?”

Spike snorts. “You think I don’t know Alice in Wonderland?”

“Well I don’t know, all I know about you is that you’re the Big Bad Vamp du jour, know how to handle crazy people, and probably know how to go about killing people as well as you know how to use peroxide!”

“Funny, funny. When Dru says it’s time for you to go, I’ll take great pleasure in showing you just how many ways, pet.”

He didn’t know quite how to respond to that. With Spike, it actually was a death threat, and Buffy wasn’t around so Xander’s quips didn’t have backup.

Drusilla tapped his hand, nearly making him drop the still spinning teacup and dish. He started up the spinning, balancing act when she stared, and once she was satisfied that the spinning would continue, and the tea wouldn’t be spilled, she smiled enigmatically at him.

“Someday I shall go to Wonderland and find little Alice. Chew her tongue and eat her brains so Kitten won’t have a word or thought left to her. Only thoughts for me and Spike…”

“I’m not sure if that’s how it works, luv, but I’m sure we’ll find a way.”

Xander pushed away the flare of outrage that burst in his chest at the thought of any harm coming to Alice, and grinned instead. Kept in mind that, despite how much it hurt, the truth was that Alice didn’t exist in this universe any more than Wonderland did.

The only thing left of her and his not his world was a book and somewhat inaccurate depictions in
“Don’t think that’s how it works, even in Wonderland… though now that I think of it, you’d definitely have a place all your own in Wonderland.”

“I fit to Wonderland better than Alice,” she sniffed. Xander shrugged.

“Maybe, but Alice is Wonderland. Willow didn’t like the end of the book—didn’t like any of the book—but it’s pretty clear all of Wonderland is in Alice’s head.”

“Then I’ll eat her brains, and you with it, my pretty Kitten.”

Xander only had a moment to register Drusilla’s gameface before she was launching herself across the table—

His tea splashed across the floor, the china shattering before he had a thought for or against it, and he was across the room.

Drusilla kicked away his toppled chair and came after him, and again Xander found himself on the opposite side of the room. Again, and again, and Xander was on one side of the bed, Drusilla the other, playing keep away with his life while Spike laughed where he was laid out between them. She went left, Xander went right, vice versa, and Drusilla lunged across the bed.

Startled and annoyed at Spike’s laughter, Xander jerked back, but she’d caught hold of his shirt and he stumbled.

Somehow Spike had gotten a grip on Drusilla to keep her from falling to the floor with him, and that meant that instead of being tackled to the floor he was instead twisted to land on the bed, one of his feet still on the floor, with Drusilla’s slight but considerable weight keeping him down.

Xander’s eyes went wide as Drusilla smiled down at him, the points of her teeth looking especially sharp. Spike had rolled to his side and used one hand to shove his face to the side, the other resting on Drusilla’s back.

“S’good to see you so lively, poodle. Makes a man proud to see his Sire so spritely.”

He only had a moment to wonder (as he distinctly remembered Spike calling Angel his sire, so…?) when Drusilla darted down, and…!

“Wot, again?”

Xander still had his hands pushing ineffectually against Drusilla’s shoulders, and wow was it doing things to his ego, but instead of baring down on him Drusilla was now only draping herself against him.

She trailed a finger along his collar bone, up and through his throat, making him shiver.

She ran a finger along where his throat should have been, actually.

As much of a perspective as he has without a head and all that comes with it, he can still see what’s happening. He hadn’t been in much of a state to appreciate it last time—not to say this was a much better situation—but it was very eerie seeing the darkness where his head was supposed to be attached, to see his own chest rising and falling rapidly but hear none of it. Experience it, but not consciously do it.
The pillow his head had landed on was slowly puffing back up without his weight to flatten it, and when Spike pressed his fingers against the shadowy dark bit where his head should attach, it’s ticklish and shivery and Xander gives up on pushing Drusilla away in order to smack Spike’s hand away.

The only thing he can say for losing his head at a time like this is that it seemed to have distracted Drusilla from trying to eat him, distracted Spike enough to keep him from reminding her, and while he’d appreciate poofing far, far away, he supposes this is… well, not fine, but it’s better than being dead, or eaten, or, any sort of deity forbid, turned.

Spike takes the hand that batted at him and shifts so his arm is trapped flat under Spike’s weight. Drusilla shifts his other arm so she can lie more comfortably on him and peer at where his head is missing, and he moves automatically to rest it on her back.

Xander would make a horrible, horrible vampire.

The sort-of hug doesn’t seem to annoy either Drusilla or Spike, which is good, because for all his sudden huggy-ness and being Mr. Tactile Touch Man, he hadn’t quite thought it extended to vampires.

He has no mouth or throat to swallow, but he does, and flinches away, downwards, when Drusilla plants a kiss in the middle of the dark spot, decides on dirty tactics when she licks.

She’s not ticklish under her arm, but she shrieks with laughter when he twiddles his fingers on her ribs.

It stops the licking, which feels even weirder there than it does on his cheek, and when Spike smacks his chest for it, he wiggles his fingers and bends his arm underneath him until he can get at his side. Spike is ticklish like Willow, though where Willow squeaks, he grunts and rolls over until Xander is being somewhat squished underneath his and Drusilla’s combined weight.

Xander gasps and finds his voice—and his head, thankfully, though he was finding it annoying that he apparently got giggly after his head goes In Between.

When he was poofing away from Drusilla, he’d thought it’d been nervous laughter mixed in with a mild panic attack, but he was giggling here, now. Again.

He wants to sigh, but doesn’t have the breath for it. Why couldn’t he have gotten the ability to fly or something that didn’t result in giggles?

Drusilla combed fingers through his hair, and he remembered that he actually had something to say about all this. Drusilla flicked his nose when he opened his mouth.

“Mummy forgot Kitten isn’t ready, yet. Hasn’t got his claws all sharp, hasn’t collected all his armor, hasn’t had enough time to make his pelt shine to survive the darkness…”

She leaned in and kissed him softly, a cold comparison to Cordelia’s kisses. Physically, he means.

She tilts her head, Spike leans in, and then they’re kissing. On Xander.

Suddenly their little cuddle pile is infinitely more uncomfortable, and he’s got to turn away when he sees tongue. Ugh, he didn’t need to see that.

He was in high school, he saw enough graphic PDA during the day, he didn’t need to see more at night. He and Cordy at least stuck to utility closets and empty classrooms.
“Yeah, okay, this is weird, how about I go and give you guys some privacy, okay? You know, I have school tomorrow, and-”

“Mummy wants Kitten to stay close, Spike.”

“Don’t worry luv, he won’t be going anywhere.”

“What? No, see, I have to go, my grades are only now even remotely resembling ‘good’, and I, uh…”seeing neither Spike nor Drusilla looked like they were going to change their minds, he offered, “I promise to come back tomorrow?”

Spike snorted.

“Sure you will.”

“Promises, promises…”

“Hey, if I promise something, I do it!” Xander frowned. “And if I’m lying it’s not like you can’t kidnap me again, and then you’ll know, but I’m a trustworthy guy!”

“Yeah, and you’ll be expecting it.”

Xander’s eyes narrowed in a glare. “Oh, so that’s how it is. Big Bad Spike keeps incompetent vampires around to do his dirty work, make himself feel better after the bigger and badder pipe organ left him with only one leg to stand on.”

“Listen here…” Spike growled, blue eyes turning yellow, “you’re here because Dru wants you here, but it’s on my say if you stay in one piece, you get me?”

Drusilla clicked her tongue and drew her index finger down Xander’s nose slow enough he crossed his eyes keeping track of it.

“Bad kitty, kssh, kssh, kssh, learn to lick your whiskers before you lick your claws. Bad kitties don’t get to stay up with Mummy…”

Her hand drifted, candlelight glinting off her nails. Xander shook his head, blinking sleepily.

“Wha…” He never got sleepy, and it was hardly… what time…? The bed was so soft underneath him, and despite being room temperature, he was warm underneath the two vampires. “I don’t…”

“Shh, shh, Mummy will know what to do when you wake.”

He rather doubted that, but his eyes were fluttering closed, and there might not have been a buzz in his chest but whatever was happening felt a lot like a blanket around his brain, and…

All of it is weird.

His house, people at school, everything.

He thinks that everything would seem odd after waking up to find yourself cuddling two vampires. Drusilla had growled at him when he wriggled to get free, and Spike had thrown his good leg over him.
When he’d poofed out from beneath them, Spike cussed the air blue and Drusilla started wailing, which brought more vamps to the room, and Xander had enough time to promise to show up for tea later in the week before poofing home.

Why he’d promised that much, he didn’t know, but thought maybe Drusilla’s shrieking wail had something to do with it.

His mom opening the door hardly a minute later to tell him to get to school made the whole experience even more… surreal.

He skips meeting Willow and Buffy at the front of the school, ignores whichever new swell of gossip had everyone talking to each other in hushed whispers, and found Giles in the Library.

“You gotta teach Willow and me some self defense.”

Giles looked up from a book. “What, Xander? I don’t…”

“No G-man, I know you’re all for training Buffy, but being a Watcher is some big thing, right?” He didn’t wait for Giles to nod. “Right, so Buffy has the super strength and super healing on her side, but Willow and I don’t, and you know a bunch of fighting styles so you can teach those things to Buffy, right?” Again, he doesn’t wait. “Right, but how about one night you give Buffy that Slayer: How To book and teach Willow and I some basic self defense, so that while we’re playing backup to Buffy on patrols, or even taking patrols like I did last night, we actually have a chance. ‘Cause kidnapping? Not fun. At all. There’s a lot of fun-suckage happening when kidnapping happens, and it’s just not good for anyone, but specifically me.”

Giles blinked at him, and then shook his head slightly.

“Sorry, Xander you just… You were kidnapped? And patrol…”

Xander rolled his eyes, which he normally wouldn’t do because he’s, well, Giles, but everything, everything is weird.

“Yes and all of it will be explained with Willow and Buffy around, but for right now can we get some sort of agreement-type thing to happen? Maybe one night a week you let Buffy hit the Slayer history books and teach Willow and me something that’ll keep us from getting eaten because Buffy isn’t around? Or am I going to have to try and convince Willow Ghandi Never Had To Hit Anyone Rosenberg to get karate lessons with me or something?”

Another head shake.

“I’ve already said the book method will not—”

“Work for Buffy, sure, and maybe not for everything, but she’s gotta know what a couple hundred years of Slayage means for her. If I had a book that had a layout of the things I can do… I don’t like reading, you know this, I know this, but I’d totally read that thing front to back. Even if I had the actual Cheshire Cat in front of me willing to give me the boiled down version of what I can do and how to do it, I’d still read the book. Don’t say Alice In Wonderland, because that is so not an instructional book, and I already know way more about Wonderland and Alice than anyone else could.”

He looked past Giles to the clock; he had less than ten minutes to get his stuff and get to class, and he really didn’t want to hear another lecture on punctuality from Mr. Crawlyn on a day like today.

“Gotta get to class, but G-man, think on it. Drusilla has her weird fixation thing on me, Spike seems
to be going along with it, and I only got away from the situation because I finally managed to poof my way out of it; Willow can’t do that. I can only do it rarely. Buffy can’t either, but what if you’re assuming she knows something about being a Slayer that she actually doesn’t?” Xander shook his head and walked backwards to the door, shooting his fingers at Giles.

“Ted might be evil, so today’s probably going to be filled with that, but, y’know. Figure out your answer sooner rather than later, so I can start working on convincing Willow that self defense is a thing that should happen, okay? Okay.”

Filling in Giles, Buffy, and Willow on the whole kidnapping thing doesn’t happen—or rather, doesn’t happen immediately. Not in the same day. He still feels so jittery with nerves that the day doesn’t exactly sail by, but it’s like he’s experiencing it on a skipping rock. Skip, skip, skip, and the rest either went up in the air or sunk deep in the water.

Because it turns out that Buffy killed Ted—human, asshole, great cook—and then it turns out that Ted not only has four ex-wives but he also drugs cookies. Bad, bad cook. Great cookies, though.

Very calming.

They’d go great with some tea.

“Haha, Ecstasy-tea. Ecstas-tea.”

The buzz in his chest tickled.

Willow took the rest of his cookies away.

There’s more cuddling happening, though this time instead of it being because of bad mojo from vampires, or in an attempt to help Buffy out with uuber-guilt for killing a human, it’s Willow and then Cordelia helping to keep him from wandering the school all loopy.

He thinks it’s the loopiness that keeps him from saying anything to Giles when he leaves to take over Buffy’s patrols—he does grin, call out “Don’t get shot!”—but that happened earlier.

He thinks that Willow would like to leave him behind when they go to check out Drug Happy Ted’s place, but she can’t, and it’s Xander who opens the door to the place from the inside. He thinks that he could probably have an interesting career as a thief if he ever got off the short bus regarding his abilities.

And, you know, if it wouldn’t make Willow sad and disapproving.

He hugs Cordelia because she was the one who notices the rug, and also because he feels like it. Hugging her is good; hugging vampires is morally wrong, but still feels about as good as hugging any person, but still morally wrong. No huggy for the blood sucky.

He laughs at the thought, and reminds himself that he should make sure to bring his own tea next time he goes to teatime with Drusilla… possibly also find a cross necklace, but would it stay around his neck if he didn’t have a neck? What if he went headless again? It was something to think on.

A mystery, if you wanted to think of it in such a way.

He shook his head and checked the closet, as people always had skeletons in their—oh.

Usually not literal skeletons.
He feels slightly conflicted, with the buzz fading from his chest, when it turns out that Ted is a robot. Robotic Ted.

Robo-Ted.

He doesn’t want Buffy to feel the indecisive guilt about killing a human man, asshole-ish tendencies notwithstanding, but at the same time…

Hmm. He wasn’t quite sure how his thoughts were working themselves out, because so far Demon Bad, Human Good seemed to work well enough, even with Larry and his goons, and to a lesser degree Cordelia and her Cordettes, but they wouldn’t have a police force if it was All Humans Good. True, Sunnydale’s police force was rather lacking, but he didn’t think anyone would blame them for not knowing about vampires and demons and the general death-by-Hellmouth that happened on the nightly.

Still, for all that he was so not on board with the career week and career test BS, if the lady hadn’t ended up as one of the Order of Taraka goons, he thinks Buffy probably could have learned a thing or two from the police force booth.

Again, if the lady manning the booth hadn’t been a murderous sociopathic killer lady of horrible guns and knife things and…

Yeah. There was the idea, gotten across.

He thinks that if he could actually tell the future, he probably wouldn’t have been the one to tell Buffy not to worry so much about the people leading the career booths, since, you know, he’d been so entirely wrong about that.

Of course that doesn’t help him with Giles, who not only hasn’t gotten back to him about training, but is now giving him thoughtful looks while shifting his shoulder.

Honestly, one pre-patrol well wishing and suddenly the S-word is back on the table. He shakes his head. Some people…

He’s considering if he can convince Angel to get over his brooding enough for a bit of training—which might not be a bad idea even if Giles does actually get back to him, as Angel not only knew how vampires would attack (being a vampire) but also knew a lot more about Spike and Drusilla than even the Watchers, seemed like—when Giles puts a book in front of Buffy.

It’s one of the leather-bound monstrosities that looks like it probably costs more than Xander’s house, like it’s probably older than his neighborhood, but has managed to stay under both three inches thick and probably under five pounds.

It was a sad world he lived in when Xander could accurately guesstimate the weight of ancient texts.

Buffy paused in filing her nails to raise her eyebrows at the book, then at Giles.

“Um, is there some disaster I haven’t heard about?”

“No—well, um, perhaps not immediately, but I’m sure there will be one eventually, but ah, I thought you might appreciate going through the Slayer’s Guide… I was informed you might find it useful to know more about, um, Slaying. The history of it, I mean, along with what Slayers before you have been able to do, their abilities and what they’ve encountered.”
That last part at least got Buffy to blink and look at the book with something other than I’m-supposed-to-read-this doubt.

“There’s stuff on other Slayers in this? Is it just notes, or…?”

Giles nodded. “Yes, but also translated notes from the previous Slayers. The ones who could write, I mean.” At Buffy’s look, he expanded, “There has been a Slayer since before the Watcher’s Council was founded, and before regular schooling, before being able to read and write was a, er, prerequisite to any sort of work, not all who were called could afford such schooling.”

“Neat!”

And, wonder of all wonders, Buffy Summers opened a book with actual interest. When Willow moved to lean over her shoulder to read along, Giles started cleaning his glasses.

“No Willow, I think perhaps you and Xander could work on something different, today.”

She frowned.

“What? What else is there? Do you need me to look up something on the web?”

“Well actually I was thinking you two might benefit learning some basic self defense.”

Buffy looked up. “Whoa, big change here. I’m on the books and Willow and Xander get the training? Oh, no,” she raised her hands when Willow looked at her, “I think it’s a great idea that you guys learn how to kick butt, only it was just last week Giles was all Books will do Buffy no good, and now…” she shrugged, and flapped her hands at Giles. “No, never mind, leave me to my book learning and go show them the proper way to stake a vampire or something—and there’s something never thought I’d be saying. Are you sure there’s no apocalypse coming soonish?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Okay! I’ll check again next week. Just in case.”

It took the combined encouragement of Xander, Buffy, and Giles to get Willow to agree to any sort of training, but they managed in probably half an hour what would have taken Xander a couple of weeks to do on his own.

Ghandi may have never needed to punch anyone, but he probably never had to deal with demons and vampires and Hellmouthy Badness.

Buffy called out encouragement when her attention strayed from the book, but she seemed genuinely interested and even somewhat absorbed in what she was reading. Xander wasn’t used to that look on her face; usually he only ever saw it with Giles and Willow.

Xander didn’t have a chance to bring up the whole kidnapping business, and he wasn’t going to mention it now and undo all the finagling it took to get Willow to agree to throw a punch, but he’d have to bring it up eventually.

But Giles would probably bring it up at some point—he’d paid attention to everything else Xander had said, so it stood to reason he’d heard Xander mention Drusilla and kidnapping in the same thought-process of a babble.

Though sometimes Giles missed things when he or Willow started to babble, and Xander had definitely been in a babbling mood earlier.
He shrugs and pays attention to Giles, who’s showing them how to break the grip of someone holding your arm, and then an alternative that throws them over your hip.

Neither Willow nor Xander are at a hip-throwing stage, but Xander likes Giles’ teaching style; here is what I am teaching you, and this is what you should eventually be able to do after learning this.

Xander also thinks it does Giles good to teach someone who doesn’t have the innate athleticism that Buffy has.

He keeps in mind the idea of asking Angel for training, even if the thought of asking him for help was just… ugh.

But it was something to keep in mind, regardless.

But still.

Chapter End Notes

Ep. Ted: Willow says the drug Ted uses in his food is similar to Ecstasy, which causes positive increases in energy levels, distortions in perception of space and time, and in their sense of touch. Xander loses feeling in his legs, loses track of time, and is a bit more Cheshire-y than usual.

Also, I was NOT intending for the Ted episode to fill up this entire chapter, but there was the thing with Drusilla and Spike, and goofiness, and just yeah.

The 2-3 eps per chapter thing is what I’m aiming for, and this shouldn’t happen again unless writing takes me.

Camp NaNo is doing well, more than 46k including the one other Buffy fic I posted earlier.

Hope you enjoy, and know that I’m posting this from the wilderness of camping in Canada :) Happy summer! Next time I post should be sometime after the 4th, as that’s when I’m back from camping.

Thanks for the support!
Chapter Notes

This chap was difficult to write, just fyi.
Smooth in some places, difficult in others.
*SIGH*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5—Judge In A Box

Xander doesn’t make it back for tea until a week later—and who could blame him, what with the creepy bezoar eggs and training and patrolling with Willow for Buffy while she’s grounded—and it goes surprisingly better than he’d feared.

He was still fearful for sure, and he wasn’t entirely sure why he was showing up again, but it was apparently a thing he was doing now.

A dangerous thing, to keep with his life’s running theme.

Drusilla greeted him by wailing and hugging him just a tad over-tight, and Spike scowled from a wheelchair they’d probably stolen. He had a shiny burn scar on the side of his face.

“Said he’d be back, promised it even, and here we see him after a whole bloody week.”

“Ah, but it was a conditional. You let me go and I would promise to be back the next night—there was no letting involved in my escape. That’s why it’s an escape, rather than just me leaving.”

“And there won’t be anymore escapes either, if you know what’s good for you. Someone get me a rope.”

Xander shakes his head and hopes he doesn’t get attacked for it—or for what he’s got to say next. Also, eugh, rope. No thank you.

“No, see, we’ve already done the part where you try to keep me here and I panic and, you know,” he flutters his fingers, pulls them back when Drusilla playfully bites at them, “away, and this past week we did the thing where you tried to kidnap me again, and that didn’t work, so I think I found a happy medium.”

“But Kitten’s not dead yet.”

“I—wait, what? No, no death happening here, where did…?”

“Not that sort of Medium, love.”

Xander takes a moment to let that sink in, and allows himself a moment of horror at Drusilla’s fairly ominous ‘yet’, before shaking it off and sitting in his spot for tea.
Well, ‘his’ spot. Different chair, after the last one got broken, but it was in the right space.

“Right, no, happy middle spot that doesn’t involve anyone being more dead than they are currently.”

“If you don’t come down for tea, my Dark Princess will be off her feed.”

Xander scrunched his nose.

“Okay, ew, but I think you’re seeing the wrong issue here. Eating is the thing I’m okay with—feeding is a thing I really don’t want to hear about. I’m so not okay with you munching on the locals, but, just, non topic, okay?”

Spike gives him a considering look, runs his tongue over the front of his teeth.

Drusilla gives him a cookie.

Xander thinks it’s good that he’s already half mad, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to handle this whole... *everything.* Spike was all threatening and growly and Drusilla was all with the tea and cakes, but when it came down to it, Xander was *so* much more confident that he’d be safer alone with Spike than Drusilla.

“Alright. But I’m guessing your so-called happy medium isn’t that you’ll stay so long as you don’t have to see or hear about our feeding. So. Speak.”

If Angel continued conversations with intensified brooding, Spike continued with intensified threatening.

It was actually impressive. He was in a wheel chair and hadn’t even said anything about evisceration or broken bones or any other medieval torture devices; instead he let you fill in the blanks. See above.

*Broken Bones.*

Xander gulped.

“Well then, I think I should first say that I don’t actually mind the tea parties—and before that does anything to my manly ego, I’m going to remind myself that it’s a tea party with terribly lethal vampires.”

Xander shook his head.

“Not that I really need the reminder, what with the terribly lethal vampires here, now, and—yeah, back on track in three, two…” He cleared his throat, almost went for a sip of tea before he remembered. Nope.

“So, I’m thinking I could come down here for tea half the weeknights, and in return you don’t try to keep me here.”

“You come down for tea four nights of the—”

“Three.”

“Bloody hell like it’s going to be three!”

“Hey, I have school and Buffy slash Hellmouthy stuff to deal with! The main reason I wasn’t around last week was because creepy demon hell eggs tried to take over the town!”
“Now you’re just makin’ stuff up. Four nights.”

“Like I could make that up—I almost ate one! It was a Bezoar thing and it took over my entire life sciences class! So no, three nights.”

Both Spike and Drusilla scrunched their noses, which was bad because it was actually a bit charming, and Drusilla started refilling teacups while muttering, “Messy, messy, messy…”

“Bezoars aside, it sounds like you’re trying to say my dark plum doesn’t deserve the most of your time.” Spike’s face darkened. “You aren’t try’na say that, are you boy?”

Xander snorted, even as he felt like his stomach was trying to recede into his spine. Or where his spine was supposed to be, as wow was it a time to feel spineless.

“She may deserve it, but I can’t give it to her! If I’m not helping Buffy with patrol I’m researching some deadly demon or ritual, and when I’m not doing that I’m actually fighting off some demon or ritual, or I’m getting possessed, or you are doing something that I need to help Buffy stop, and when I’m not doing any of that stuff, I’ve still got school work! Realize too, I’ve got many, many people to spread my time with.” He ticked off fingers on one hand, “Spike, Drusilla,” he ticked off fingers on his other hand, “Willow, Buffy, Giles, and even Cordelia. Schoolwork should count as a person, but that person would be a Bigger Bad than you, so let’s just leave it at the 2:1 ratio. Three nights a week I’ll come down for tea. That’ll make Drusilla happy, which’ll make you happy, and in the long run it’ll make Buffy and Willow happy because I’ll get my crazy talk out to someone who can crazy talk right back at me.”

Spike didn’t look any happier.

“How about I get some of those friends you so helpfully listed for me, and bring them down for tea. Better time share, that.” He smirked.

Xander set down his cup to make an X in front of him with his arms.

“Whoa, foul play! Red card! Penalty! No kidnapping! I won’t tell Buffy where your hideout is—”

“Oh! I don’t care if you tell that chit where we are, I don’t need protecting from no Slayer! Or are you forgetting who’s the Slayer’s slayer, here?”

“Oh my god fine! But you don’t want to have to move, do you? Because I tell Buffy where you are, and she’ll be bugging you, posse included. I’m in her posse, by the way. So I’ll be bugging you, Buffy’ll be bugging you, whoever you don’t kidnap will bug you, whoever you do kidnap will bug you, and don’t take that as a challenge because eventually you’ll get exasperated and have to move and, and there’s no guarantee you’ll get all this stuff out. Certainly not all of these dolls.”

“Miss Edith says it’s not time to move, not yet. Shh, shh, drink your tea, else you’ll go back in time out…”

Spike made a face, but, as Xander was starting to see, Drusilla seemed to be his Big Bad soft spot. Giles said that vampires were soulless, and had heavily implied that no soul meant no love, but Spike was doing a pretty fair impression of it. Or maybe some weird obsession thing, or Stockholm? Xander didn’t know, but there was affection happening between the two vamps.

“Right then, three nights you show up—miss a night, and you better believe you’ll be making up for it, with interest. You keep quiet, and there won’t be any kidnapping to get you down here. Not you, not any of your little friends. That all?”
Xander thought about it and slowly nodded. “Yeah, and I guess you don’t try to hurt me and I won’t try and stake you.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Not confident in your disappearing act?”

Xander grinned.

“It comes and goes.”

Spike rolled his eyes, but Xander knew that somewhere in his demon-y soulless being he was laughing. That was golden material.

A thought occurred to him.

“Also, an Addendum: I bring the tea. Or at least make up my own tea, no offence meant. It may be boring, but I’m a milk ‘n’ sugar kind of guy. Sometimes honey, even. But I don’t think our tea additives quite match up here, if you get my meaning.”

Drusilla smiled while Spike barked out a laugh, and went to pour more tea in his cup. He moved to stop her from overflowing it when he paled and noticed that the cup was significantly emptier than it had been at the beginning of the night. Xander clutched his throat, gagged a little.

“I didn’t actually drink that, right? It’s just a thing like with the dolls—I didn’t drink that, right? Right?”

Willow’s Oz turns out to be the redhead he’d gone all blue eyed for, and two mindsets war with each other.

On the one hand, he’s a chill guy, definitely nice for a senior, and Xander’s warning to him seemed to be about things going bad for him if he lets something else happen, rather than if he does something… call him biased, but after Ford he found it harder to be all around friendly with people he blue-eyed against doing something. It wasn’t likely that they were give-my-childhood-friend-to-vampires levels of badness, but…

On the other hand, Xander already had an ongoing war between Yay Willow Likes Someone Else and No One Will Be Good Enough For Her.

It was a three-way war, currently ongoing, and it was a good thing Xander was used to having a multifaceted look on things because otherwise he’d be avoiding Oz entirely until he got things figured out… only, with the avoiding, he’d probably be more likely to settle on Bad, Unworthy Oz, since he wouldn’t have Oz’s innate chill to combat the negative outlook.

Instead, when he sees Oz, sees him look like he’s trying not to look at Willow (an failing), he gives her one last squeeze. Promises to meet up with her at lunch, untangles from her to go talk to the guy.

A Talk needs to happen.

A very particular talk.

Because there isn’t all that much time before class, and because he’s still reeling from a narrowly avoided talk about Buffy and Angel maybe having sex (one that mostly involved Willow smiling and saying “wow,” and Buffy nodding and saying “I know,” rinse and repeat), he skips the usual pleasantries and gets straight to the point.
“So, Willow.”

Oz blinks up at him, and his yes flicker for a moment to the side, where Willow had disappeared back into the school.

“Yes, that Willow. So. You like her.”

His serene Neutral Face seemed to get even more Neutral. Oz nods.

“…Yes. She’s a nice girl. You probably know that, you two seem rather… close.”

And the Neutral Face intensifies. Neutral intensification. Xander frowns at him for a moment, not liking that Oz was playing dumb to what the both of them knew he was saying, before he realizes what his huggyness looked like to the Uninformed.

Oz, for all the friendly greetings and invitation to hang out with him and Cordy’s Ex Beau, was still the Uninformed.

He grins wide, and Oz’s Neutral Face cracks a little. Understandably confused.

“Sure do! I mean, she’s been my best friend since forever, and if it’s at all likely that a relationship might be happening in the future, I’ve got my Best Friend Duty to give you the Shovel Talk.”

Oz’s face had cleared some while he talked, but now the little frown was back. More puzzled this time.

“Shovel talk?”

Xander’s grin widened.

“Good weight, good weapon, great for clean up, and the police don’t give you the side-eye for carrying it around. The Shovel Talk. She doesn’t have a brother, and thank all the powers that be that I don’t have a sister, but someone’s gotta give the Well Meaning Threat. So. Shovel Talk.”

The frown cleared, too, and Xander decided to take it as a good thing that Oz had swapped it out with a small smile. If he’s going to be around Willow, he’ll be around the rest of the Scooby’s, and if he was one of the people who got all leery when Xander grinned extra wide and crazylike, he wouldn’t last.

He didn’t think Willow would ever be the type to change herself to please a significant other, certainly not one to abandon her friends, but it was one of those things where it was better not to leave that as an option. Better if everyone could be friendly.

“Ah,” Oz nodded, “the Shovel Talk. Clever and informative. It’s nice that Willow has such a good friend.”

Xander plopped himself down next to the other boy, and dulled his grin down to a friendly smile.

“You better believe it. And I’m not saying anything about interest on her part, but if you thought your subtle looks were, well, subtle, I’ll tell you that’s a yes and a no.”

“A yes and a no?”

“A solid yes and a no, even. I think Willow has noticed some, but she hasn’t noticed others, but because I’m her friend and you seem like a nice enough guy, I’m going to give you a secret look into the mind of Willow; she doesn’t think on things unless she’s given reason to think on things. Take
Because he has hope for the guy, Xander lets him think through that on his own, and because he thinks he might be the same sort of smart as Willow, he even gives him a chance to articulate those thoughts.

Sure enough, after a moment of thoughtful looks at the grass, Oz tilts his head and looks back at Xander.

“Teachers and school give her reason to think on things like science and math and literature, so she thinks about them and ends up the top of her class?”

“Exactly!” Oz looks a bit startled when Xander pulls him sideways into a quick one-armed hug, but he’d gotten it right on the nose! “Good for you! So if you want her to think romantically…”

“…I should probably be more obvious than subtle looks across the school. Or mostly subtle looks. You’re a very tactile person, aren’t you?”

“Got it in one. Or two, I guess. But keeping the Shovel Talk in mind, I’m only letting you in on this part of Willow because I think you might like Willow for her Willow-ness. If anything actually develops between you two, Buffy will have her own Shovel Talk to give, but keep in mind that if you do actually do anything to hurt Willow…”

“…you gave the Shovel Talk first?”

Xander laughed and shook his head. Grinned.

“Naw, Buffy’ll probably get to you first. Buffy, she’ll beat you up; you’ll have bruises in places you didn’t know could bruise. But me? Aside from the little fights that every couple has, if you give Willow reason to really cry over you, I will rip you apart. Make her happy and I’ll probably also be giving her a variation of the Shovel Talk for you, and there’s no need to look surprised, I’m an equal opportunity sort of guy when it comes to giving out affection in case you haven’t noticed,” another side hug is given, “and if it comes to the point where there’s a break-up from lack of attraction or whatever reason, that’s up to you guys. I may be crazy, but I’m not that crazy. But you hurt her…”

Anyone else, and maybe at the first mention of being ripped apart from the locally accepted Crazy would have them running. But while Oz may have gone a little wide-eyed, Xander didn’t think it was a weird sort of Hellmouth Blindness that had the redhead thinking over his words and nodding.

It also said something about him that, when Xander smiled and pulled him into yet another one-armed hug, he didn’t flinch. They both went to their respective classes with friendly smiles and, at least on Xander’s part, a feeling of accomplishment.

He’d finally gotten a name and a face for the redhead/Oz, he’d decided that Oz might be good for Willow (if not good enough for her), had gotten the Shovel Talk out of the way, and all before second period!

When he slid into his seat before the bell, he smiled at Willow—and she flushed.

And it wasn’t her usual blush, no; it was her dire embarrassment blush, with enough shame thrown in to make her ears and neck go red.

She looked away.

Last time he’d seen that happened, it was after she’d won the regional spelling bee in first grade and
got so excited she’d peed herself in front of 500 people plus the parentals.

When he looked to Buffy, she gave him an even look, which meant she at least knew the reason for Willow Shame-barrassment, but that didn’t help him now. Less than 20 minutes ago he’d left her laughing and smiling to give Oz a successful talking to.

What the hell could have happened?!

“You told her?”

So this was what real betrayal felt like—and it was coming from Buffy! The Buffster! A fellow Scooby betraying him to another Scooby!

“I couldn’t not tell her, not when she’s still waiting for you!”

He gaped at her. That was another thing they just didn’t talk about! She’d broken the silence for two unmentionable things! The unfortunate Willow crush and what he said as the Cheshire Cat were two things that were left not talked about!

“You totally could have not told her! I was just checking out that Oz guy, and he can totally understand Xander-speak, so he can totally understand Willow-speak!”

“You—wait, you know Willow’s interested in Oz? You noticed?”

Xander shifted. “Well, no, but it’s good that she’s interested. I just noticed that Oz kept looking at her, and saw that sometimes Wills noticed him back—oh, by the way I gave him the Shovel Talk—Ow! Ow! Ow! Stop hitting me!” She aimed another punch at him but he disappeared to the other side of the bench. She kicked him instead.

“Ow!”

“Xander! You don’t give the Shovel Talk before the relationship! You’re gonna scare him away!”

Xander scoffed. “Yeah, like he’d last more than a week with our crowd if he gets scared away by me. I’m the least scary person of the Scoobies—Besides, he totally wasn’t running! And I told him to actually make it known that he likes her, like tell her, because sometimes you have to actually put it plainly before Willow puts serious thoughts into a subject.”

Buffy raises an eyebrow behind her sunglasses.

“You mean like putting it plainly that you really don’t see Willow that way?”

Xander opens his mouth, closes it, and glares.

“Yeah, see, I put out some hope that maybe the much furrier you may have had it wrong, and maybe you’d somehow wake up one day and see how much Willow likes you—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you’re making it sound like I never noticed and/or didn’t care! I noticed! I cared! And I felt really, really awkward about it, since you and Willow are the best girls I know, but Willow’s pretty much my sister. There’s sibling-y love happening, and it’s happening in the least romantic way possible.”

“Yeah, and I see that, but it’s like you said; Willow has to be told to think about something before she puts serious thought into it. She’s been thinking of you in a romantic way for so long that loving
you in a platonic way hasn’t even occurred to her! I think sparks might fly between her and Oz, so I’ll bring it up with her later, but before she can even start to consider Oz seriously, she has to stop considering you!”

Xander pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and pointedly did not react when Buffy kicked him again.

“Xander!”

“Yeah, I know! I know, it’s just… You couldn’t have brought it up some other way?”

“Look, repeating what Cheshire Xander said serves two purposes,” she tugged one of his wrists free to put it flat on the table between them. “For one, when you were all Cheshire-y, you were kind of a figure of authority—a crazy one, for sure, but I remember you were all confident and knowing things, and you know how Willow is with authority figures.”

Xander put down his other hand and nodded. “Yeah, it was probably Giles bringing up the self defense more than anything that got her to try. But can we both agree that even possessed, I’m not at all a good authority figure, and should never ever be considered one. Ever.” Buffy linked their hands together and gave them a squeeze.

“Yes, and don’t think I don’t know it was you who convinced Giles you two needed it. But the other thing is this,” she held up their linked hands.

“It’s great that you’re all touchy feely now, and let me be the first to say that no one is complaining about an abundance of Xander Hugs, but it isn’t easy for Willow to see you hugging me. Not even when you hug her just as much—not when you even hug Cordelia.”

“I hug other people too.” He’s quick to point out. “I’m equal opportunity affection guy, now.”

“But you’re also much more huggy with us Scooby’s… not that I’m willingly including Cordelia, but she’s helped with Hellmouth disasters in her own, very unique way. And then she goes out and buys shoes…” Buffy shook her head. “But to get back on point, Willow hasn’t been a happy camper when you hug me, because she was still under the impression that you were crushing on me.”

At his look, she rolled her eyes.

“Oh I have no doubt that you actually had a crush on me at some point, but I’m not going to hold the lack of current crushing against you. But Willow didn’t see that it stopped a while ago. That, uh, dance that one time… it probably didn’t help.”

Xander shifted, uncomfortable. The Unmentionable Dance just had to be mentioned… Hey, he was as in tuned with his feelings as the next guy—maybe more—but this was a thing that’s been going on since before Buffy came to Sunnydale. It was much with the discomfort.

“She couldn’t have figured that part out on her own?”

Another eye roll, and Buffy let go of one of his hands to lightly slap him. The abuse he takes from his girls, honestly…

“And how would she have figured it out? You’re all with the physical affection now, and you aren’t any nicer to Angel—”

“With good reason! The guy has the emotional complexity of a depressed brick!”
“And to be fair, you haven’t been acting at all differently… If I didn’t know to look for it, I’d be wondering if you had any lingering feelings for me. But you don’t.”

She tilts her head to catch his eyes, but Xander is resolutely looking at the grain of the table. The table never wanted him to go through emotional challenges. He should be friends with more tables. Or friendly. Spill fewer crumbs, maybe.

“Xander, Willow needs to know that there isn’t anything romantic going on between us, needs to know that it’s not going to happen. With or between any of us.” She shrugged, “I know she’s not like that, but I don’t want Willow having any reason to resent me. And,” Buffy grinned, “as soon as we’re done playing matchmaker for Willow, we can focus on finding you a girl who won’t try to kill you—Xander? Xander don’t run away, we know you better than you know yourself! You can’t escape!”

And, with Buffy’s laughter behind him, Xander had the bad, no good, horrible feeling that she was right.

It meant he still had horribly awkward and ashamed Willow to deal with, to try and make feel better, but Buffy spoke logic. He didn’t like it, but then there were a lot of things that he knew to be truth that he didn’t like.

Planning Buffy’s surprise party takes some doing, what with Willow working hard to get past her shame over her own feelings, and Xander feeling resentful that Buffy had gone and—pardon his expression—let the cat out of the bag with Willow.

He could understand why she did it, and could even see that it was smart, but this Willow-shame and awkwardness was exactly what he was avoiding, with the whole avoiding thing he had going.

There was just a lot of avoidance happening.

Like, for instance, Willow was still trying to avoid talking to Xander, and didn’t say anything about bringing Oz as her date to Buffy’s party, but he got the gist of it from Oz… giving thumbs up should be social suicide in high school, but Oz made it cool when he’d smiled across the yard and done just that.

*Man* he was cool.

Cool enough it was impossible to hate him for it.

*God.* If only he could get annoyed over that.

Xander was manfully avoiding—or, well, ignoring Willow’s internalized horror to try and keep this as normal as possible, and also avoiding thinking of the train wreck he’d made of himself with Cordelia.

It wasn’t like he was offering up anything particularly crazy—and he would know, right? But kissing was a thing they kept doing, and groping, and while he was entirely aware that he wasn’t Cordelia’s usual rich fuddy-duddy boytoy… but apparently even with his new not exactly popularity, or rather something closer to infamy, maybe… yeah, whatever, apparently being seen with him was just too embarrassing. So they were both going to Buffy’s party solo.

Despite the kissing and the…
And the train wreck he’d made of himself…

Also too, too embarrassing.

Really, he wished he could give himself some of his apparently infallible advice.

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Turns out Buffy is all with the belief that Drusilla might not be dead—which was true, but Xander had apparently missed the meeting where it was agreed that a pipe organ and a teensy fire would dust two master vampires. Xander wasn’t all that clear about what made a master vampire, and how that was different from The Master (aside from the whole wrinkly-faced general grossness), but when the pipe organ came down it didn’t fall with a bunch of stake-like pointy bits; it fell with clanging pipes and big flat chunks of wood… and now that he was thinking on it, it wasn’t even really wood; it was drywall.

He didn’t think Vampires could be dusted with drywall.

He says that, instead of coming out with the whole been kidnapped angle of things—because it’s been more than two weeks, and any time he could say anything seemed to get worse and worse timing as time went…

And now, in the middle of school, when the conversation would probably have a lot of yelling and freaking out…

Yeah, just bad timing all around.

He also has no idea how he’d explain that sometimes it seems like he can be more honestly himself around Drusilla and Spike, even with the constant feeling that one day he’ll wake up dead because of it. Since making the deal, Drusilla had done her sleepy-time mojo on him twice, and he was starting to get worried he was getting desensitized to the weirdness of waking up playing bed warmer space heater to two vamps.

Though he thinks he’s starting to get the timing down, late enough that Drusilla doesn’t start wailing, but early enough that she doesn’t do the… he thinks Spike called it a thrall? Something like that.

Willow tries reassuring Buffy, which was all with the good because Buffy was freaking out about Angel more than usual, but he had to say, quite firmly, Spike and Drusilla were around. Drusilla looking all healthy, even, though still insane, and Spike was slowly healing from having one of his legs dislocate (which sounded painful) and the other get… well, either it was sprained or it was broken, but either way Spike didn’t have anything like a cast on, and it wasn’t like he could go to a doctor, but the thing was that only one of his legs was out of commission, and the other was more temporarily out of commission.

Sometimes, when he’s not within smacking-distance, Xander still laughs at that.

*Without a leg to stand on.* Really, if all the blue-eyed advice he’s given out is as sideways in meaning as that, it was a wonder anyone paid him any attention.

But somehow his certain-ness over some things got translated to blue-eyed advice, so he didn’t have to explain himself.

He thinks, for a moment, Giles will bring it up, but he stays silent instead.

Willow has to leave, then, as her ability to handle her shame has been used up. Buffy seems
confident Willow will be okay, though, so Xander goes on ignoring it.

His words don’t exactly help with Buffy’s freak out, but it at least takes some of the uncertainty out of it.

“Could I be having prophetic dreams?” she asks Giles.

His eyebrows go up and everyone looks to Xander for an awkward moment, before refocusing on Giles.

“Oh, prophetic dreams? Um, I, er…”

Buffy shrugs.

“In Slaying 101 three other slayers had them. Diana in 1633, small town in Europe, Xiao Lynn of 1703, somewhere in Asia, and Courtney in 1753 of, um, some small town in Canada?” At Giles’ look, she shrugs. “I think it might’ve been in Ontario? Or Yukon Territories? Somewhere near there, I think.”

Xander grins. “Those two places aren’t really close, Buff. And I think the Look you were getting was due to your experience in History class… you aren’t so good with remembering names and the dates that go with them.”

“What? I don’t really care about Marie Antoinette, but it’s interesting reading about previous Slayers. I may not be that great with the places, but most of these girls come from small towns with weird names.”

Xander nodded, “Which makes you par for the course.”

And now he was on the receiving end of a Look. He shrugged, because it was true. They lived on a Hellmouth called Sunnydale.

“Thanks, Xan. But do you think it might be prophetic? Do you think Drusilla will kill Angel?”

He shrugs. “Well, I’m not saying anything I say is remotely future-seeing, but what stuff I do say, if it comes true it doesn’t happen the way you assume…” he trails off, thinking. “You seeing Drusilla kill Angel, yeah it could mean that she’s going to literally kill him, but it could also mean that Drusilla is going to do something, or something will happen that involves Drusilla that will change Angel. Or maybe it’ll change how you see him, effectively killing the Angel you know. Not actually dead, you know, but not the same brick-faced brooding Angel.”

 “…Xander that might have been the most eloquently insightful thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

He shrugged off Giles’ words. “Eh, this is pretty much all we do in English Class, and it’s easier when you’re crazy enough to see all the possibilities, all the perspectives. And I am certainly crazy enough, for sure the only reason my marks are going up.” He turns back to Buffy. “What else happened in the dream, do you remember?”

“Well you and Wi—I mean, Willow was there at the Bronz, speaking French, and ah…” she blushed. Shrugged. “There might’ve been a cat there?”

“Uh huh.”

“But Xander, there was other weird stuff too, like my mom was there drinking tea, and she asked me if I was sure I was ready and broke a plate, and, and Drusilla wished me a happy birthday, and just,”
she deflated somewhat, “sorry Xander.”

He shrugged, scratched his nose. “At least your subconscious didn’t imagine me as a monkey or something. Though I could be one of those little capuchin monkeys, with a little red coat, and… know what? Never mind. But okay, let’s try looking at that with English Class Symbolism Goggles… Hmm, so there was Willow and Xan-Cat, and Willow was quite literally speaking another language. I’m going to say her speaking French in your dream is either a worry about an upcoming French class, or else your mind acknowledging that sometimes when Willow goes on her kicks it seems like she’s speaking another language.”

“And, er, you as a cat? And Buffy’s mother?” Giles asks.

“If it’s actually prophetic it might mean I get turned into a cat, or I’ll be put into a position to be more Cheshire-y… otherwise I’m guessing Buffy’s still thinking of me less like Xander and more like Cheshire Xander. Which is fair, you know, since I’m,” he twirls one finger at his temple in a universally accepted word substitution. For, you know.

“And as for your mom… well, has she had the future talk with you lately?”

He gets a blank look from Buff. “The… future talk?”

“Yeah, you know, the one that usually crops up either when your grades are brought into question or when you’ve done something your parents think is stupid. ‘What kind of future do you think you’ll have with grades like these? Who do you think will hire a boy who does insert-action-here?’ You know, and so on.” He twirls one hand and rolls his eyes. “You’re another year older, Buff, and that also usually triggers the Future Talk. You may also recognize its other variations, like What Do You Want To Do When You Grow Up? and Think of your Future, and Blah, Blah, Future, Blah, Career, Blah, Blah, Yeah, many names. It gets around. Goes around. Comes around again, and again.”

Buffy frowned at her hands. “Well, not recently, but it’s just been kind of busy…”

Xander shrugs and checks the clock. “Well, my one last bit of insight to your subconscious is Drusilla wishing you a happy birthday. You’re freaked out by Drusilla, and she was the one with the well wishing, so maybe you’re worried about being another year older. Fair; the future’s a scary place, and I’m certainly not ready to be there.” He stood and offers a smile.

“And if we’re going the prophetic route, then something’ll be happening on your birthday, but I thought we were all getting ready for that possibility already, so no worries. I’ll bring the stakes, you provide the steaks, eh Buff? Or vice versa; I’ve seen your Home Ec grades.”

He turns to Ms. Calendar, and feels a Blue-eyed moment coming on. He’s gotten better at recognizing the brain-shiver ticklish sensation.

“Your heritage and your mission will be the cause of your death. Your Betrayal is not one to make lightly. Wow that’s morbid, no wonder you’ve been all leery of me!”

“Xander!”

Part of Buffy’s dream comes true, though it isn’t the Future Talk. It’s the No You Can’t Drive Talk. He feels for her, but at the same time Xander has the feeling that Buffy’s Slayer hyper vigilance might not be the best thing to bring on the road.
Seeing tiny movements while on the road? Great. Reacting to those tiny movements at high speeds… not so great.

She’s also late to her own birthday party, which is so not the plan, so Xander goes out to find her.

He moves just out of sight of Oz because so far he’s still Out Of The Know, and shakes out his arms and legs.

He’s been practicing, at least at home, with his disappearing act… Sometimes it works, sometimes not, so it’s a pleasant surprise that he poofs to In Between when he goes all loose-limbed and fills his mind with Wonderland and Buffy.

He appears next to Ms. Calendar’s car, which is a surprise, parked outside of the building hosting the Surprise Party, which is a pleasant surprise, and Buffy is fighting vampires—less of a surprise. Much, much less of a surprise.

“Buffy look out!”

A vampire picks her up despite his warning, throws her into a wall hard enough that she might actually get a bruise. He winces.

She rolls to a stand and kicks, punches, and catches the stake Xander throws her just in time for both to go through the darkened window—right into the surprise party.

Xander looks into the opening just in time to see Buffy dust the vamp… looks past her to see Oz wide eyed and pale—or no, that’s mostly the lighting. The lighting made everyone look extra pale.

Cordelia jumped up in the back.

“Surprise!”

“That pretty much sums it up.”

Xander laughs and means to jump down through the opening Buffy conveniently made, but he’s apparently loose enough that instead of landing on broken glass he poofs to behind Willow and witty, witty Oz, and puts his arms around them.

Oz startled again at Xander’s appearing act, which had Xander laughing through Angel and Giles filling in Buffy.

Willow turned to Oz.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah… hey, did everybody see that guy just turn to dust?”

“Oh, um, sort of…?”

Xander grins down at him. Both he and Willow are a very convenient height to put his arms around; it was great. Willow and Oz could just be tiny and smart and huggable together, and it’d turn out great.

“Yeah, you mean right after Buffy crashed her own party? Vampires are real. A lot of ‘em liv in Sunnydale.”

Willow twisted her hands together. “I know it’s hard to accept at first…”
Oz looks Xander up and down, at the arm thrown about his shoulders, and raises an eyebrow.

“Actually, it explains a lot. And you are…?”

Xander raises his eyebrows and smiles his goofiest smile.

“Alejandro Lavelle Harris, nice ta meet’cha.”

A clue? Nope, no clue here.

“Can somebody help me with this?”

Ms. Calendar was hauling in a big, oddly shaped crate, and Xander removed himself from Oz and Willow to help her haul it in—she flinched away from him. It was a tiny, minute gesture, but still. Flinching was not cool.

He might have advised her on her death, but still.

Angel helped him put the crate on a cleared table, and then they just looked at it for a moment.

The thing might’ve been rectangular if the ends weren’t sort of pointed, and if the whole thing didn’t have a slight curve to it.

A knock came at the door.

Weirdly, it was a vampire. Or rather, extra weirdly, as this was definitely the strangest birthday party Xander had ever been to.

Including that time his Uncle Max had spiked the wrong punch bowl

He looked at the people in the room nervously, something clutched in his hands.

“I, uh, we were supposed to get that to the Slayer, a-along with this,” he gulped, “f-from Master Spike…” he held out a large envelope.

Buffy started towards him, stake in hand, and the guy flung the letter into the room before turning and running away.

She lowered the stake and frowned at the envelope.

“Didn’t know vampires had a delivery service.”

She shrugged and slid a finger through one of the letters openings, ripping through the seal.

Xander had a bad feeling about this.

She frowned when she started reading, but slowly, ever so slowly, her eyebrows rose.

“Um, Buffy? I take it it’s too much to hope that’s a birthday card?”

“It’s… an arm. Of a demon called the Judge.”

She kept reading. Angel swore.

“Well, I guess that’s the Hellmouth answer to, ‘What do you give the slayer who has everything?’ Demon arm. So, uh, anything else in that note? Buff?”
For another minute she kept reading, and then her eyes flicked up to his.

“So… you wanna tell me anything, Xander?”

He smiled. Hoped dearly that her mild tone meant that maybe whatever Spike had written hadn’t been all that bad.

“Um, I’ve been having tea with interesting people?”

She nodded once.

“Aaand the reason those interesting people are Spike and Drusilla…?”

His smile widened and he laughed nervously.

“You know, I was going to tell you guys immediately, but then demon eggs happened—and I’ll actually explain everything after we deal with the demon arm, yes? ‘Cause if a demon gets a name like the Judge, hahaha…”

He made his eyes go wide, and he knew his puppydog look wasn’t even remotely in the same power range as Buffy’s, but thankfully even with everyone wanting to know what exactly Buffy meant, she simply nodded and folded the note into her pocket.

“Buffy, you must let me see what was on that note-”

“What do you mean Spike and Drusilla-?”

“Why is Spike giving you-?”

“Everyone shut up for a minute! The birthday girl has spoken!”

She gave everyone a pointed look, and when they stayed quiet she smiled. “Okay, you can all read the note after we deal with the nasty demon arm. In short, for reasons I’m not getting into right now, Spike gave us the Judge’s arm as a sign of good faith, and promises he’ll find a way to kill me later, directly rather than with a something-something of a demon.”

“A something-something of a demon?” Somehow Angel sounded like he doubted that was what Spike had written.

Buffy smiled brightly.

“Something British and something British and probably swear-wordy.”

“And you were all political and mature for all of two minutes…”

She smiled even brighter. It was a bit frightening.

“Yep, and as the person I was being all poetical and mature for…” she trailed off.

For not saying anything more, she sure said a lot in that silence. Xander nodded, and mimed zipping his mouth shut.

“Great! So, the Judge. Anyone want to fill me in on what we’re dealing with—or not dealing with, for a change?”

Between Angel and Giles they painted a morbid picture of an unstoppable demon (except where it
got stopped through thorough dismemberment) that separated the righteous from the evil, and smote the righteous. Apparently his touch could vaporize any with a touch of goodness and humanity within them, and when Buffy asked what weapon could be used against the Judge…

“Well, I’d need to consult my texts to confirm, but I do believe they went something along the lines of, ‘No weapon forged can kill him’…” Giles shook his head. “Well, supposing Spike has sent us the Judge’s arm, and supposing he hasn’t already—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second,” Xander interrupted. “No weapon forged can kill him… and this guy hasn’t been around since before Deadboy’s time? So this is before modern warfare things like guns and flamethrowers and, and bomb type things like C4, right? I’m not saying we should use C4, because honestly I think I’m more afraid of that stuff than anything else, but if all the kings horses and all the kings men manage to put Judgy together again…” he spreads his hands, “there’s totally a military base we could steal guns from. I remember enough of being the loose-screw Lieutenant… well, aside form the recoil, learning to shoot a machine gun can’t be much harder for Buffy to learn than a crossbow. Just saying, the human race has come a long way from sharpened rocks and sticks.” He gives a pointed glance to Angel. “Not to say that pointed sticks haven’t been useful, but if the guy was around before Deadboy…”

“I’m not that old, Xander.”

“Uhuh. Right. But we still don’t know exactly when this guy was around, so all we got is dusty books and the word ‘forged’. Forged weapons probably mean swords and stuff, right? Well aside from a very niche community, weapons aren’t exactly forged anymore. They’re just made. Built. Sometimes on a conveyer belt.”

“This is all assuming that this is indeed the Judge’s arm.”

Buffy shrugged, and moved around Giles to the box.

“Well, only one way to find out. Look, there’s a latch, and…”

It was Giles and Angel who pried the demon arms grip off her neck. Once she coughed and caught her breath, Buffy looked more annoyed than damaged.

“And this is supposed to be a good faith gift? I wouldn’t have complained if he sent some designer shoes, honest.”

“So I guess this thing is real—unless there are other demons who still have control over their limbs autonomous to the rest of their completely separate self?”

“Well, Xander you… kind of… um…”

Willow trailed off, flushing, and didn’t seem to notice her hand drifting to her throat.

“Um, I mean good job using the word of the week? Gold star?”

Xander was about to explain that he didn’t have autonomous control of anything when he lost body parts to In Between—it wasn’t like his head was gone, it was still attached even if it happened to be between several levels of existence! —when Giles spoke up.

“We need to get this out of town.”

“Angel.”
“What?” Buffy sounds surprised, almost as much as Xander feels. He’d kind of forgotten that Ms. Calendar was around.

“You have to do it, you’re the only one who can protect this thing.”

“What about me?”

“What, you’re gonna skip town for a few months?”

“Months?”

“She’s right, I gotta get this to the remotest region possible.” Oh, and now Deadboy was in full on Brood And Take Responsibility mode. Ms. Calendar had put it in his head, and now…

“B-but that’s not months.”

“I can catch a cargo ship to Asia…” And Deadboy isn’t listening. Xander shakes his head and wonders when he got to be the sensible one. Something bad had to happen soon, even if it wasn’t this demon arm thing, if only to even things out in the greater universe.

“Okay, can we stop with the immediate jumps to doom and gloom? I realize I’m not exactly the best person to be saying this, but wow this is two for two! In under an hour!”

“Yes! Exactly!” Buffy was quick to jump in. “We can do other stuff, like, like whatever Xander probably has in mind…?” She looked at him, hopeful.

Xander scowled.

“Did we not agree that I should never be the responsible one?” He shook his head and wished for some consistency in his future. It’s like no agreement, spoken or unspoken, was sacred anymore. “Okay, whatever, but I just went over the whole possibility of using guns and whatever—and an arm is much smaller than a whole body, so what about dissolving it in acid or something? And hey, you said the Judge has to have all his bits in one place to get back in one piece?”

Giles adjusted his glasses, looking perturbed, but nodded. “Well, yes. The Judge must be whole before he can rise again.” Just to make sure there wasn’t any miscommunication, Xander raised his eyebrows at Angel, too.

Deadboy shrugged. “That’s what I heard. And that’s why we have to get this arm away now.”

Xander rolled his eyes and wiggled his fingers.

“Okay, but one thing we know for sure is that the Judge can be cut up to pieces, so why don’t we…”

He leaves it hanging, waiting for someone to pick up the thread so he didn’t have to finish. Because there were adults in the room! He shouldn’t have to be the logical one!

Willow perked up.

“Oh! We could let you bring it to that between place your head goes sometimes!”

“Ye—no, what? That was not what I was saying. What I was going to say was—”

“Cut up the arm so there’s more pieces?” Oz frowned for a moment at his own words, and yeah, Xander could sympathize. But if Oz wanted to stay In The Know, he’d have to get used to suggesting weird things like the further dismemberment of a demon arm.
Xander snapped his fingers and pointed finger guns at Oz.

“Exactly! Gold star for that, Willow, seriously where did that suggestion come from?”

She pursed her lips and wiggled her fingers at him.

“I thought that’s what we were using so we could talk about your crazy in public. Remember? When you go poof,” she wiggled her fingers again, and then tapped a finger at her temple, “and when you go blue-eyed.”

“I think it’s possible.” Giles was nodding, the fingers of one hand at his chin. He looked at Xander, still nodding.

“Those with evaporation skills are few and far between due to the particular, uh, mindset needed, and you’ve mentioned that in order to evaporate you go, uh, somewhere else, between, yes?”

“Evaporation skills? Is that what Xander does?”

Xander forgot that Oz wasn’t there for Halloween… he nodded.

“Apparently. Did you go outside last Halloween? When everyone went a little crazy? Well there was some serious mojo going down where everyone who got their costumes from this one shop turned into their costume.”

“And Xander here went a little extra crazy,” Buffy picked up the story, “seeing as he dressed up like the Cheshire Cat.”

“Only the Cheshire Cat exists in a lot of parallel universes, all at once, and because he—the cat—is used to being many places at once, he can do this thing he called evaporating where he disappears from one place and appears in another. But since there isn’t a real Cheshire Cat in our universe, bits of the Cheshire Cat started staying in this universe once he was introduced…” Willow trailed off.

“The more of the Cheshire Cat stayed in me the longer he was around, only I—he was more interested in Wonderland, and is like entirely a chaotic neutral kind of character, so he put on another costume from the shop—and know what? That’s just, no, you don’t, no. Let’s not talk about that thing right now. Thing is, he wasn’t around long enough to overwrite the Xander you all know and love, but enough of him stuck around that now I hug a lot, sometimes I disappear, sometimes bits of me disappear, and sometimes I, you know.” He tapped his temple.

Willow twisted her fingers in the bottom of her shirt and bit her lip. “I know it’s a bit confusing, and doesn’t make all that much sense…”

Oz shook his head.

“Oh, no. Totally makes sense. It’s like if every universe is a pond, and the Cheshire Cat is a big rock that’s gotten all broken up into equal pieces that all fit back together. Halloween chucked one piece into our pond, and even though you fished it out before it hit the bottom of the lake, a couple bits and pieces of the rock got chipped off; the big piece is gone, but a few corners are still sticking around.”

“What.” Buffy didn’t phrase it as a question.

Willow couldn’t even articulate that much and only opened and closed her mouth. Giles, Angel, and Ms. Calendar didn’t seem to have anything to say about that. Cordelia was eating cake. She licked icing from her lip.
Xander was a bit distracted. Her tongue was really pink…

Oz shrugged.

“And parallel universes are interesting. As much as you might think alternative universes would be so totally different from our own, it makes sense that some are just like our universe, but with a few key differences. Your—you called them blue-eyed moments?—are probably insights into what could happen, based on what did happen in another universe. Only instead of knowing exactly what’s going to happen, you end up giving out little bits of advice based on a possibility of foreknowledge. It’s not foreknowledge the way we recognize it, it’s just… recognizing the odds. It’s like Math for the universe.”

Giles took off his glasses to clean them, a muttered “unbelievable,” his only comment on that amazing bit of insight.

Giles shakes his head and returns his glasses to his face.

“The, uh, mechanics of Xander’s blue-eyed moments aside, I think we should focus on if Xander might be able to hide the arm, um…”

“In Between?”

Giles’ mouth twitched. It wasn’t a happy twitch.

“Do you actually call it that?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Not currently. You said you’ve been practicing—can you manage to leave the arm in your, um, between places?”

“See? Hard to give it a name that isn’t In Between. It’s the space between two places. It’s In Between.”

“You still haven’t explained that.” Buffy cuts in. “Like, at all. You tried before, I remember, but I still don’t get it.”

“Well it’s hard to explain! Look, you’ve got point A and you’ve got point B,” he holds his hands approximately a foot apart, one hand open, one hand closed. “To get from Point A,” he shakes his fist, “To point B,” he wiggles his fingers, “and most people have to travel the distance. In Between… In Between is like a shortcut. But like one only you can see and get to.”

It takes a moment to loosen his shoulders and get in that particular headspace, but he gets there. Then… then he shows off a little. But only a little.

“So you guys get to Point B this way,” He moves his arm to put his palm over his fist, then back, “While I do this.”

The group jumps a little when just Xander’s hand appears over his fist, the dark greyness at his wrist where his hand was supposed to be.

Giles goes for his glasses, changes his mind and clears his throat instead when Xander got his hands back to where they were supposed to be. Xander can’t help grinning; he wasn’t entirely sure that’d work.
“That, um, t-that still doesn’t…”

Xander rakes a hand through his hair and rolls his eyes.

“Oh my god it’s like blinking, okay? You can’t see yourself do it but you know that you do, and even though you can’t see where you are you’ve got confidence that you’re right where you were before you blinked—only sometimes I’m somewhere else. My god Angel could’ve caught that cargo ship to Asia by now. Do we really have to talk about this while there’s a grabby demon arm in a box? What is it exactly you want me to try to do; because all I’m getting is that you want me to do a thing. What is the thing?”

“We want to know if it’s possible for you to bring the Judge’s arm In Between, and leave it there. Or,” Angel quirks his eyebrows, “do we need to break up the arm into more pieces so I can hide them?”

Xander’d get annoyed at his tone, but at least he’d somewhat admitted that his choppy-choppy idea was a good one. Ms. Calendar shook her head.

“No, it’s too risky. No offence Xander, but what if you drop it somewhere, or, or what if someone else figures out how to evaporate and goes In Between to get the arm… No. Angel has to go.”

“Oh my god no he doesn’t. I’ve lost both my watch and my shoelaces In Between, so I can definitely lose an arm—a demon arm, I mean. And there’s an easy way to check that it stays In Between.”

Instead of looking relieved or assured at Xander’s wildly out of character defense of Why Angel Doesn’t Have To Leave, he just looks more broody and worried. Buffy and Willow on the other hand, were frowning and mouthed, shoelaces?

Like that was the thing to focus on.

“But what about someone else finding their way In Between? No, she’s right, it’s too—”

Xander can’t believe it.

“Is no one listening? Going In Between point A and point B is like a shortcut, but it’s only ever a shortcut between Point A and Point B. Not B to C, or C to A, or even B to A.” He walks over to the wonky shaped box and heaves it into his arms with a grunt. “Unf, and what is the likelihood that someone will be going In Between from this point A right here, exactly where I am, to, ungh,” he readjusts his grip because the thing is actually really freaking heavy when he’s carrying it on his own, for a dismembered arm, and reappears on the other side of the room.

“Whew, to point B, right here, where I’m st…” he trails off at the wide-eyed looks he’s getting. Looks at the whole lot of nothing in his arms.

“Hey, it worked!”

“Xander! What did you do with it?”

He gives Ms. Calendar a long look. He’d only been gone a second, it wasn’t like he could go anywhere else in that time.

“I lost it In Between.”

“Xander!”
“What? I couldn’t get it back if I wanted to, so stop yelling at me!” He has a thought, and grins at Ms. Calendar, moves to the cake table to get his own slice. Cordelia can’t have all the cake. Only, like, half.

For someone always watching her weight, she sure could pack it in.

He very carefully didn’t think about how attractive that made her.

“Know what? No. You go stand where I was. Exactly where I was. Exactly where my feet were and everything.” He pulls a plate towards himself and shoves a forkful of cake in his mouth. “Really, can someone who knows math and percentages and whatever tell me how likely it is that anyone could find the exact point where I was standing with the box, and then figure out the likelihood that they’d be able to get from that point to wherever I appeared at over there. Exactly where I poofed to, I mean.”

Giles opened his mouth, and then seemed to reconsider. He shifts, shrugs, starts…

“Well…”

He doesn’t finish.

“It’s a low chance.” Oz said.

“A very, very low chance,” Willow agreed.

“Uh, what they said. So… no demon arm means Angel doesn’t have to go anywhere? The Judge is a non-issue kind of issue…?” Buffy sounds hopeful. Xander nods and hopes the rest of Buffy’s birthday celebration can move onto non-Hellmouthy things. Like more cake.

“For good, sounds like.”

Angel actually manages to sound more relieved than brooding, so Xander takes another bite of cake instead of, well. He scrunches his nose at the thought, because anyone else, anyone else not a vampire, and Xander would be okay with verbally taking a bite out of them. But the thought…

In relation to vampires? Ugh.

“Great!” Buffy clapped her hands together, and then fished something out of her pocket, turning to Xander and—oh.

“So Xander, want to explain why Spike thinks he needs to get me a gift for ‘letting’ you have tea with Drusilla?” She smooth’s out the note, “since, and I quote, ‘he’s been a good sport, and I’m feeling generous.’”

Xander scratched the back of his head and was suddenly less hungry for cake.

“Um, because I have?”

The whole explanation doesn’t take as long as he’d feared—in part due to Buffy ah-ah-ing anyone interrupting. He hadn’t realized that doing that ever worked in real life, but then it probably didn’t work for anyone who wasn’t short, attractive, blonde, and crazy levels of strong.

He distantly wonders when he and the rest of the Scooby’s had gotten comfortable with the c-word, since for a long while after Halloween it was word-ona non grata. Like persona non grata, but a
But while the situation was a bit complicated morally and emotionally, what with Spike and Drusilla being more than a little unhinged in the dangerous way, it really wasn’t hard to put in simple terms.

Drusilla was a little weirdly fixated, and wanted to have tea parties.

Xander was actually okay with a couple of tea parties.

Xander had a deal of sorts with Spike over how much time he can actually spend on tea parties, which included no kidnapping (on Spike’s part) and no hideout revealing (on Xander’s part), and the mutual understanding that Xander would poof away if Spike or Drusilla or any other vampire tried to kill him—

And it was more than a little amazing that Buffy and Willow were more worried about his safety than they were about regular tea parties with Drusilla.

They do ask the extremely uncomfortable (but understandable) question about why Xander is okay with tea parties with the extra crazy vampire… and he feels more than a little guilty when he shrugs and says, “It’s nice talking crazy-talk with someone who can crazy-talk back.”

Willow looks hurt, and Buffy more than a little frustrated, but it’s Cordelia who manages to put it plainly.

“Ugh, you’re acting like you haven’t noticed that everyone gets weirded out by Xander. Maybe not always, true, but it’s like ugh, why else would I spend any time with you freaks? It’s not like I want to be around freaky demon arms and have vampires ruin one of my favourite dancing outfits, but if I tried talking about this stuff to anyone else my reputation would be as bad as yours. Besides,” she sniffs, “it’s not like he’s dating her.”

She says it flippantly, but something in the shape of her mouth, in the tilt of her head, the warning in her eyes, something had Xander hurriedly shaking his head.

“Nope, no, not at all. No dating happening. At all. It’s just nice letting the unapologetic crazy out around someone who’s also unapologetically crazy—”

Willows eyes go wide.

“We’re not letting you let your crazy out?”

“What? No, no, nonono, now you’re the one who’s speaking crazy—C’mon, am I suddenly speaki—wait, that’s exactly it. It’s like a language. I can speak fluent crazy, but you guys only know a bit, see? It’s not like Crazy is the only thing I speak, so it’s not a problem, but it’s nice talking to someone who is also fluent in crazy. See?”

Xander looked around, hopeful, because he was running out of similes or whatever, and while it was good that there wasn’t any talk of Xander going behind anyone’s back, this should not be a Someone’s At Fault sort of conversation either.

“Seriously, anyone? Or have I slipped back into fluent crazy-talk?”

Instead of answering verbally, Willow pulled him into a hug, and oh my god he was so ready for stressful conversations to be over with for the night.

He loved Buffy, but he really hoped her next birthday wouldn’t top this one.
He’d be perfectly happy with sub-par stress situations.

Willow gave him one last squeeze before stepping back slightly to give him a small grin.

“So. Tea parties. Are they better or worse than the ones with the Mad Hatter—or, does the Cheshire Cat drink tea with the Mad Hatter? Does he drink tea at all?” She frowns. “Maybe I should try reading that book again…”

“I should probably make time to read the book at all, in between Slayer 101,” Buffy quips.

And that, more than anything, made him feel 100% all right. Buffy was okay, Angel was shaking his head but Xander didn’t actually care about Deadboy’s approval, both Cordelia and Oz look more bemused than anything, and while Giles and Ms. Calendar were both a little blank faced, the utter lack of Willow’s shame-barrassment from earlier was just…

“Get out.”

Xander blinked when he realized Giles was talking to him. “What?”

“Get out. We cannot…” Giles shook his head and took a deep breath. “I cannot allow Buffy risk her life associating with a supposed friend who, who has tea with the enemy. Or do I have to remind you that Spike has claimed the lives of two Slayers already, and is interested in making Buffy his third?”

Xander gaped. Giles shook his head.

“I should have known… You’ve been remarkably helpful since Halloween, but it’s obvious your insanity has degraded you past the point of trustworthiness. Simply too dangerous to associate with.”

Xander slowly shook his head, held up his hands to forestall any more crazy talk.

“Whoa, I don’t know what it means in the UK, but here having tea with someone means having a hot drink, not conspiring to kill one of your best friends. And I’ve been helpful? What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

Buffy shook her head, looking between Giles and him. “Xander, you’ve been more thinkful helpful, you and Willow have been in the thick of things every step of the way. Giles, what are you talking about? Xander isn’t going anywhere.”

“Yeah,” nodded Willow, “and Xander may be a little crazy, but to question his loyalty? I mean loyalty is one of Xander’s defining traits, I-I mean he’s always been there when there’s trouble, and he always will be there when we need him.” She looked down at her hands. “I don’t… I mean I don’t really get the tea thing, but it sounds like it might be good for him. But to say he’d betray us…”

Xander appreciated the support from Buffy and Willow, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Giles. The longer he stared, the more obvious it became that this wasn’t some twisted joke; Giles actually thought… he wanted Xander to leave because…

Xander blew out a breath, slowly, because there was a lot of foreign pressure in his chest happening, kind of like being angry, but worse, and he just… He just had to keep breathing, in two three, out two three, in two three, out…

It wasn’t that he had no words, because oh did he have words. They were a slow build in his throat, a building pressure just waiting to be set loose… He had words that would rip Giles to pieces; he had words that’d, that’d burn their way through him until he’d never forget them. Because when you spend that much time in the library, yeah you find out a lot about the librarian.
The pressure kept building.

Giles thought he’d, he’d what. That he was a danger, that he’d put his girls in, that he’d risk them and…

A hand at his elbow almost made him jump, but he was wound too tightly with tension to move much.

“Xander? You need to take deep breaths, just like when we were kids.”

Xander smiled thinly and jerked a nod. Unclenched his jaw. Felt Oz move up at his other side, a quiet support. He wanted to laugh, because what a day it must be for Oz. Vampires are real and just look at the drama behind the scenes with the Scoobies. Lots and lots of drama.

“I know, use your words not your body? Yeah I remember. Only words aren’t a good thing right now.”

Because he was feeling angry and spiteful because of it, and it was with great restrain that more words don’t follow. Because words are not a good thing right now.

Not a good thing at all, and he was already looking—glaring, really—a Giles, but he felt himself reorient himself anyway, and he had a half moment to be glad he could feel his blue-eyed moments now, had been proud enough that he’d planned to tell Giles about it later…—He opened his mouth.

“Be warned watcher, bet-mphl,” he clamped his hands over his mouth, stuck his knuckles in when his mouth kept going without his say so, and saw the alarmed surprise on Giles’ face when he realized what Xander was doing. Yeah, that’s right, he wasn’t going to let out the viscous words pour from his mouth and burn all his bridges, but he wasn’t above being petty.

His fingers get gnawed a bit, and his index and ring finger are still a bit sore from when they were broken, but spite has never tasted so sweet. And it wasn’t even due to the cake icing on his fingers.

The words stopped, and Xander lowered his hands, wiping his mouth with the edge of his sleeve. The words he’d muffled burned in his mind, and he knew he’d tell Giles the words later because they needed to be heard, but for now… For now, Giles gaped.

“Xander!”

He shook his head, not looking at Buffy. Now it was time for words.

"No, if Giles is going to have a problem with my insanity, if he really thinks it's too much trouble to bother having me around, if he thinks it makes me too dangerous, disloyal, then he doesn't very well need ME to tell him anything, ABOUT anything, now does he?” His tone turned mocking, “I mean never mind the fact that I've only recently figured out when I'm even having the bouts of future-crazy, since I can't see my own eyes, but no, no, I'm obviously out of it, and aware of it enough to conspire with vampires looking to murder one of my best friends. Clearly crazy translates to evil. I mean really, isn't it obvious?” And, because he can't help himself, he continues.

“It’s just like all vampires are evil, and Slayers aren’t supposed to have any friends or a life, and Watchers aren’t the sort to summon demons to get high.” He bites his tongue to hold back more words, feels a bit bad for bringing Angel into this, for reminding Buffy that she’s breaking the Slayer mold, and even a bit for bringing up Giles’ spotty past.

At Buffy's worried but also blank look, and Willow looking confused, Xander glared at Giles. "Wow Giles, you must be the seer type guy, since no one else seems to get it. I mean, I didn't know I
was evil and, whew, way to cut me off before I found a crazy way to kill everyone."

"Now see here," Giles took off his stupid glasses to clean them, and a hand was placed between his shoulder blades. Bigger than either Willow or Oz could manage, or Cordelia, and it burned him to realize it was Angel offering support. It was Angel on his side against Giles.

It was too much of a change.

He couldn’t take it.

"Wonderland makes more sense!"

And he disappeared to the In Between.

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He sticks around, because it’s hard to feel anything but happy floating In Between.

Also because, after somewhat deliberately leaving something behind the In Between, he’s curious if his intended destination can be In Between.

It can.

The perspective was different, but similar to having his head gone.

The horrible pressure in his chest was gone, too, and he was calm enough to realize that that had actually been anger—but the sort Xander never got to.

When he was usually angry he snarked and sniped and made fun of whoever was making him angry, or he used some other form of wit to get back at them…

Jesse’s mom had taken him aside when they’d all been kids, back when vampires were only Halloween costumes, and he wouldn’t hear about the Cheshire Cat for another two years, and told him the secret of not getting sent to the principals office.

Breathing exercise.

Use your words, not your body.

If that doesn’t work, leave.

But in this instance he’d actually shouted, and not in a watch-out-there’s-danger sort of way, and then had to leave… but not, because he couldn’t just leave. He had to calm down, sure, but they’d only just gotten rid of a demonic arm, like hell he’d be leaving his girls alone!

So he’d left and stayed in the only way he logically could, and went In Between. He wasn’t technically still in the room, but he hadn’t quite made it away to anywhere else, either.

Buffy let out a breath.

“Wow.”

Then she shook her head.

“No, not—or, yes wow, but bad Giles! Bad, bad Giles! What were you thinking?”
“What was I—he is putting you in danger! As your Watcher I cannot allow it!”

“What danger? Did you entirely block out what just happened?”

“I certainly didn’t miss Xander’s temper tantrum—”

“Oh my god, Giles! If Xander had worked with Spike and Drusilla to take me down, would Spike have sent a sort of good will gift? You and Angel and Ms. Calendar got all wiggy at the very mention of the Judge, so why would Spike give up the arm of Judge Doom and Destruction?”

“Almost like Spike was giving us a helping hand.” At the looks that got her, Willow shrugged and smiled, even if it was a bit strained. “What, Xander’s the only one allowed to make stupid jokes? Besides, he’s not around right now to make them.”

“Willow’s right. I may be new to all this, and I don’t know who Spike is, but giving away the arm of a deadly demon guy doesn’t seem like something you do to get maximum doom and gloom…” Oz shrugs, smiles at Willow. “Unless this Judge guy was… too much of a handful for Spike?”

Xander laughs in the silence of In Between. The more he saw of them together, the better he felt about their chances.

He might not have a body to feel things like anger in, but somehow their combined adorableness turned his incorporeal insides to goo.

“Bad jokes aside, there are two things we need to get over—or, three, because Xander and Drusilla? It’s actually weird how understandable that friendship could possibly be.” Buffy scrunched her nose. “Maybe. But thing one is still Giles coming down with a bad case of the stupid, and thing two is me wondering since when does Xander go quiet when he’s angry?”

Willow shrugged. “Xander’s never really gotten properly angry—annoyed, sure, but he doesn’t know what to do with himself when he starts to get worked up past that.

When we were kids, I knew Xander could be serious, but he got teased because he was goofy.” She shrugged. “And he got so angry, but his parents always got upset if he was loud, so he was never the one to start yelling.” She shrugged again. “So he got back at them other ways. And then Mrs. McNally, Jesse’s Mom, she had a talk with all of us about what to do when we got angry, but we all knew she was telling Xander.”

Buffy tilted her head, but it was Angel who asked. “What’d she say? Xander’s not exactly a quiet, angry kid…”

Willow smiled a little sadly, a little worriedly, and Xander wondered if she was feeling as bad as he did that Mrs. McNally didn’t know what happened to Jesse. That he wasn’t just ‘missing’.

“She taught us breathing exercises, and told us to use our words instead of our fists.”

Buffy smiled at that. “So that’s how we got Xander.”

Oz nodded. “Makes sense.” At Willow’s curious look, he shrugged. “You don’t really notice it, but Xander’s actually a pretty big guy. If he wanted to, he could do some damage.”

Giles shook his head. “Fascinating as this is, you’re all willfully ignoring the part where Xander has been sitting down for
tea with William the Bloody and his Mad Sire Drusilla!”

Willow, shock of all shocks, rolled her eyes. It was only a little thing, nowhere near the epic eye rolls that he and Buffy could get up to (never mind what Cordelia could manage), but she was rolling her eyes at Giles.

“He has tea with Drusilla, and I don’t like it but she does offer up one thing to him we can’t.”

“And what could that possibly be?”

“She’s crazy. Like Xander said. A different kind of crazy than Xander, but you know we sometimes don’t react well when he says crazy stuff even when we know what we know… I don’t think he gets anything from Spike, but it must be a relief to say whatever he wants and have his crazy understood.”

Angel nodded. “He probably gets that from Spike, too.” He grimaced, “Part of the reason I kept him around before… well, was because he understood Drusilla enough to make her visions useful, even on her especially bad days. Besides,” he gives Willow an even look, “most of what he says sounds less crazy, more unnecessarily poetic. Like how most of his ‘advice’ is spoken in riddles.”

He shakes his head and smiles when Buffy slips her hand into his.

“He just has an interesting perspective, Giles. He—”

But Xander had heard enough, and didn’t want to hear any more of Angel defending him to Giles.

He was so, so relieved that Buff and Wills didn’t think he was conspiring against them, or, or trying to sneak behind their backs or something… because despite that fact that it took so long to actually tell them about the tea thing, it was never his intention to keep quiet about it.

There just wasn’t ever a good time, not between slayage and demons and vampires and schoolwork on top of all that.

But Giles…

He knew he’d tell him exactly what he’d muffled when he’d gone all blue eyed, because it was important, it was an important thing, but still it hurt that Giles thought he could be evil.

That he could be Evil.

Really, Xander would be the worst evil villain in the history of ever. Of this, he was sure.

He sighs when he reappears, puzzled when Drusilla is right in front of him. He’d been aiming for his room, in his house, for some quality time with his country music, so what was he…?

“Shh, shh, don’t be sad Kitten, Mummy’s here,” she cooed, and held his face between her hands. It said something about how tired he was that he didn’t flinch away, and he didn’t just mean emotionally.

He shook his head and blinked at the room—his room. He did make it to his room.

How the hell was Drusilla in his room?

It was actually really weird seeing Gothic Princess Drusilla in his Very Much Teenage Boy bedroom.
“How did you…” he cut himself off with a yawn, and did flinch back when Drusilla poked her finger in his mouth. Jesse used to do the same thing with his old cat.

Now Xander understood why she’d always run away afterwards.

Her finger followed but thankfully kept out of his mouth, only pressing flat against his lips when he goes to speak.

Her other hand goes to run fingernails through his hair—he’d be disturbed at how much Drusilla was into petting him, but it was hard to keep up that sort of feeling when it happens so often. He’d tried to explain to her last week that he wasn’t actually a kitten, since the note (and Greg the gender-confused cat) apparently didn’t help, but all that had gotten him was an early night when Drusilla did her sleepy-time mojo on him.

He yawned again, and wondered if she’d done mojo along the same lines to his parents to get an invite, but before he could even start to get alarmed at that, he gets entirely distracted by Drusilla’s eyes, dark like In Between, and…

---

He jerked awake with a small gasp, disoriented. He was in the fluffy, lace-covered bed in Spike and Drusilla’s lair, somehow… He remembered Drusilla inexplicably in his room, and figured she’d somehow gotten him out of his house.

But that wasn’t what woke him up. It was still a few hours to daylight.

“It’s been snapped open,” he gasps, and the shivery feeling tells him he’s gone blue-eyed. But it’s not to anyone in particular. So what…?

Spike grumbled somewhere on his left, and on his right Drusilla was sitting up. In the candlelight her smile was wide. Rapturous.

“The nasty spark is gone.”

“The cage wide open,” he agrees, and then sneezes. Sneezes again.

And apparently that’s all the wakefulness he’s got in him, because he’s back to yawning.

His eyes get heavy again, and he only half registers Spike asking Drusilla… something before he’s back to sleep.

“Daddy is coming home.”

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Chapter End Notes

Back from camping! Also finished Camp Nano! And sorry this took a bit longer than I (kind of) promised through implication. I was going to stop at “Um, because I have?” but then I remembered what my original planned ending was going to be, so.

13k later, and I can finally post it. This was a very difficult chapter.
How do you like it?
Aside from cake, the previous day was not good. Not good at all. Demon arm losing=good, everything else=bad.

The next morning doesn’t get better.

He could probably sleep longer, but the bed is moving slightly, consistently, constantly, and it sounded like Spike and Drusilla were muffling themselves.

That wasn’t good, because being around Spike and Drusilla had taught him that when they weren’t making noise, they were doing something that would freak Xander out. When they were trying not to make noise…

He turns his head and peeks his eyes open.

And—yep, that is a big no-no, that’s a bad, nonono—

“Oh my god!”

He tries rolling away from where they’re having sex right next to him, but Drusilla has one hand tangled in his starting to get a bit too long hair, and Spike had his fingers twisted in the looser material of his jeans under his belt. He doesn’t do more than jostle them and lose a few hairs. Drusilla bounced harder on his lap when Spike roared with laughter, and Xander felt entirely justified in poofing away from the entirely inappropriate vampires, a little ways outside of their weird warehouse of inappropriateness.

He’d have gone straight home, except, ugh, what if he smelled like sex. Like vampire sex. His parents wouldn’t know the difference, but coming home in the wee hours of the morning smelling like…

Like the sex he was not having.

He shudder and stuffed at his shoulder… didn’t really smell much besides Drusilla’s weird incense, and decided to walk anyway.

He checked his watch and found that he had another two hours before he had to be at school. Which was good.

He needed to shower.

He shook his head and started the not really long walk home, breathing in the smell of recent rain. It still smelled a little damp out, but unless it started raining again, he’d use the walk to clear his head. Walking was better than sitting in his room having an entirely justified freak out because vampires had had sex right next to him.
If he *had* been a Seer, he’d have left immediately after that one weird wake-up call earlier, and saved himself the trauma—

Though, actually, would he have actually saved himself the trauma? Because he’d have Seen it, and…

He shook his head, and had a brief longing for tea. Not tea with Drusilla. For Wonderland tea. He wasn’t tired, but he could use the shot of adrenaline, the strength and euphoria that came with it. He grimaced, and wished doubly for the strength, because he’d have to deal with people at school…

He was still happy that Buffy and Willow were so surprisingly okay with his *whatever* with Spike and Drusilla, and all the kudos for Oz and his well tested chill, but Giles…

He’d find him to tell him his little bit of blue-eyed advice, because it was important, but he wasn’t prepared to forgive him yet.

Hell, Giles might not be looking for forgiveness, and as much as the thought burned…

He shook his head and decided that instead of words, he’d just write down the advice, because once again words wouldn’t be the thing to make things better. Then he jumped.

Out of nowhere, Angel. Not the last person he’d like to see, but he was pretty darn close. Angel blinked at him, and tilted his head. It was mostly the setting and the damp dark of the alley, but he almost looked spooky.

Xander frowned and looked to the sky… it was still a little while until the sun was up, but this was getting pretty close. It was only a little while.

“Deadboy? Much as I’m sure I’d get a laugh out of it, I’m pretty sure Buffy’d be a little upset if her boyfriend went all extra crispy. You are sort of the white bread of personality types, but turning yourself to toast won’t actually help that.”

Instead of the blank faced resignation to both the (wholly accurate) nickname and par-for-the-course snarkasm, the corner of his mouth quirked up for a moment before an expression of extreme sadness took over his features.

This, more than the setting and the dark and the brooding vampire coming out of the dark, made Xander uneasy. Angel did extreme brooding, not extreme emoting. Brooding wasn’t emoting.

Angel let out a long sigh, and held his arms out some.

“Xander, buddy, you were right.”

“Mhmm, I’m not yea- or nay-saying that until you tell me what I’m right about. And what’s with the sadface.”

Angel sighed again and moved closer.

“You were right about my attitude; brooding *doesn’t* help…” he paused, and held his arms out a little more. A little wider. Like he was expecting…

It took Xander a moment to remember, but when he does he almost laughs because *wow* this was his life.

“Cuddling,” he-as-the-Cat had informed him so long ago, “is infinitely more useful than brooding.
Remember that, after tonight.”

He doesn’t laugh, because he’d be an asshole to laugh at someone when they felt like they needed a hug (even if it was Angel), but he does quirk an eyebrow and give him a look just to make sure he knew just how odd Xander found this whole thing… and he does this while walking forward to give the guy a hug.

It would be weird; it would be so weird, but now that he was paying attention he could see that Angel was damp like he’d gotten caught in the rain, and considering how relieved he and Buffy were that he wouldn’t have to go hiding a demon arm around the world…

Ugh, maybe he’s extra broody because of the totally justified and reasonable thought that he doesn’t deserve Buffy.

Or more like Buffy deserves better than usually brickfaced Angel—and now he was feeling guilty after Deadboy stood up for him with Buffy and Willow when Giles was all—argh.

Xander shook his head and ignored Angel looking at him from under his ridiculous eyelashes (which was actually impressive since Angel had an annoying few inches on Xander) and pulled him into a hug.

Wet leather, cologne, and the weird dirty musky field smell he normally associated with the very few visits to the relatives on his moms side (and their crazy sprawling estate), and one other smell that was kind of familiar but he couldn’t…

Angel sighed into the hug, ducking his head down lower to his shoulder. Hell yeah Xander gave the best hugs, though it was a little uncomfortable what with it being Angel, and a vampire, and the neck thing. Though he thinks it’d be much more uncomfortable if he hadn’t had the, uh, experience in hugging Drusilla and Spike.

Angel let out another breath, what sounded like a small laugh, and Xander recognized what that one other smell was. Scrunched his nose. Now that was just gross.

“Ugh! Blood breath—I know you have to drink the stuff to survive or whatever, but brush your fangs afterwards!”

Angel tensed, and gave a small growl—tough luck, Xander told it how he saw it—and ducked his head down, to Xander’s—

In an alternate universe, what happens next has dire consequences.

Angelus’ fangs rip into Xander’s throat, and in his shock Xander only jerks in the cage of his arms. He is confused, because what?!, and curious because you can’t know about vampires being a real life actual thing without wondering what it’s like, and because he is, at heart, a cat. the combination keeps him from poofing away.

In yet another alternative universe, Xander does poof away after the first rip of flesh, and dies choking on his own blood in the relative comfort of his own room.

But in this particular alternate universe he stays, mostly from confusion and a lack of comprehension, and it’s too late, all he hears when he drops to the wet concrete is the sound of Angel’s laughter, tastes something like too-raw steak and copper pennies dripping down his throat… and does what people bitten by vampires do.
It is both the best and worst decision of Angelus’ unlife.

His blue-eyed moments stay, and help Angelus rule the Hellmouth, and Xander and Spike are both feared as his most enthusiastic Enforcers.

Spike is feared for immediate infractions, and Xander is feared because he can find anyone after a short stop In Between.

Sometimes he remembers to bring Spike, to keep him in line.

Buffy doesn’t fall quickly, but it’s hard to fight a vampire who can appear as a disembodied head to bite you—hard to stake a vampire who regularly disappears his torso to In Between while fighting.

He caterwauls worse than Drusilla on a bad day when Angelus drains her dry, and stops soon enough when he’s given permission to turn Willow and, after a little longer, Cordelia.

They thrill and terrify him as vampires, and they all laugh when Drusilla manages to turn Rupert Giles, and Sunnydale California expands its borders, slowly and steadily as a pool of blood seeping into dry earth.

Oz, when Willow turns him, is quiet and intense.

Xander lets the next slayer stake him in his (heartless) chest, and rips her head off while she is still gaping in shock at his failure to turn to dust. He laughs all the while.

“I left my heart In Between,” he explains, giggling with Drusilla.

Willow kicks him hard, jealous of the attention, and Spike frowns. Forever worried over him and Drusilla...

“Pet, you might’ve dusted yourself doin’ that. Would’ve left us all upset and lacking for playmates…”

Xander sniggers and sticks his tongue out.

“It’s why I tested on you first, silly! And then on Cordy, and Drusilla, and Angelus, and even Willow!”

Xander laughs through the roars and snarls, the much delayed panic, laughs harder and stays in place as they take turns peeling the skin from his back in thin strips, and kisses the taste of his own flesh from bloody lips.

Wonderland screams in his head, wild and bloody, but now the whole world screams louder for him.

His gameface grins a cat’s grin, wide and full of sharp teeth, and when his eyes aren’t blue they’re glowing yellow and gleaming madness…

Pity this universe, and be grateful that it is not our own.

---shoulder, which Angel will probably feel guilty for later since it’s so close to his neck, and Xander poofs away.

He spares a half glance to the wide expanse of Angel’s back before shaking his head and walking away faster. He needed to get home, get showered, get to school, and ugh he had to tell Giles his
blue-eyed thingy.

“Deadboy, let me know if you need another hug, but I have had a weird enough morning, and at no point am I the person to talk to about guilty vampire feelings. I am not a therapist! You drink blood to survive, Buffy likes you despite your personality and eating habits, and I really never had a chance if she’s okay with blood breath, so just—ugh. Just no. And now I have to go shower because—I’m not telling you why. Get out of the sun.”

And because he was now realizing he also didn’t have a stake handy in case he ran into another vampire

(one not looking for a hug)

he poofed back home.

He put his clothing into a plastic bag to be disposed of later, absently thought that Cordelia would be happy, as she’d never liked that shirt, and then had as thorough a shower as he could without his dad yelling at him about the hot water.

………………….

He rips a page out of his notebook to write it down, and heads to the library first thing. He’s early enough that he can meet up with Willow at the front of school later, and Buffy too if today is one of her early days, but he wants to get this dealt with early.

So he can reasonably and maturely avoid the hell out of Giles afterwards.

Giles looks tired, which makes Xander both happy and concerned, and startled to see him. Xander throws the note (which he’d made into an airplane on the way over because he was bored and agitated) to Giles and watches it hit him lightly in the chest.

“Xander, what—”

“‘Be warned watcher, betrayal soon followed by grief will leave you shattered, if you let it.’ That was what I was going to say the other night but didn’t, and despite what you think… I’m crazy, not evil. And that seems like pretty pertinent advice. And,” he holds up one hand when Giles looks like he’s about to speak, “I’m not sure if you’re looking for forgiveness or not, but you won’t be getting it right now. Because I’m going to be the mature one right now and say I did not deserve that—It’s not smart, like at all, for me to be having tea with Spike and Drusilla, but it means three nights a week their plans for chaos and murder are put on hold for tea time. Call me crazy all you like, but that’s a good thing. And you know what? We mostly talk about the stars, and Wonderland—not about how I can help them kill my best friends.”

Giles winced and looked down at the paper airplane.

“Xander, I—”

“Nope.”

And he left to In Between to wait in front of the school for Willow. Because he’d used up the maturity he had for the day. All of it.

So no, he wasn’t going to listen to what Giles wanted to say… just nope.

He sighed and ignored the few people who jumped at his sudden appearance. After a moment of
Xander’s nonchalance, they shrugged it off and continued on their way… Hellmouth Blindness at it’s best.

So, school was going to be fun.

Willow and Buffy left the horribleness of the previous night mostly unsaid with worried looks and a quiet, “are you okay?” and otherwise treated the day as a normal one.

Well, no, Buffy seemed a bit preoccupied, a bit worried about something else, but Xander figured that it was whatever happened with Angel and he’d be hearing about it at lunch.

And he did.

“I’m just really worried… he just—took off. I couldn’t find him, and…”

Buffy trailed off, Xander and Willow traded looks at what Buffy was deliberately not saying. He wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought it might be a sex thing—it took effort, but he manfully didn’t scrunch his nose.

Ugh.

So that was what Angel had been all broody sadfaced about. Guilt over… over having…

No. Just no.

He shook his head.

“I wouldn’t worry, I saw Deadboy last night—or this morning, whatever. I wouldn’t worry. He seemed more sorry and guilty and broody than anything, and that’s only a little more than usual. Buffy, find him tonight and talk to him, and I’m sure everything’ll be fine.” He looks her square in the eye. “But remember that I’m not the detail guy—I do not want to know details. Details you can tell Willow you cannot tell me. Okay? Buff. No, this is not a laughing matter, you have to—Willow, can you- oh great, blank for some of my best material, and this is what gets them to laugh.”

He throws his hands up and heads to the garbage to dump his tray and to properly hide his smile.

If he had to hear about Buffy and Angel doing… that, then he’d sign himself into an asylum.

The rest of the day did not go well, and this for a number of reasons.

Giles kept showing up in a distinctly uncasual casual way, and that meant that when Xander wasn’t cutting himself off from conversation to walk away, he was also being entirely uncasual in his escapes by disappearing In Between when there’s no immediate escape route…

This meant that, while still trying to leave off conversation about him having teatime with the Big Bad vamps, they were alternating between scolding him for doing wiggins-worthy stuff in front of the Uninformed, for using his one really useful superpower for frivolous things, and also trying to convince him that he should give Giles a chance.

And he would, he told them—just not now.

For now he was going to let his anger run out, let the feeling of betrayal lessen, let himself be upset,
so that when he eventually does get over the thing between him and Giles, he’d be able to avoid the spiteful festering sort of thing from popping up in the future.

So there was that, but annoyance at the attempted kind-of-ambushes and Buffy and Willows unique attempts to help, meant he snapped kind of extra hard at Cordelia, which had him feeling guilty…but when he found her later, after school (and carefully avoiding the habitual gravitation to the library), she wasn’t really upset. She was understanding, even, and all grinning at him, and just…

He sighed.

Just beautiful.

Since they’d passed the make-up part of kiss-and-make-up, they moved onto the kissing part, and that was as amazing as ever…

The slamming of the door behind Willow had him reeling worse than any punch.

With the training with Giles Willow was much faster than he remembered—but luckily, instead of having to resort to going In Between to catch up to her, once they’re in the hallway she wheels around to face him.

“Willow!”

“I knew it! I knew you two were… well, not knew it in the sense that I had the slightest idea, but I knew there was something I didn’t know! You two were fighting too much—it’s not natural!”

“Willow, I know it’s weird…”

“ Weird? It’s against all laws of God and man, it's, it's Cordelia—remember? The we hate Cordelia club, of which you are the treasurer!”

“I was going to tell you.”

“Gee what stopped you, could it be shame?”

“All right let’s overreact, shall we?

“I mean—”

“Willow. We were just kissing. It doesn’t mean that much.”

“…No…. it just means that you’d rather be with someone you hate than be with me.”

When she ran off this time, Xander had to stop and think a moment.

Because she needed to stop and think, and he wanted to run after her, because he’d kind of thought that the Willow Shame had gotten through her crush, but…

He shook his head, and poofed with the intention of appearing ahead of Willow. He wasn’t sure if it would actually work that way, but…

She blinked at him, stumbling slightly when she stopped, and he blinked back.

Held up his hands when she looked at him with teary eyes and looked like she was bout to do an about face and run again. “Look, Willow, we just… Look, we need to talk about this. Like actually talk. Not Buffy talk, either, but… look, I’m going to go back to the school, and I’m going to wait
there, and if you’re ready and willing to talk… whenever that is, I’ll be there. In that hallway.”

She sniffled slightly and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

“W-what are you going to do… just wait? And why not either of our houses?”

Xander shrugged.

“I’ll probably be avoiding Giles until the guy finally goes home… if he doesn’t actually live in the school library. And I figure the school is a good neutral place… that way you won’t feel like I’m all invading at your house, and you won’t feel like I have… I dunno, home field advantage at my place. Besides, right now my parents are kind of…” he grimaced. She mirrored it.

She knew what his parents were like sometimes.

She sniffled again and gave him a watery half-smile.

“You can’t be all thoughtful when I’m upset with you…”

Xander held up his hands again, and shrugged. “I’ll still be there, Wills.”

And he poofed away.

This was really not the best day.

“Let’s get this straight, then. I don’t understand it, I don’t want to understand it, you have gross emotional problems… and things are not okay between us.”

Xander inclined his head.

“I will say that is both fair and something I have been hearing way too many times, lately. But I will also say that the understanding thing, at least in this… as much as your thoughts and opinions matter to me, I don’t think understanding all of my relationships are in the friend code.”

“It should be.”

“But if it was, I probably wouldn’t have an issue with Angel, you wouldn’t have as much of an issue understanding the snark and sarcasm and smooching going on between Cordy and me, and we’d all be much happier.”

Willow scuffed her toe on the ground and looked to the side. Xander made note to not mention smooching again.

“You, uh, you didn’t say anything about Oz and I.”

Xander grinned and ducked his head to catch her eye. “That’s because you two are just adorable, and in an entirely not condescending way. Uncondescending. Condescending? Whatever, the thing is that you two are adorable and shy with each other, and you’re both crazy-smart with each other. You’re all with the cleverness and compliment each other with the…” he trails off, not entirely sure of what words he was looking for, and how he would get the sentiment across.

He’s been (in his opinion) very good about keeping the Alice in Wonderland quotes to a minimum—even the ones he only vaguely recognizes as Wonderland-ish—but he thinks he’s being fairly wise in not mentioning anything about Oz understanding him better.
Nothing ended friendships quicker than—well, actually being a dick and doing your best to push someone away, using personal information against them…

Well, nothing made friendships more strained than those that turned into competitions and constant comparisons.

Though sometimes he wished he could get away with blunt language the way things had—did—do in Wonderland.

Wished he could tell Willow that she had a big bad issue with believing in things she’s decided to be impossible. Or highly improbable enough that she decides they’re close enough to impossible.

‘I daresay you haven't had much practice,’ he quoted the Queen in his head. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!'

He doesn’t say this, and instead shrugs into the silence.

“I’m not sure what else to say that won’t make this get violent or teary.”

Willow laughs. “Coward.”

“Oh no, I'm very brave generally,” he counters with the smallest of grins, “only today I happen to have a headache.”

Willows eyebrows slant drastically, suddenly in full-on worry-mode.

“Not like before, right? You’re not sick, or, or somehow—”

“Wills, I’m all right, I swear. Lets not get distracted, now. Or, more distracted.”

She pursed her lips. “It’d be easier to understand the, the you and Cordelia thing if you were sick… Right now I’m feeling like I don’ know you even half as well as I thought I did…”

Xander pulls her into a hug, shushing her gently. “C’mon, I know you’re smarter than that…”

She shakes her head. “Can’t you figure out how to poof to the past and talk sense to yourself—or, no, poof me there—only, I don’t like poofing, it makes me nauseous, and I just…” she trailed off, Brooding Willow making an appearance.

“I couldn’t even go back to yesterday because I was a different person then,” he says to fill the silence, wincing because that had the tang of Wonderland in it, and hoped dearly that Willow hadn’t noticed.

Gently taking her by the shoulders, Xander pushed Willow far enough away that he could look into her eyes.

“Look, Willow, it’s just—we’re good together, yeah? We’re good the way we are now, and we’ll only be better friends as we go on. We would not be good together, not the way I think you’re hoping…”

“But no, we-!”
Xander shook his head, cutting her off.

“No Willow. I’m not strange, weird, off, or crazy, my reality is just different from yours. I love you Willow, but our realities are similar enough to be friends, but not similar enough to be more than that. That you really, honestly don’t understand how Cordelia and I can be around each other kinda shows that.”

Willow blinked, sniffling, and took a small step back.

“How long are things going to be awkward like this?”

“No forever.” He hopes.

“And how long is forever?” she asks, probably rhetorically. Or else she’s asking an unWillow-ish thing to get him to smile.

He shrugs instead, offers, “Sometimes, just one second… probably a bit longer than that for this.”

“…Emotions are hard.”

Xander nodded, hoping dearly that the wobbly quality of Willow’s voice wouldn’t mean crying in the near future.

“And now I’m getting a better idea of that” And then the lights went out.

“And now I’m having a wiggins.”

“Let’s get to the library—I can’t see your face, but stop making a face. You’ll have to forgive Giles at some point.”

Before he can comment on that—because he is going to forgive him, just not yet—

“Xander? Willow?”

“Angel?” Well that’s not totally random. Not at all. But for all the voices to come out of darkness, his isn’t the worst to come.

“Thank god you’re okay… not that I didn’t believe you, Xander, but it’s… um…”

Xander shook his head, because that was such a non-issue.

“Deadboy, you talk to Buffy?”

“Yeah. What’s up with the lights?” Okay, so something did happen… and they were not talking about it. Okidoke.

“Y-I don’t know, but I think I have an idea.”

“Forget about that now… I got something to show you…”

“Show us?”

“Yeah… I can show the others later, but Xander, if you want to go get them…” he leaves it hanging, and Xander can’t see him, but he still hears the smirk in what he says next. “You don’t want to miss
“O...kay. You know, you’re in a pretty chipper mood.”

Angel laughs, and wow this was a total 180 from last time he saw him.

“Hey Willow… c’mere.”

“What is it Angel?” Willow starts forward, and Xander is torn between the Very Good Idea of getting Buffy here and not leaving Willow alone, and not just because they still had a few things to clear up between them. But he really wanted to know what it was Angel wanted to show them. What if it was cool? Despite his usual brickfaced-ness and bland personality, Angel could find cool things. Like the place they set up for Buffy’s Birthday.

“It’s amazing.”

Xander started forward too, curious and wondering what Angel wanted to show her—she wouldn’t mind if he saw too, right? He could get Buffy after.

“Stop. Willow get away from him.”

Xander turned to see Ms. Calendar at the door, a wooden cross held out. For Angel?

He turns back to Angel and Willow to see what’s up, just in time for Angel to grab Willow, Game Face right next to her neck.

“Hey! Don’t do that!”

“Oh I think I do that.” Xander opens his mouth to respond, but he’s just... really? He suddenly feels really bad for making fun of Angel—for a 200-something year old vampire, the guy was lacking in the witty repartee. Cordelia could at least keep up.

“Angel!” Willow twisted in his hold, wincing when it made the grip he had on her hair tighten.

“Oh he’s not Angel anymore… are you.” Ms. Calendar didn’t make it a question. Well Xander had a question, he had many questions. They mostly revolved around the classics like ‘what the hell’ and ‘why’, but he also had the extra special ‘who else would Angel be?’

“You’re wrong. I am Angel… at last.”

“Oh my god.” Angel-maybe-not-Angel actually grinned at him, extra startling for his mouth full of fangs.

“Xander you should come here… I’ve got a message for Buffy.”

“Why don’t you give it to me yourself.”

Buffy! Xander let out a relieved sigh, because her timing was impeccable.

“Well it’s not really the message you tell, it sort of involves finding the bodies of all your friends.”

“This can’t be you.” Her voice trembled on the last word.

“We already covered that.”

Not really interested in listening to more of their… whatever, Xander took the cross from Ms.
Calendar and crept slowly towards Angel—demony, evil Angel.

Could they start calling him Satan?

Could that be a thing?

He brought the cross up into Angel’s face, and when he wrenched away Xander made sure Willow was out of reach before grabbing Angel’s hand. Jerked him forwards and hoped he wouldn’t be killed in the next two minutes. Wondered why he’d thought this was a good—well, no, he hadn’t actually thought this through, and he really should have, but of all of them he was the one most likely to escape a dangerous situation…

“You wanted a hug, right?”

…So maybe he’d take the dangerous situation away with him.

Xander grabbed him up, and wow this was probably the most dangerous hug he’s ever given—not that grabbing like this could really be considered a hug, but, y’know. With the general thought of anywhere but here, he wrenched Angel after him In Between.

It wasn’t intentional, but he’s kind of unsurprised that anywhere turned out to be Spike and Drusilla’s place.

Shoving Angel away, he was hardly aware he was going to do it when his fist made contact with Angel’s jaw, snapping his head to the side.

Angel immediately had an iron grip on Xander’s wrist, but that sort of thing hadn’t been an issue for him for a while now.

“Don’t,” he says, shoving at Angel with his captive arm, felt the beginnings of a bruise, “touch Willow again. Don’t.”

And he disappeared back to the school, appearing at Willow’s side.

“Wills, you okay? Willow?” She nodded, but he pushed her hair behind her shoulders to check her neck, carding his fingers gently through the hair at the base of her skull to check for bruising.

“Xander, where did you bring him?”

“You didn’t leave him In Between, did you?”

“I left him at an abandoned warehouse,” he answers Ms. Calendar and Buffy both, “but next time he grabs one of you guys like that again I might just—oh my god he totally tried to bite me! That asshole!” He ignored Willow’s elbow in his side for the swearing and took the moment to feel extremely, surreally betrayed.

“I gave him a hug and he tries to bite me, and he just,” Xander gasped, “this totally explains the extreme sadface! When Angel is evil he shows emotions on his stupid brickface!” He felt a lot like he’d somehow cracked a code he wasn’t even aware existed…

Buffy, Willow, and Ms. Calendar were more interested in the circumstances that brought Xander into hugging distance of not-Angel, but…

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After explanations are through, including how exactly Ms. Calendar knew something was wrong
with Angel-the-now-soulless, Willow asks Xander a very important question.

“I-if Angel is now, um, Angelus… does that mean he’s going to be all friendly and evil with Spike and Drusilla?” And Xander, is left unsaid, though Ms. Calendar’s eyes cut straight to him.

Xander grimaces, mind still firmly on the fact that Angel-us, Angelus had tried to sneak-bite him, and still firmly NOT thinking on what happened to make him Angelus-y, and shakes his head.

“I’m not having tea with Drusilla anymore if Evil Deadboy is going to be there.”

Drusilla had tried to bite him, sure, but at least she’d been honest about it—Deadboy just made hugging a little more suspect.

If it were possible to skip out on the entire next week, he’d do it. Gladly.

If it isn’t Buffy and Willow giving him worried looks, it’s dodging Giles who does not understand that Xander isn’t ready to forgive him yet. When Willow and Buffy aren’t giving him worried looks, Willow is making barely veiled comments about him and Cordelia, and Buffy makes jokes and does her best to distract them from… each other.

When it’s not a nameless vampire trying to grab him, it’s a furious Spike looking way too terrifying for someone getting around on crutches, or a wailing Drusilla coming after him for so many missed tea parties, or, on one blood curdling instance, Angelus.

Xander was just glad that he’d warned his parents of a hair-gelled, Leather-clad Canadian Queer who’d been hanging about at the school, following guys home, because otherwise Angelus totally would have gotten an invite into his house.

It coated his mouth with a sour taste to say it, but if there were anything that’d keep his parents from falling for that thrall trick again, this time from Angelus, it’d be that combination.

Xander didn’t have a problem with gay people, didn’t have an issue with leather, didn’t have an issue with Canadians—though he couldn’t believe any whole nation could be nice enough for niceness to be their stereotype—but the only thing that’d make his parents dislike someone more…

Well, even Xander thought it’d be a bit of a stretch to say a hair-gelled, Leather-clad Canadian Queer Liberal was hanging around. His parents might’ve asked about how long he’d talked to the gay Canadian.

“Not if Deadboy’s going to be there,” he tells them, and disappears.

“Not if Angelus is invited,” he yells, running, before poofing away.

“No, no, no, no, no!” he shouts, stumbling out of his bedroom window, away from a wailing Drusilla.

He spends quite a few nights napping at Willows without her parents knowing, feeling both happy and annoyed that his parents had left for Vegas for the week, after making sure he wouldn’t let any Canadians into the house.

So really, he wishes time ravel was in his arsenal of skills, because then he’d gladly skip out on this week—maybe the next, too, as the teachers were being unreasonably mad for their professions, as well.
No he wasn’t interested in taking a class specifically on classic literature, no he didn’t want to sign up for philosophy next year, yes he’s sure…

If anyone had told him even last semester that he’d have the various arts teachers after his ass because they wanted him to attend their classes…

Xander sighed and almost turned around when he saw Larry and his goons… but as little as he wanted to interact with them, he was even less interested in leaving Oz to their jock-strap level personalities.

Though it sounded like he was holding his own.

Conversation wise.

Because there wasn’t any actual fighting, which was good.

“Gee, what has my favourite upperclassman and my least favourite upperclassmen hanging out like it’s not weird, hmm?”

“Hey Xander. Willow just headed to class…”

“Harris.” Larry’s lip curled, “you aren’t gonna try and hug us, are you?”

“Only if you ask nicely,” Xander replied brightly, tugging the sleeve of Oz’s plaid shirt to lead him away; if there wasn’t a fight right now, there would be one soon.

Because that was how his life was working out, lately.

Tracy Milligan gave him a small smile while she was walking past—Larry tipped the books from her hands.

She scowled at Larry and his goons, and bent to pick them up—Xander bent to help.

“Oh, thank you Thighmaster!”

Tracy rolled her eyes a little in the way that wasn’t unique to Buffy and Willow’s I’m embarrassed and offended, so Xander batted his eyelashes and tilted his head.

“Oh, and here I thought nobody would notice!”

Tracy still hurried off, but was at least smiling again. Larry shoved him.

“You trying to say something?”

“Oh definitely. I mean, I’ve been working so hard on my girlish figure, and sexist jerks just don’t seem to be noticing—hey now!”

Larry and his goons jumped a little when the harder shove Larry aimed at Xander just had Xander’s shoulder disappearing; the jocks all got a little leery when he did stuff like that, but Hellmouth blindness had them quiet and brushing it off…

‘Normal’ people were weird

Vampires and demons trying to kill everyone? They were obviously on drugs.

Try to shove a guy and part of his body disappears? Xander didn’t know how they explained away
that one.

Oz grabbed his remaining sleeve and led him away in the startled silence of Confused Jocks. Which was probably good. If they’d aimed a punch at his other shoulder he might’ve lost his backpack In Between.

“So what bit of wisdom were you gaining from them?”

Oz shrugged.

“Just sexist jerk talk. They seem to be under the impression that I must be getting something specific from dating Willow…”

“Oh high school…” the head of the English department turned the corner, and Xander flinched back when her eyes zeroed on him. Ms. Hogan wouldn’t stop hounding after him! “Sorry Oz, gotta go—do something. Yeah. I just… bye!”

Students jumped a little when he appeared, and from behind a confused Ms. Hogan he gave Oz a double thumbs up.

From beside him Cordelia sighed, most likely disgusted with his uncool behavior, and yanked his arms down. “Are you trying to embarrass me?”

He had no clue where she’d appeared from—and he was the one with super powers? —but he didn’t much care when he wrapped her up in a hug, grinning at her bemused gaggle of Cordettes. He still wasn’t considered cool, but the fact that he’d gone blue-eyed for Cordy and several popular girls besides had given him some weird… not exactly green card, but it was definitely a card that meant that he could be huggy with Cordelia and not have her yell at him for associating with her in the halls. In public.

He thinks it probably helps that he’s at least a little huggy with anyone who stays within reach for long enough.

Willow was still a bit, um, frosty about Cordy and him doing the do—not that there was any actual doing, because they hadn’t explored past groping and heavy kissing and Xander trusted that Cordy would make it explicitly clear when she was ready and willing to move past that part—

Not the point.

Willow was not with the happy on the Cordelia-Xander front, but she wasn’t any more hostile to Cordelia than she’s been before.

And that was what was important.

That was important.

Doesn’t mean he doesn’t have the niggling Willow-disapproval in the back of his mind while playing tonsil hockey with Cordelia—wait.
“Did you hear that?”

Cordelia pulls back from trailing her lips along his jaw line, body still in a light twist waiting for

“Xander, is this really the time? I have only so long before I have to get back home, a limited amount of time to do things I can never tell my father because he still thinks I’m a good girl…” she trailed off, pouting. “Your eyes haven’t gone blue, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Xander shook his head.

“First off, you’re still a good girl relatively speaking, and secondly… Believe me when I say I’d much rather continue what we were doing, but Spike and Drusilla have been getting better at finding me…” his eyes searched the darkness, but if it was Spike and Dru, they were in a mood.

Well, they were always in a mood one way or another, but Xander at least knew he could get away quickly.

He could do the same with Cordelia, but she’d threatened particular bodily harm if he did it without warning ever again.

She started the ignition, huffing when Xander looked at her, curious.

“As if I’m waiting around for Dead and Deader to show their pasty faces—AAH!”

The face that looked through her windshield wasn’t pasty or white and it most definitely wasn’t Spike or Drusilla.

It was much hairier.

It leapt onto the hood.

“Drive! Driving would be nice any moment now!”

Cordelia slammed in reverse, engine loud over the wolf man’s growls, and without a seatbelt Xander slammed into the dash.

“Xander it’s still on the hood! It’s—scratching daddy’s car!”

“Not the thing to focus on!” Xander looked at the steel grip Cordelia had on the wheel, and had a very bad idea. Damn it.

“I’ll get its attention, then Cordy you have to drive once it’s distracted! Okay? Cordy!”

“Yes, yes, okay now go!”

Feeling like the worst sort of distraction, Xander appeared just behind the wolf man and yanked a handful of grey fur—lost his arm for a moment when it whirled around and swiped at him, lunging when he scrambled backwards. But he’d done his job well enough, because its claws were no longer sunk into the metal of the car, and the wheels of Cordelia’s car squealed and kicked up gravel when she sped away… which was a good idea, except Xander had the nasty suspicion that the werewolf-like creature would go after the car if he left immediately—

He appeared just out of reach, and started heading away from the road Cordelia had taken; it’d lead them closer to one of the housing areas if he had to continue for much longer, but he could lose it before then, he was sure.
Xander ran, boosting himself forward by several meters every time the werewolf started to catch up (and damn was it fast!), and when his heart was pounding and he was gasping for breath, he poofed home.

Collapsing onto his bed, panting, he sincerely hoped his parents would forget that he hadn’t come in through the front door, because he was so not going out again.

*Werewolves*, he thought with some disgust.

*Couldn’t they have skipped to werebunnies?*

“*You’re sure it was a werewolf?*”

“*Well, lets see… 6 feet tall, claws, a big ol’ snout in the middle of his face, like a wolf—um, yeah, I’m sticking with my first guess.*”

“*Seems wise.*”

Xander nodded to Oz, “*Yeah, and there was the little part where it tried to bite us—and wow that thing is fast!*”

“It was so awful.”

“*Not too awful if you were willing to leave Xander to it,*” Willow pointed out. Cordelia rolled her eyes.

“*Please, Xander was the one who decided to play teleportation tag with wolfy last night. The only real tragedy of the night is that Daddy just had this car detailed.*”

Willow only hummed in response. It wasn’t exactly a happy hum, but she leaned into Oz when he rubbed a hand up and down her back.

Xander paid attention, but didn’t look at Giles when he explained the ‘wild dog’ attacks of last night, the mutilated animal carcasses, and left reassuring Willow of the relative bunny safety to Oz.

Thankfully, Giles seemed content with leaving their interaction on Xander’s terms, and leaves to research werewolves and see if they had to worry about their furry new friend in the next 24 hours…

Buffy, surprisingly, pipes up with some book knowledge of her own. “I think I remember something about werewolves in the Slaying 101 book, so I’ll check in at lunch, ‘kay?”

Before they headed to class Oz caught his eye, so he hung back while the girls went on ahead. Oz held up a finger, a smiley face Band-Aid on its end.

“*My cousin Jordy just got his grown up teeth in. He does not like to be tickled.*”

Xander laughed and raised an eyebrow.

“*Ankle biter, huh? Any sign of longstanding consequences yet?*”

“*Nah. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.*”

Xander grinned and pulled him into a quick one-armed hug.
“Maybe it’ll be a good consequence… like, maybe your cousin will develop a phobia against biting people.”

“We can only hope, I guess.”

“No cheating,” Buffy grinned at him, and Xander returned it along with a significant look.

“I could, and am, going to say the same Ms. The Slayer.”

She went off with Willow, and Xander headed to the table to sign his name on the participation clipboard. Noticed the bandage around Larry’s arm, just above his elbow.

“What happened?”

“Oh, last week some huge dog jumped out of the bushes and bit me. 39 stitches.”

He was ready to be sympathetic, but that kind of died with the bragging tone.

“Hmm,” he jerked his chin Oz’s direction. “He got bit too, though he didn’t need any stitches.”

“By a dog? They oughta shoot those strays…”

“My cousin, actually.” He looked down at his clipboard, then said, “I don’t think it’s legal to have him shot over it.”

Theresa, his partner for the class, looks nervous as their gym teacher explains the exercise.

“Don’t worry about hurting me,” he says with what he hopes is a reassuring smile. “I’m used to bruises.”

“That doesn’t really make me feel better…” she sighs. “I don’t know, this just doesn’t seem like much fun to me.”

“Well, that’s school for you. It’s not real work unless you would rather be doing something else.”

That gets him a smile, and then he’s got to grip her across the collarbone with his arm—he’s very conscious of Cordelia’s eyes on him, the next group over. Yep, that was her collarbone that he had his arm on, he was gripping her shoulder… nothing else.

Of course, five minutes later Buffy flips Larry over her shoulder, and he has to let go of Theresa to cheer.

“Whoo, yea Buffy!”

“Harris, back in line!”

Theresa’s shaking her head when he puts his arm back around her, but he considers it a success when he ends up on the mat before the end of class. On his side, because she’d rolled him off her shoulder rather than flipping him straight over like Buffy had, but it was still good.

He gets the condensed version of things after lunch from Buffy since he’d skipped out on the library time—and ignored the pointed look she gives him for it.
“So it turns out that our furry friend might not even know he or she’s a, uh…”

“Animal lover?” he offers. “Sleep walker? Sleep walking animal lover? An unconscious part of PETA?”

Their desks are just too far away for her to elbow or kick him, but he can see that she’s tempted to try anyway.

“… Yes. That. But it turns out that Fluffy doesn’t even have to be, you know, fluffy to turn someone. There’s an entry from an unnamed Slayer in the 1950’s who talks about someone getting bitten during a, um, particularly enthusiastic significant other.”

“Talk about necking.”

“You’re so mature sometimes, it’s a real wonder you can find humour in anything.”

He shrugged.

“Everything is funny, if you can laugh at it.”

Buffy wasn’t so sure about Xander patrolling for the werewolf on his own, but her Slaying 101 book also mentioned that werewolves are attracted to, well…

He’d gotten a particular look when it came to why the werewolf had gone for Cordelia’s car last night.

So Buffy and Giles went back to the make-out point, figuring that the werewolf would be more interested in the woodsy surroundings, and Xander went to the Bronze. He thinks he got the easier of the two options.

But also not, because he noticed Cordelia and Willow were talking… and not visibly fighting, which was good and not to be interrupted. He had the strong feeling that they were talking about him, but even so, so long as they were with the talky talky and not the fighty fighty he was going to encourage it.

And that meant staying out of sight of them.

And, predictably, that means that he doesn’t see the werewolf when it enters the building, doesn’t see when it jumps down on the table right in front of them.

“Oh great…”

People are doing a good enough job of evacuating on their own, so he focuses on the werewolf—specifically, getting its attention.

He appeared behind it, grabbed a handful of fur—

“OW FU—that’s not how it’s supposed to go!”

Xander gripped his arm where the werewolf scratched him, feeling at least three cuts in his shirt. He was sure he’d feel the actual cuts in a moment, because he could certainly feel the blood dripping from them, but shock was keeping that particular feeling from him for the moment.

The werewolf snarled at him, and Xander poofed to a slightly safer distance.
“Okay, so Wolfy learns, good to know.” Xander clenched his hand into a fist because yep, there was the pain. “Wish I’d known that before trying the same trick twice…”

Mostly empty now, it was a terrifying game of keep-away with the werewolf until the Bronze was totally empty—and thank whatever powers that be that Buffy showed up when she did, because he wasn’t sure what he could do when Wolfy lost interest in the game.

“Buffy! It’s in the back!”

“Got it—get out of here!”

Didn’t have to tell him twice.

He poofed away, and started walking in the neighborhood he appeared in.

Craning his neck and pulling his torn sleeve out of the way, he grimaced at the scratches.

“Seriously? Ugh, this’ll be fun to explain…”

He shook his head and took a left to cut through the truck parking lot. He had some cash; he could stop by the all night drug store and get some gauze. He still had the elasticized bandages from when he’d sprained his ankle as a kid, and he was very well stocked in antiseptic, but he didn’t think Band-Aids would cut it with scratches like this. He just needed the gauze and he could keep it in place with the bandages.

He paused at the edge of one of the trucks, a flash of plaid catching his eye.

Feeling stupid, but worried all the same, he took a step towards the shadows where the plaid-wearer was standing. Because generally people don’t just stand in darkened corners of truck yards in the middle of the night.

“So hi?”

The darkness shifted slightly, and a pale face rose from—oh shit, her neck, and that was Angel in his game face.

Xander jumped back before he could think, and Angel grinned bloodily. Let the plaid-wearer drop.

“Oh shit,” Xander felt the blood drain from his face, “Theresa.”

“Oh Xander… did you know her? And did you,” Angel paused, sniffing, “did you bring me a snack? This is a better apology than I could have hoped for…” He grinned and stepped over Theresa’s body. Xander laughed a little, backing away and clutching his arm tighter. He really did blend in with the shadows remarkably well. Maybe all that leather served a purpose after all.

“Haha, you see, I can’t really think of anything I need to be sorry for—not to you anyway.”

“Oh, I’m sure if you think hard enough it’ll come to you. I mean, with Spike sulking about on his crutches or in that wheelchair of his, and Drusilla…” he sighed, shook his head a little, “she has been very upset that you’ve been missing her tea parties.”

“Yeah, see I’m still not setting where you fit in—and oh, here’s an idea, how about I just, uh, go, and you can go and find something wooden and pointy to fall on.”

Angel lost his game face and gave him an indulgent smile, still walking towards him. Xander gave a quick check behind him to make sure he wasn’t going to do anything like walk into a wall, and when
he looked back Angel was a lot closer than he was before.

“See, it’s when you say things like that that make me think you might be avoiding me. And that can’t be the case, now could it?”

“Um, yeah, actually. That’s exactly it. So I’m just going to uh—Ah! Bad dog!”

The werewolf lunged at him and Xander moved to the top of one of the nearby trucks, because where the hell did it come from? Were there more werewolves? Was it the same one? He probably should have stayed to see what was up with Buffy, but his arm… They should really get pagers or something.

He shook his head, and decide to do what he should have done right from the get go, and poofed directly to the drug store—he startled Lenny, the guy who hung out outside the shop all the time, but ignored that in favour of pushing through the door and getting his damn gauze.

A few bucks poorer, Xander shivered in the sudden breeze, and froze when he heard footsteps behind him. He spun and scowled at Angel, giving a quick check to see if the werewolf was also around. Would just figure if the werewolf teamed up with the vampires.

Angel smirked at him and glanced at Lenny, spun the stem of a flower in one hand.

“If you keep hurrying everywhere like that, you’re bound to miss something.”

“And yet the hurrier I go the behinder I get. Such is life—not that you’d now about that, eh Deadboy?”

He didn’t even twitch. Maybe there was a difference between Angel and Angelus—Angel always did that eyebrow quirking thing. He nodded down to his arm.

“You know, I could help you out with that…”

“If you’re about to try and convince me that saliva is a disinfectant, I wouldn’t suggest it.”

Angelus’ smirk widened, and he shrugged slightly.

“Believe what you want, Xander, but all I want to do is help you.”

“Uhuh, and I just want you to lave me alone.”

“If everybody minded their own business, the world would go around a great deal faster than it does.”

Xander sputtered, and Angelus just fucking smirked.

Asshole.

“That’s—that’s not fair! You can’t use Wonderland quotes against me like that! ”

Angelus just smiled, smug.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about—and if I did, I’m sure I wouldn’t try using it again.”

Xander scowled.

“Not unless it worked, you mean.” He sighed and went to rake his fingers through his hair—thought
better of it, what with his bloody hand. Damnit.

He pointed at Angelus.

“Try to bite me and I’ll…” he frowned, thought for a moment, “well, I’m not sure how far I can go, strictly speaking, but I’ll transport you directly into the nearest sunrise.”

Xander frowned and pointed again.

“I’ll be by for tea after this werewolf thing is dealt with.”

And then, with Angelus’ stupid smirk an afterimage behind his eyelids, Xander poofed home.

Throwing his shirts into the garbage bag he used for slaying-effected clothing, he grimaced at the cuts on his arm. Scratches. Whatever.

Three long ones and one smaller, thinner one, and removing his shirt had reopened them in some places. That was going to be fun to shower with.

In the morning he checks and cleans his arm, and packs more gauze and disinfectant in his backpack—he wasn’t looking forward to it, but he’d probably have to let Giles take a look at it.

“Alex! Your English teacher called for you last night, you got a meeting with her before school, so hurry up!”

…After he goes to the meeting his dear mother apparently set up for him.

Xander sighed and headed out the door, poofing away once he was out of sight of his house.

“Oh my…! Xander, don’t do that! You scared me.”

He shrugged. “Sorry Wills, but apparently my mom agreed to me meeting with Mrs. Perbury and Ms. Hogan will probably be there…” he sighed, because Willow was literally the last person he should be complaining to. She was all for Xander going on to advanced English and Literature courses… if he wanted any sort of commiseration, he’d have to wait and talk to Oz.

“Anyway, it means that I won’t see you guys until class… but, um, you know Theresa?”

Willow immediately gave him sad eyes, “Xander, she—”

“Angel killed her, Willow.”

“He—what? Really?”

“Yeah, I saw the guy with his face in her neck, was about to leave, and then—wait, quick question, did you guys, um, catch the werewolf last night?”

“Oh,” she blinked, “no. No we didn’t.”

“Oh. Right. Well, then the werewolf showed up again right before I poofed away from Angel—”

“Angelus.”

“Whatever, but that’s when I got out of there, because Wolfy is fast. Like really fast. I don’t think I want to play tag with him again, honestly. But I heard the radio and…” he took a breath, let it out
slowly, “I think it’s going to be a real issue for Buffy to humanely catch our furry friend if she thinks it killed someone.”

“… Why didn’t you go to Buffy?”

Xander winced. “Because I’m a coward and really don’t like that You Just Mentioned Angel look on her face—and look at the time, I have a meeting with a gaggle of English teachers to look forward to! And by the way can you ask Giles to have the emergency kit out for at lunch, I kinda got scratched the other night.”

“Xander!”

“See ya!”

The meeting went exactly as well as Xander had feared it would, with good (and misplaced) intentions on one side and extreme disinterest on the other, and then Xander begged out of the meeting because he had to go get his books.

Really.

He did.

He was just glad he didn’t have English until after lunch…

He turned to—of course—Larry, and said,

“*Your secret will eat you from the inside out if you let it.*”

Xander blinked and tilted his head. What kind of secret did Larry of all people have? And if it was the sort to eat him up inside, why hadn’t Xander gone all blue eyed earli—oh.

Oooh.

Before Xander could ask, the bell rang and Larry and his goons rushed off, and Xander left to find Buffy.

“I think I know who Fluffy is!”

With a promise to meet up in the library for lunch (and Buffy didn’t have to look so pleased at that), Xander left to ambush Larry in the locker room.

“Jeesh, Harris, wear a bell next time…”

“Haha, funny, cat jokes are real funny—why so jumpy, Larry?”

“Geeks make me nervous.” Oh Xander was totally right, Larry was definitely the werewolf—why else would he be getting so defensive?

“Uhuh, and that has nothing to do with any, let’s say, secrets that may or may not be eating you up on the inside?”

“Harris, just because you did your freaky eye trick on me, doesn’t mean you know squat.”

“I know your secret, big guy. I know what you been doin’ at night.”
"Curiosity killed the cat, Harris…” he grabbed the front of his shirt, “you lookin’ to die today?”

Okay, different track.

“Hurting me isn’t gonna make this go away, people are still gonna find out…”

Larry seemed to deflate a little, and let go of his shirt… but instead of actually saying anything, or continuing with the threats he was just… quiet.

“Larry? You're thinking about something, and it makes you forget to talk.”

He shook his head.

“What do you want, huh? What’re you after? You’re too crazy to be after hush money, so what is it?”

“I don’t want anything, I just want to help!”

“What, you think you have a cure?”

“No, it’s just… I know what you’re going through—or something close enough to it. I’ve been there, y’know? Twice, even, and I know it kind of messes with how you look at everything, at everyone. That’s why I know you should talk about it.” He didn’t think Larry would survive talking about it with people like Spike and Drusilla—though any and all interaction with Drusilla would do wonders for how he treated women, Xander was sure of that.

“That’s easy for you to say. I mean, even with your creepy eye trick you’re nobody. I’ve got a reputation here.”

“Larry, please, before someone else gets hurt! Look, if you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison' it is certain to disagree with you sooner or later. I don’t think I’m being crazy in saying, in this case, it’ll be sooner.”

Larry paces away, shoulder hunching.

“Look, if this gets out, it’s over for me… I mean, forget about playing football, they’ll run me out of this town.” Xander opened his mouth to point out that they hadn’t run him out of town yet and he’s crazy, when Larry whirs around rom his pacing and continues with,

“I mean, come on! How are people gonna look at me after they find out that I’m gay?”

Xander closed his mouth.

Ran their conversation through his head and… oh. Oooh.

He makes it to the library in… shock, he thinks.

Okay.

So that just happened.

And he thought he’d had communication problems before…

Well at least he and Larry were now… friends, sort of. Ish. Kind of? Was this a good thing?
He wasn’t altogether sure.

Larry thought that Xander was gay, now, too…

“Hey Xander are you, ahem, are you okay? Because I heard from Willow that you were, uh…” Oz trailed off, and Xander shook his head.

“You know, I just had a really odd conversation.”

“Oh?” Oz paused, and then said, “you know that’s really saying something. Coming from you I mean.”

“Oh I know, and I still mean it… and I don’t think I’m allowed to tell anyone about it. Like, I think there are ethical rules somewhere about keeping conversations like the one I just had… quiet.” He shook his head again. “Sorry, what were you saying before?”

“Ah. Willow said you’d been, um, hurt. By the werewolf. She was… very upset. Understandably,” he seemed to rush to say, “but—you know. Upset.”

Xander winced.

“Yeah, she’s been throwing me worried looks in class… our fluffy buddy scratched me. Apparently hair pulling only works the one time—which is fair, I guess, but I wish the relative ability for werewolves to learn from past experiences could have been mentioned or something… Look, I’m heading to the library to get Giles to look over my less-than-dire war wound, if you come with then you can do the supportive emotional thing when Willow overreacts to my scratch.”

Oz nodded but didn’t move when Xander started heading to the library.

“Oz?”

“…You’re forgiving Giles, then?”

Xander tilted his head, and Oz expanded on that odd question. “You just… the library. Are you forgiving Giles, or…” Oz shook his head a little. “you don’t seem to forgive easily.”

“Oh, no,” Xander laughed, “there’s very little forgiveness happening between the G-Man and I right now… mostly because he hasn’t said sorry, and I’m not actually ready to stop and let him, but he’s got a lot more medical first-aid know-how. So that’s what’s happening right now.”

“But you will forgive him? Eventually? Like, hypothetically of course, the werewolf… would you forgive him for…” Oz trailed off and jerked his chin.

Xander checked over his shoulder before realizing Oz meant his arm.

“What, this? I’ve gotten worse from—well, mostly from vampires, but this is the first time in months that I’ve actually gotten injured and it was from a guy who doesn’t even know that he did it. Or doesn’t remember doing it… I’m not exactly going to be offering to cuddle up with the guy on the full moon…” he trailed off and shrugged again. Scrunches his nose, because he’d honestly thought Larry was the werewolf, and cuddling Larry… He shuddered.

“All that aside, I’d like to make sure I don’t have, say, wolf nail clippings in my arm, so if we could go to the library now…”

Willow did indeed overreact, Buffy went all adorable and terrifyingly pouting, and Giles some
mystical stuff that felt a lot like mace or saltwater or mace-y salt water over his arm…

Xander didn’t care that he was making probably the least masculine face possible, and making squeaking noises because that stung.

It stung, it stung, it stung and frothed a little bit and when Giles carefully wiped his arm down little gravelly bits and a long line of yesterday’s ruined shirt fabric pulled free from the wound. At least he didn’t need stitches…

Giles sprayed it a second time with antiseptic and covered it with new gauze and bandage—and realized that everyone had made a probably less-than-stealthy retreat from the room.

He was alone with Giles.

That’s what he got for letting them know what happened before getting his scratches treated…

He sighed.

“Giles—”

“No, no—um, Xander…” Giles sighed and pulled his glasses off to clean them.

“Things have been. Strained.”

Xander snorted.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Look Xander I—what I said was out of line. I should never have implied that you would—”

“Said. You said it; you went right past implying and outright said that you thought I went crazy enough to help kill Buffy.”

“And I should not have.”

Xander closed his mouth, not expecting Giles to own up quite like that. Especially after Xander interrupted him.

Xander stays silent.

Giles sighs, puts back on his glasses.

“I am sorry. I was not thinking, and I do not believe that you could mean any harm to Buffy or Willow… and I hope you may someday forgive me for my harsh words.”

Xander nodded, once.

“I’m not quite ready to forgive you all the way… but I just need some time. Thanks for fixing up my arm.”

After a pause, Xander nodded and headed for the door.

“Come back!” Giles called after him, and then hesitated. "I've something important to say."

This sounded promising, or worrying, or that regular Hellmouth mix of both, so Xander turned and came back again. Raised his eyebrows in question.
"Keep your temper."

Xander stared. Felt his lips twitch.

From the doors he heard a shocked gasp, and turned his head enough to see that Buffy and Willow were peering through the glass in the door. They ducked out of sight.

He looks back to Giles, and he can’t help it when his mouth twists into a grin.

“You lost something in the delivery without the Hookah. Caterpillar could say a thousand words in one puff.”

Xander shook his head, feeling suddenly nostalgic for some nonsensical debate with the smokestack of a bug.

He turned and continued towards the door—paused, and turned to throw Giles another grin.

“Thanks G-man.”

He’d like to say that he was entirely involved with the plan for stopping the werewolf for the night, but that would be a pretty big lie.

Willow had dove into the research aspect, pulling up student profiles in probably less than legal feats of technological might, doing her best to find out who of their fellow students could possibly be the werewolf…

Oz was busy, apparently. Xander didn’t know what to do with that. He wasn’t all that worried, though, not when Willow eventually left to go after him.

He’d wanted to go pay his respects to Theresa with Buffy, especially considering the whole, you know, thing with Angel being the one to kill her, but Oz’s buddy Devon had wanted to talk to him. Weirdly.

Wanting to get him out of the library where Giles had books on werewolves spread out, where he had a suspicious looking case he wasn’t opening—

Suspicious, that is, to Xander. Normal Xander.

To the crazy violent soldier still in the back of his memory there was the comfor-uncomfortable certainty that there was some sort of gun in there. A firearm.

He flinched slightly and brought a hand down the side of his face to wipe away the phantom feel of blood splatter.

“You okay man?”

“How? Oh, I’m just dandy. Thought I felt something for a second there, don’t mind me. So, uh, what was it you wanted?”

Devon reels back a little like Xander just said something… well, something crazy. But Xander was more than a little certain that he hadn’t said anything odd…

“Dude. Harris. Xander. You totally haven’t made time to hang with me and the boys, and that’s just
not cool.”

“Um… what?”

Devon laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Man, don’t tell me you forgot?” he snorted. “Nah, you’re yankin’ my chain. Everyone wants a chance to party with the seniors! C’mon, we got a party tonight—Oz said he was busy, but you can hang with me eh?”

Xander scratched the back of his neck and laughed along, because why not? Today was a day for weird conversations.

“Right, well, see the thing is—” Behind Devon, the library doors swung open before Buffy made a face and pulled back into the room, a large tranquilizer gun in her hands. The doors kept swinging. Devon started to turn—

“Cake!”

Devon turned back to Xander, frowning. Belatedly someone, probably Giles, stopped the library doors from swinging and revealing his gun-toting friend.

“Cake?”

“Yeah, um, I have cake—very important cake—that I have to deal with at home. Tonight.” Devon started to frown, looking both puzzled and offended.

“Dude, seriously? Cake?” He raised an eyebrow, “sure you’re using the right word there, Harris?”

He winced, but plowed on ahead.

“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more, nor less… But tomorrow! Tomorrow I’m free.” He winced, thinking of Spike and Drusilla and what Angel probably told them and just… “Yeah, I’m free tomorrow. Tomorrow good? That was Oz can be there, too.”

“Ah,” Devon started grinning again, and clapped his arm, shaking him slightly. “Sounds good, man. I’ll make sure Oz knows the details, so I’ll see you later, right man?” Xander grinned and nodded, gritting his teeth and pointedly not letting any noise out because, by all that is holy, his arm.

“Awesome. See you tomorrow man.”

Xander kept smiling after Devon walked away, though he thought it might look a bit more like a rictus, and shook his head.

Then Cordelia rounded the corner.

“Xander? Ugh, I have been looking all over for you—cheerleading practice just ended, and you are going to walk some of the girls home.”

“I am?”

She rolled her eyes and tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“Of course. I know you and Buffy and Willow are all over this wild dog thing, and since I haven’t heard anything from you about it being over with… yes. You get to play protector, for all the good that’ll do us.”
“Thanks, Cordy. Your confidence really gives me a happy. Really.”

She smirked and started walking towards the gym—Xander sighed and followed.

He could catch up with Buffy and Giles afterwards.”

He’d also like to say that he’d actually been there for the take-down of the werewolf; but in reality he got there just in time to see Willow—Willow!—shoot the tranq gun and put Fluffy to sleep. Like, actual sleep.

The guy sure could snore.

“I shot Oz.” Willow sounded like she might be in shock.

“What?”

He ducked, the strange guy with stubble he’d appeared besides swinging at him.

“Hey, hey, hey! No need for violence!”

“Heck, what are you supposed to be?”

Xander frowned and leaned to look around him. Buffy was picking up the guy’s gun.

“Buffy? Who is—” he interrupted himself to turn to the guy and say, “be careful of red eyes and blue teeth, green collars will choke you through the West. Well that makes about as much sense as ever. But seriously, who’s this guy?”

The man scoffed, but his eyes went contemplative.

“Seer, huh? You particularly attached to your eyes, kid? Split the profit with you for ‘em… still a pretty penny, and I know a guy to do the surger—”

“What? No! No, no, nonono!” He poofed behind Buffy, entirely unashamed. She’d dealt with the weird spider-egg monster, she could deal with this guy no problem. “Very attached! Buffy, seriously, I leave you alone for like two hours and suddenly you’re hanging around guys like this? Not cool—though good job with Fluffy.”

The man scoffed again, rolling his eyes.

“No wonder this town’s overrun with monsters. No one here’s man enough to kill ‘em!”

“Oh I wouldn’t be too sure of that.”

Xander wasn’t sure what the man could have done to merit a show of Slayer Strength (aside from that black-market-y thing he offered with his eyes), but the gun barrel bending impressed him. That was not an easy thing to do—and the shotgun would be useless. Xander thought he could probably save the scope, but…

Buffy shoved the ruined weapon at the guy—wait, were those teeth around his neck?

“How about you let the door hit you in the ass on the way outta town?”

Xander scrunched his nose (because ugh, teeth, teeth were always creepy), but gave Buffy his mental tally of badass points. In pastel purple leather jacket and a ponytail, she’d totally just stared
down Shotgun Toting Tooth-Necklace Guy.

Werewolf snores punctuating his departure, Xander looked down at their furry friend. At Willow, crouched next to him.

“So… what’s this about Oz?”

“So I never actually asked—and it seems silly now that we know who it was going wild in the moonlight—but how did your talk with Larry go?”

Xander leaned on the vending machine and laughed. Laughed a little more. Stopped laughing when the look Buffy was giving him turned concerned.

“Hah, um, yeah. Went well enough. I guess. Definitely not a werewolf…”

A couple seniors knocked the books from a freshman’s hands, jeering when she bent to pick them up—Larry appeared and bent to help her.

In an amazing show of dominance among the Senior Ranks, the other two seniors backed down under the look Larry gave them.

Xander was all for Larry’s sudden care for not being a total jerk to girls, but he had an uneasy feeling he knew why.

Suddenly, the side of the vending machine was just—fascinating. He hadn’t noticed before, but it was all grooved on the edges, and there was hardly anything carved into the sides by bored students…

“Hey, Xander, look, about what you did… I owe you.”

Xander was all set to nod and hope he left, but then Buffy had to get all curious. “What did you do?”

Larry looked to Xander. Great, now he had to answer.

“It’s really nothing we should be talking about… ever. Or really, if Larry wants to talk about his, um… yeah, then he can totally do that, no shame in that, but I don’t… mmm.”

“Oh, I know, I know!” Larry nodded, probably thinking he knew what Xander was talking about, but didn’t. “It’s just, well… thanks.”

And then with one last ridiculously thankful look, Larry clapped him on the arm and walked away.

Xander slowly let out a breath, because…

Buffy raised an eyebrow.

“Isn’t that…?”

“Yes.” It was indeed right where he’d gotten scratched.

“And doesn’t it…?”

“Hurt like hell? Oh yes.” It was throbbing.

She winced.
“C’mon, let’s make a quick stop at the library; I know for a fact that Giles keeps pain pills around for after training.”

“You know, I only agreed to get Devon away from the library… you don’t actually have to come with, if you don’t want to.”

Oz raised an eyebrow.
“You realize Devon is my friend, right?”

“Well, yeah, but aren’t you tired from last night or something?”
“Only a little sore… Look, Xander, I’m fine. I swear. Just be sure to let me know when you’re ready to head out.”

Xander was about to say that Oz didn’t have to leave when he did if he didn’t want to when they reached the door to Devon’s place.

Oz opened the door, but paused.

“Oh, and uh don’t smoke anything before running it by me first, okay?”

Xander made a face, thinking of his Uncle Murphy’s yellow teeth and gross fingers, but followed after Oz down to the basement…

Oh. Oooh.

That kind of smoking.

Well, Oz wouldn’t have to worry about that, either, not after what Robo-Ted’s cooking had done to him—

His eyes caught on a table in the corner.

Ooh, brownies!

Chapter End Notes

Warning you now that there’s some pretty explicit stuff in this. At talk of alternate universes, be careful, and really I don’t know if I should be changing the rating or not. Gore, violence, death, all that great stuff. But… Casual regard for violence is still violence.

Thanks to everyone for all the support, and sorry it took so long to get this out! But hey, it’s got a LOT of stuff in it… and more Spike and Drusilla coming up next! It’ll be great :)  Thanks for the support, let me know what you think!
The basement had walls covered in a mismatch of band posters and colourful blankets; futons and couches and chairs filling the room in rough semi-circles. On every couch and chair and pillow there was collectively more than two dozen people Xander only vaguely recognized as maybe from school, probably from the Bronze, and even in the multi-colored strings of Christmas lights set up the air was tinged grey with how much smoke there was.

He wondered if that was the point, or if he should probably open a window or something.

Low music created a rolling continuous sound as people alternated between pulling out instruments and fiddling around with Devon’s music collection. It wasn’t like any party Xander had ever been to before, and that was either good or bad or someplace in between both at the same time.

Devon was a nice guy.

Like a really nice guy.

And Xander hadn’t been invited to too many parties, to be perfectly honest.

Xander was really comfortable, just lying back on his couch and it was just really… everything was really soft. It’s nice. Xander just felt really calm, and it’s nice.

And Devon keeps bringing him more brownies.

They’re good, and Xander thought he’d have reached his too-much-food stage ages ago, but…

He swallowed, the taste of chocolate coating his mouth.

Actually, he could probably still eat…
Oz fell into the seat next to him, and Xander grinned widely. Oz froze, staring, expectant and startled.

Xander waited, wondering what was up. Licked over the front of his teeth, sucking, wondering if maybe he had chocolate on his teeth?

“Um, you’re not… saying anything.”

Xander shrugged, still smiling. “I was about to say the same thing. Hey, Oz, can you write when you’re all wolfy? Like, words-writing, not making note of fluff.” Xander asks.

“…I don’t think so,” Oz replies. “Why?”

“The proper definition of a man is an animal that writes letters. Or something like that.” He frowned; searching Oz’s face for the right set of letters before remembering that you can’t read people’s faces like that. Not really.

(That was unfortunate. If he could that would be truly novel.)

It would make social interactions much easier, otherwise.

“I can’t remember who said that, but I guess it doesn’t matter because I just did.” He blinked and grinned at the room at large before remembering regular social convention. “Wait, no, rewind a moment—what’s up Oz? I mean, hi? Hello.”

Xander pursed his lips, wondering if he’d gotten that right. Should he have started with Goodbye? Or toodles? Toodles was a neat word. Did Oz ask who’d said what?

He wanted to know why people asked him who said what so many times—he wasn’t always quoting, and if sometimes he was who was to know if it’d actually been said in this universe, in this state of being?

“I was kind of wondering the same thing, Xander.” Oz said, not at all about what he was actually thinking. “Your eyes have gone all…” he tapped his temple gently. Xander sighed, happy. It was good when people were worried over you; it meant they cared. It was nice to know Oz cared, even if they’d known each other for, like, ages already. As long as—or not as long as Willow, he frowned, but surely for a long time right? Maybe. They would know each other for a long time, and that was almost the same thing, wasn’t it?

But he cared. That was a good thing.

But if he and Willow always cared…. No, not yet, at least. A matter for another time.

That made all the stressy-stress horribleness of the past however long a lot better, or at least less bad. Possibly both. Oncoming things would be difficult, but then they’d be better, he knew. They would inevitably come ‘round back to horrible, in some way, at some point—several points, even, but they’d get better.

“Things will get better,” he reassures Oz with a smile, “so long as there’s clear communication, caring between friends, and a few other feel-good sentiments. Or something. But things will also be less bad if I stay away from drugs. Drugs make you go blind, you know—or me. You? I don’t know. Someone,” he draws the word out, stretching it out to encompass a larger crowd, “has probably said it. And if not, I did.”

Oz frowned at the table in front of Xander, examining the ends of cigarettes and not-cigarettes
collected there in ashtrays and discarded cups.

“Xander you didn’t…”

“Nope,” he replies with a small grin. “I’ve been told doing drugs makes you go blind. But, then again, I’ve also been told that about masturbation…” he shook his head. “I’ve just been sitting here, drinking water and eating brownies! And not masturbating!”

“I have!”

“Me too!”

Xander shot finger guns at the stranger across the room. “No high fives for you, but I like the confidence!”

Oz paused. Impressive, Xander thought, as he wasn’t doing anything to really pause at, but there he was.

“…Brownies?”

“Yeah, I tried one and it was good, and then your buddy Devon just kept bringing more over…” at the growing frown-y look on Oz’s face, Xander shook his head and, after a moment of thought, put a hand on his arm. Contact helped… right? Or something like that. His memory was a bit fuzzy on that. Contact good?

Non violent contact, he confirmed.

He felt a bit like he was playing a video game where the graphics were lagging, everything just a little too disjointed for him to react in what was probably an appropriate time-frame…

Nothing had gone to pixels, yet, at least.

“No, no, don’t worry. They were really good brownies.” He grinned. “I didn’t know I was that hungry until he just kept bringing them over.”

Xander leaned back on the couch with a sigh. “Such a nice guy.”

Oz sighed too, but his sigh was a bit more… frustrated sounding. Worrying.

He should have a brownie.

Oz shakes his head when Xander tells him this, raking a hand through his hair. It sticks up differently, now.

“Great…” He stood, pulling Xander up with him by the elbow. Xander grinned and let him. Xander was feeling all floaty, and Oz was fun. He was a cool guy too.

No wonder he was a friend of Devon’s.

Oz looks at him wide-eyed for a moment, got the same little wrinkle between his eyebrows as Willow did when she encountered a situation she had absolutely no experience to draw on. It was cute.

Xander looked down and immediately saw the not-problem; his feet weren’t touching the ground.

He remembered gravity and straightened out from his mid-air seated position, from a slightly-off
universe where the world was just that slightest bit bigger, where the room was just a little bit higher, sneakered feet sinking into carpet. He made sure they stopped before going through the floor, one universe down, and smiled at Oz. Waited for what was next.

“…Right. C’mon, we should get you home…”

Xander sat back down. On the couch, this time.

“Xander, c’mon, we should really go…”

Xander shook his head, scrunching his nose.

“Home is not a good idea,” he says sadly. “I blew off Spike and Dru and kind of Angel-Angelus because otherwise Devon would have seen the tranquilizer gun.”

“…You’re still having tea parties with those two? Or… three?”

“Oh, no,” he shook his head, and grinned with the feeling of it. He just felt so loose. “I haven’t. Not since Angel went all… pssh,” he waved a hand. “But he was all fine and like, Wonderland-y that time after he killed Theresa—which was totally uncool, and he’ll be all extra broody after we get him back to brickfaced Broody Angel—but then I promised that I’d be by once the werewolf stuff was over with. Not,” he conceded with a small nod, “that you were dealt with, not in our usual fashion, or even that the werewolf stuff is even really over with, but I don’t think that’ll keep Drusilla from screaming or Spike from sitting on me.”

“Screaming? Sitting on you?”

Xander nodded.

“…And instead you’re here.”

Xander nodded.

“…And you don’t want to go home because Spike and/or Drusilla might be at your house? Where your parents are? And Spike will… sit on you?”

Xander opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned. “Well, we had an agreement, but that was conditional to the tea parties, so…”

Oz sighed, but was remarkably calm. Xander was remarkably calm. The thought of Spike and Drusilla being pissed off should get his heart pounding, but… Well, he wasn’t looking forward to being sat on; especially since he wasn’t wholly sure only Spike would be doing the sitting.

“Xander. Xander, would Spike or Drusilla hurt your parents? Or, or would Angelus?”

“No.” A beat. “…Maybe.”

Oz sighed again

“How many brownies did you eat?”

“So many,” he shrugs, and gives Oz a sad look. “You’ll be leaving soon, won’t you?” He shakes his head before Oz can answer, because of course he doesn’t know, not yet. But he probably would. He could already feel the distance yawning between them. “Not yet, I mean, but soon. Not really soon, but sooner than would be likely otherwise.” He gives Oz a long look, because Willow wouldn’t be happy, but there was a large likelihood that Oz would make her a bit more upset with his absence,
for various reasons.

They’d both be upset in different ways once he came back, was the thing.

“Communication,” he repeats, because that would be significant.

“We’ll both be leaving soon,” Oz says after giving Xander an odd look, and Xander doesn’t have the heart to tell him that that’s not what he meant. He was talking farther than that. Oz let out a little breath, too worried to be a proper sigh. His eyes were full of worry, too, enough that Xander wondered how he could breathe or see with so much worry blocking the way. “Did Devon tell you what was in the brownies?”

“Mmm, no. Chocolate? There’s definitely chocolate in the brownies. And chocolate chips. Chewy bits around the edges. They were delicious.” He smiled and then frowned, because Oz was actually looking… upset. Not calm. Xander didn’t really want to be around if Oz and Devon got to fighting. He liked Devon, and didn’t want to have to freak him out if he had to help Oz beat him up for whatever reason. Even in the midst of looking not-calm, Oz frowned at him with some concern—oh. Xander put his hand back down from where it was covering his left eye.

Xander didn’t want to fight. Someone could lose an eye.

“Oz, I can just, y’know,” he wiggled his fingers, “back home, or to Willows, or to Buffy’s. It’s Friday, so no school or anything… oh! I could grab Larry for you!”

Oz frowned, and his eyes kept skipping away from his. “You know… if you’re planning on beating up Devon. He’d be much more useful than I would, just saying.”

That made Oz laugh, at least, and Xander lit up with a grin. It lessened, somewhat, thinking about how Larry was feeling more comfortable with himself, but Xander still hadn’t reacted… the best way. He should apologize, probably, and hope in another universe another Xander learned from his mistakes.

“No worries, Xander… but I think it might be best if you headed out. Just remember to grab some food, drink lots of water… and try to stay out of trouble.” Oz seemed to consider his own words, and then winced. “Maybe I should go with you…”

Xander laughed and stood with Oz, pulling him into a hug immediately. “Oz. Oz. Ozzy-ozzy oxen free. Free oxen. Free oxygen. No, wait—Go deal with Daaaaaa…” he trailed off. “You know, I’ve forgotten his name? Don’t tell him I said that, though. He’s still a pretty good guy, even if he got you angry. But really, go deal with David? Darren. Donny. Go deal with Danny, because I can get home safe, and he may or may not be choking on his own vomit right this moment.”

When Oz pulled back from the hug to give him a look, Xander shrugged. “I have no idea. But he’ll mostly be one of the people who’ll survive Sunnydale, except where he isn’t; contrariwise to the times he lives past graduation. Graduation will be rough in any iteration. I’m not sure this time, though.” And he really wasn’t. “But you should go, just in case I’m right and just in case I’m wrong, and I’ll head out the front door and ffft,” he let him go to wiggle his fingers, turning it into an odd little goodbye wave to the room at large. Several people waved back, blinking through the smoke-hazy room. Xander stood and pulled Oz into one more hug, because hugging was great when he remembered to give them, and then started to back away towards the door. He almost trips over an ornate glass… thing, vase? But doesn’t when someone snatches it out of the way. “Don’t you dare break her!” He smiles and doesn’t mention that her thing would break in a month’s time when she uses it to defend against a vampire. Doesn’t mention it because she’ll get a thing she likes better a
week before that, so she’ll get over it. When she breaks it over the vampires head, it’ll dent the metal helmet it’s got on for whatever reason. Smash, crack, bong.

Or nothing will happen at all and that would be survivable, too.

“I’ll be on my way. See ya Monday!”

There’s no one on the stairs when he heads up to the main floor… he hesitates in front of the door, because he swears he can smell more brownies being baked in the kitchen…

Someone knocks on the door.

Xander looks around to see if anyone else seems to have heard.

Someone knocks again so, shrugging, Xander opens the door.

Grins wide.

“You bloody little—”

“Spike!”

The thundery expression on Spike’s face only lessens teensy bit when Xander throws his arms around him in a hug. When he leans back, arms still around his shoulders, Spike’s eyes flash yellow; Xander beams.

“You’re standing! And without crutches! That is equally good and terrifying—mmmm I’d rather you didn’t do that.” Much like he did the first time he’d shown up in Spike and Drusilla’s warehouse, back when Kendra had been in town, Spike had grabbed a handful of his hair to hold him steady and was using his other hand to keep his eyes wide open.

“Yeah shut it… What’d you do to your eyes?” He snorted. “Angelus won’t be pleased if you’ve gone permanently blue eyed.” His eyes hardened, and his one hand clenched tight in Xander’s hair. With the other he kicked at the door so it slammed against the wall and bounced back shut.

Xander winced but didn’t make a noise at the manhandling.

“What in the bloody hell made you think that Angelus bein’ ‘round had any effect on our deal, eh?” Spike wrenches his head back further and started marching him down the street. “Three nights a week without fail was the deal, and Dru’s been in a right snit. Even with Angelus about playing her sodding Sire… Bloody fuck you are going nowhere for the next couple days, even if I have to sit on you…”

He stopped, and wrenched Xander’s head back up again.

“You reek of chocolate. What were you takin’ in there? Smelled like a bloody sex pistols concert…”

Xander scrunched his nose, because smoking was still… no.

Spike rolled his eyes and at least shifted his grip to the back of Xander’s neck instead of gripping his hair.

“C’mon lovey, use your words. I know you’ve got ‘em. You can tell ol’ Spike what you got up to, eh?”

Xander grinned wide and shrugged a little.
“It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” he says, “but I remember Oz wasn't happy when I told him.” He tilted his head and considered Spike for a moment, asks, “Will you get upset if I tell you I ate brownies, too?”

Spike laughs and ruffled his hair, and while that was nice Xander felt like sitting down. Soon. Not right then, but soon.

“And how many brownies did you have, hmm?”

Xander smiled and found a good spot of sidewalk to sit. Sat down, ignoring the slight sting from where Spike’s nails scraped the back of his neck. It'd be fine.

“Many brownies—all the brownies, I think.” Spike crouched next to him, pulling at where he’d moved one hand to cover his eye.

“What’s all this then, ay? What’d you do to your eye?”

“I didn’t do anything to it. Someone will, though the lottery’s still going. You should sit, it’s a good time to sit, Spike.”

“No, I think you’ll find it’s time to walk.”

Xander shook his head and covered his face with his hands, laughing and worrying because he wasn’t looking forward to what would and maybe shouldn’t be happening soon and in a while.

He felt Spike’s fingers tickle at the back of his neck, where it was feeling damp from where his nails had scratched. It hurt a bit when Spike rubbed his fingers through the wound, shallow though it was. He heard a faint wet noise and figured that Spike wasn’t letting anything go to waste.

“You’re not yourself, pet…” Spike didn’t sound very concerned about this, more thoughtful than anything, so Xander stayed sitting on the sidewalk. Obviously nothing was wrong.

He peeked through his fingers at Spike, curious.

“Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up; if not, I'll stay down here till I'm someone else.”

“Or,” Spike says, bending to get a grip under each of Xander’s arms, lifting, “I could do this and just bring you with me.”

Xander grinned and draped one arm over Spike’s shoulders. It was slightly awkward with Spike being a bit shorter than him, but vampire strength and that lovely floaty feeling made it all too easy to walk leaning on Spike. Or not walk; his feet weren’t actually touching the ground.

“You win! Or something like that. Oh! How fine you look when dressed in rage,” he quotes, the words lining up neatly on his tongue like card soldiers. “Your enemies are fortunate that your condition is not permanent. And you're lucky too: red eyes suit so few.” Xander laughed because Spike didn’t have red eyes, and Spike gave him a curious look.

“Can’t quite tell if that was you or the brownies talking.”

“So many brownies,” Xander agrees, “I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense. At some point, somewhere else, that meant something, but we don’t have that kind of tea here—no, not tea…Hmm…”

They were silent for a while, Xander trying to figure out just what he was trying to say, when he realized it didn’t matter. Not here, anyway.
“Hey Spike,” he says, “Did you want to take a shortcut?”

Spike is laughing, grinning wide when they appear, and Drusilla tackles Xander to the ground. Snarls in his face. Her teeth seem large, seem more than very sharp, and her left incisor is very close to his eye. Not the eye he’s most concerned for, though, so it’s fine.

His tailbone might be bruised, but Xander grins up at her, cradling her snarling features in his palms. Soothes his thumbs under her eyes.

“Happy Birthday!”

Her game face fades to a pout.

“You’re late.”

“Terribly,” he agrees, and plays with the hem of her dress. It was red this time. “Your dress is pretty.”

Dru flicked his nose hard enough to sting and shook a finger at him. “None of that… now what have you done to make my Spike snicker so?”

Xander shrugged and smiled when Spike swooped down to swing Drusilla up and around, still laughing.

“Bloody brilliant, no wonder you disappear at the drop of a hat!”

“I don’t wear hats,” Xander says, perfectly happy to stay sitting on the ground. At some point someone had gotten a bunch of carpets, and the one he was on was really soft. It was nice. He pushed his fingers into the fibers, kneading. His nails aren’t sharp.

Spike picked up and twirled Drusilla, making her laugh, and dipped her low beside Xander.

He grinned at her upside-down—from her perspective, at least. And maybe from his own, he wasn’t quite sure.

She reached for his face, trailing her nails along his cheek—there was a steady increase in pressure.

Xander smiled at her. Her nails broke skin, and a thin trail of wetness ran down his cheek. He twitched his nose, a faint trail of blood from when she’d flicked him making itself known.

He worried, distantly, as her pinky had dug in perilously close to his eye. He’s fairly sure that’s a bad thing. There were a bunch of face things, ligaments and tendons and stuff, probably. Important face things that did important things and shouldn’t be cut.

Probably.

She hummed at him when he finally leaned away, Spike pulling her up from the dip. Xander wondered why Spike was frowning.

“Now wait a mo’, what’s happening with you? Did someone magic you, or something?”

That had Xander laughing, because no, no one had. He didn’t think so. But he did get hit with the major mojo more times than most, didn’t he? But he didn’t think he’d been hit by anything. Except, kind of, by Spike and Drusilla. He hadn’t lost his right eye, though…
But then it was more scratches and flicks rather than hitting, and he thought that was ok?

His focus, quite suddenly, shifted to Spike.

“I’m going to make a mistake, soon. A really bad decision, you should—” Xander stopped, tilted his head, and scrunched his nose. “No, you can’t do anything about it. It’ll happen at school. And it’ll probably most definitely happen.”

“What’s the mistake, then?”

“Hmm? Oh, I don’t know.” He grinned. “Probably something bad. Ish.” He turned to Drusilla. “You’ve got something on your fingers.”

Drusilla sighed, staring at the red on the tips of her nails. “Sometimes the colours… the colours are too yellow…” she makes a small wounded noise in her throat listing into Spike’s side. Lifted her hand to Spike’s face and let him lick the blood on her fingers clean.

Xander nodded, understanding completely.

“A little too green from my perspective.”

Drusilla tuts, shaking her head at him. “That’s because you’ve much too much blue in your sight, kitten… Kitty’s had too much cream.”

“No luv,” Spike denies for him, grinning. “He’s had a few too many brownies.”

“Brownies?”

Xander looked up at where Angel had appeared from the shadows, noticed a stinging on his face… thought about it, and winced. Frowned, downward, because that made his nose hurt worse.

Brought a hand up to feel the tackiness of slightly dried blood on his face, and remembered that what he was thinking of hadn’t happened yet, the cuts hadn’t healed yet, and when he refocused on Angel he remembered another thing that hadn’t happened yet.

“No.”

Angel crouches right in front of him, face a friendly mask with knife-holes for eyes. He reached to Xander’s face—pulled his hand down from covering his eye.

After a moment, Xander flinched, a vague memory-will-wouldn’t-maybe-could-be of another hand going for his face—different hand, going for his face, different hand, going for his face, different hand, going for his face, different hand—

“I’ll go blind,” he says with a slight frown, hand coming up again. “Or half-blind. I think I remember my Gram saying that once—different situation altogether, but I don’t think I have enough eyes to go around.” He grinned, sudden and sharp, and Drusilla laughed.

“Creepy people after my eyes… Creepers after my peepers—jeepers creepers they’re after my peepers! Hah!”

It’s funny even though Xander doesn’t like the idea of being blind, or losing an eye, or even being eyed like he knows people soon will… eye… him. His head feels light like a cloud, but words keep drip dribbling from his tongue, burbling like a creek. Damn it.

He jerked his head to the side, the crack of a slap registering to his ears only after wards. He turned
back, confused, and tilted his head at Drusilla, somehow back on his lap. The throbbing in his cheek was a welcome respite from the itchy sting of the scratch on his cheek and nose—why were they still there? He’d thought they’d heal by now. He’d gotten wounded way back… no, wait, when had he gotten injured? He couldn’t remember, but it couldn’t have been recently.

“Daddy, Spike, I don’t like him like this…” She gripped his hair in on hand and stroked, pulling, pulling…

“Ouch!” His hand went to his cheek where he’d been slapped, fingers moving through the wetness that was only now registering. Her nails had cut him.

He made a face at her when the hair pulling hurt, had apparently been hurting for a while now… his scalp ached, now.

Drusilla moved in close and licked at the blood between his fingers, focus divided between licking up the blood and moving his fingers away with her tongue. Xander suddenly remembered, again, again, again, and leaned to the left to look at Angel again. Drusilla’s lukewarm tongue distracted him for a moment, but not long enough to derail his train of thought.

“No,” he shook his head. “No.”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that, Xander.”

“Boy’s gotten a bit slow, ay?”

Xander didn’t jump from the sound of Spike directly behind him, his voice still laced with a hint of laughter—Xander did make a small noise of thanks when Spike took the hand still tugging on his hair, on his scalp, and removed it, threading their fingers together instead.

“Spike, make him stop. I don’t like him like this. Kitten is not here.”

“What you talking about love? You’re right on top of ‘im.”

“No, no,” she started to rock, “he’s not, kitten has gone far, far into his own lit’le head, his mind is like swirls… whirling… whirling away from me, Spike. Make him stop. Mummy doesn’t like him this way. Bring kitten home before his ickle face disappears beneath the waters…”

Xander looked around Drusilla again, pulling her into a loose hug when she leaned in, to look at a slightly troubled looking Angel.

“No,” he repeats. “Whatever you’re just planning right now, no. No. Or whatever you were planning before… I can’t tell. You have a plan, will have a plan, and it’s a bad plan, but I can’t tell which one, when, or…” Xander tilted his head again, curious. “Was it you? Was it your plan that’s bad, or…” he trailed off, thinking. “Am I talking about my mistake? Will it be the same thing? Hmm. I want another brownie.”

“I think you’ve had enough brownies.” Xander would agree with that, except he was feeling a bit… distressed? He thought? He was feeling somehow dangerously disconnected from himself, a little bit like he should be shaking, or like some bad mojo was going down and like he should be hyper alert and worried over this. And he didn’t like the feeling. Chocolate usually helped.

Xander made his hands disappear to Damian? Dylan? Darcy’s house, to the brownies in his oven, and brought the brownies back to him.

Chin on Drusilla’s shoulder, he looked down at the pan in his hands…. And realized that he didn’t
know what to do with hot brownies. They were very hot. He didn’t even have a knife. He was about to disappear his hands again to get a knife, but his hands were shaking, and there was a smell…

“Bloody fuck!”

Spike, or someone, took the metal pan of brownies from him, but his hands kept shaking. The brownies were very hot.

The pan they’d been in was very hot.

It made sense, he supposed.

The brownies had been in an oven…

Spike was sniffing at the pan he’d thrown to the nearest table, scowling and puzzled. “Don’t think chocolate’s the only special ingredient in these…”

“Kitten doesn’t have eyes for himself.” Drusilla leaned back from his very loose hug, expression uncharacteristically solemn. “Kitten must sleep the brownies away, else I may scoop his eyes out to suck the blue from them.”

Before she fully got her fingers up, before she got her hand fully off from around his shoulders, Xander felt his eyes drooping because she would, she would…

He fingers were only just wavering in front of him when he felt his eyelids flutter and droop. His last thought was for why his hands hurt so much, and why they wouldn’t stop shaking, throbbing, throbbing…

He has a splitting headache when he wakes up, the kind that usually meant he’d had way too many Dr. Pepper’s before he’d gone to bed, and maybe a bag or two too much candy. Dehydration and sugar-high recovery were way with the not-good for the ol’ noggin.

Or something similar.

His hands hurt, too; his palms ached like he’d spent all night carving stakes, or like when he’d dug the grave for the Master and skipped out on using gloves. But worse. His fingers felt raw. He could feel his pulse in his palms.

He keeps his eyes closed from experience, and rolls over to bury his face in the blankets, to pull a pillow over his head. The material chafed against his hands, stinging and unpleasant.

He figures he’s at Spike and Drusilla’s lair since that pillow is immediately pulled away, but he’d been around them long enough to know how to get his way with two violent, super strong vamps.

His disappears his head instead, enjoying the floaty feeling of In Between. After a second of further thought he also disappeared his hands, sighing at the cool relief to his palms.

A body immediately rolls onto his own.

It is much larger than Spike’s.

Then he remembers.

Oh.
Right.

Angelus.

“It’s time to wake up,” Angelus rumbles against Xander’s back. It was like having a lion against his back.

Or a Dandelion.

He almost snorted at the thought, the memory of petal-soft fur seen from a book warring with fur-soft petals from not-memory, all warring with what sort of a reaction he’d get if he told Angelus that he reminded him of a dandelion. Big and heavy and kind of soft and not terribly warm. Also dangerous.

Room-temperature breath stirred the hairs at the base of his neck.

It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards, Xander thinks. He wished he could play this forward so he could figure out how the hell—

Oh.

Oh no.

Disappearing and appearing a few feet to the left—out from under Angelus, his neck more out of reach from mouth-contact—he felt more than heard Spike grunt from the impact, and scrambled more left. It was interesting, without hands. Drusilla caught him up into a hug Xander was mostly okay with falling into; her hugs were sometimes in the awkward levels of comfortable, as she had no problem squishing his face into her more than ample chest like he was one of her dolls. Then there was the awkwardness that came up when Xander considered the thing/not-thing he had going on with Cordelia, not to mention his fondness for breathing.

(It really was 50/50 sometimes if he was more likely to get smothered by Drusillas boobs or by Cordelia if she ever saw this.)

But here, now, he still had his head In Between so he wouldn’t feel the splitting headache he’d apparently gotten from Devon’s drug brownies.

God, Xander was going to… to do something when he saw him next. He was fairly certain that giving drugs to unsuspecting ANYONE was a no-no… and Devon had given Xander quite a few brownies. He’d laughed and encouraged Xander into what he’d originally thought had been a mild pre chocolate coma haze. He felt especially stupid then, too; he knew about putting weed into cookies and other snack-foods, should have checked once he’d seen that recreational drugs were, well. Around.

Internally groaning, and shoving Drusilla away enough that he’d have room enough for his head, he brought his head (and the headache) back and looked around—tried, he tried to look around.

Blinking hard, and straining his eyes to see through the darkness he saw… nothing. Nothing? Did he forget to bring back his eyes? No…

He shook his head, pulling back further from Drusilla.

“Something wrong, love?”

“Can someone turn on a light or something? I can’t…”
“I like the light from the red candles best…” Drusilla trailed off, one hand leaving him. “…Pretty. The wax burns skin so nicely.”

“Oh,” he replied, absently patting Drusilla’s arm. “Oh, so…”

So there was light. The light was on. Xander just couldn’t… he just…

Xander couldn’t see. At all. He blinked, hard, and waited a long moment just in case it was one of those times when he was just moving a bit too quickly. You know the situation, where you get up too suddenly and suddenly you can’t see for about a minute but once it passes you just… drink water or something.

But the not-seeing was lasting quite a bit longer than he remembered ever not seeing anything with his eyes open. And his head wasn’t rushing… Still achy, not any better after he’d shaken his head, so…

He felt a slight breeze against his face, faint enough he only really felt it on his cheeks, and jerked back.

“Did you just—did someone just wave their hand in front of my face? Not cool, not—that’s not supposed to be a thing that you actually do, that’s supposed to be something comic book and cartoon characters do. And you aren’t supposed to do that—” Xander cut himself off, a slightly slurred life lesson from years ago coming to mind. Rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, hard enough that it hurt through his pounding headache.

“Drugs do make you blind, oh my god my mom was right, I had drug brownies and they made me blind, I thought mom just made that up but—”

“Shhh!” Drusilla hissed and smacked him, bringing a startling ache and sting to his face. Why did his cheek hurt so much? “Kitten will be put in time out if he can’t stop yowling.” His hand, when he brought it to his face, shook. His palms felt… shiny. Tender. Swollen, a bit. Did he do something to his hands?

“What? How are you going to do that if I can’t see you—Ouch wh—mmph!”

He assumed the smack to the head came from Drusilla, but the smell of cigarettes coming from the hand over his mouth told him that this was from Spike. He’d lick his palm if he wasn’t sure Spike would take that as an invitation. For what, he wasn’t sure, but Spike was always warning Xander that one day he’d take him up on this or that invitation and he assumed it was either sexual or otherwise demon-y. Both of which he was especially NOT taking him up on.

He breathed heavily out his nose when—probably Spike—used his fingers to keep his eyelids open. It was more reaction than any real expectation to escape that had him jerking against the hold Spike and Drusilla had him in. He jerked again when yet more fingers pulled his other eye open, felt entirely justified in being more freaked out, because Drusilla was keeping his arms at his sides, Spike had one hand in use on his eye and the other over his mouth, so that left…

“Your heart is pounding so hard, Xander. If you aren’t careful, I might think you’re afraid of me. You can’t think that I would try taking your eyes…”

Xander didn’t actually need to see to know Angelus was grinning, or probably smirking right now, he was apparently that sort of guy—less with the brooding expressions, more of the jock-like facial contortions of cockiness.

Shaking one hand loose from Drusilla’s hold he pulled at Spike’s hand—it wasn’t fair that Angelus
could use his creepy asshole-y-ness but Xander’s main defense/attack was being muffled by nicotine stained fingers. His fingers ached terribly, but he thought he was putting up a good enough fight.

Somewhat typically, though, Spike’s hand stayed where it was.

“You don’t have any pupils, so keep your gob shut already.”

It probably says something that his first instinct is to rush to a mirror—

Because for one, he can’t see and therefore that’s absolutely useless, and for another he’s in the villainous vampire lair, and vampires don’t have mirrors. Because vampires. So there’s that.

He hmm’d, frowning when Spike’s hold on him made his lips buzz.

He wasn’t entirely sure why him not having pupils meant he couldn’t see, except that people had pupils, normally.

Seeing people.

And him not being able to see and him not having pupils was obviously connected as, when he could see, he also had pupils.

Or at least no one had told him otherwise, or that he’d noticed.

Though, speaking of noticing…

What time was it?

Willow would probably be alarmed to hear that Xander was more worried about the fact that it was Sunday than he was about the whole not-seeing thing.

She’d be alarmed at it all—especially the whole being unconscious for more than 30+ hours in the vampire-y vampiric lair—but probably especially alarmed at the blindness. Possibly (hopefully) temporary blindness.

Though she’d probably be alarmed at more than just those things if she were here, too—

Like how no one would tell him what time of day/night it was after fessing up that it was Sunday (and getting them to say even that much had been a miracle unto itself), or how Angelus seemed to be alternating between acting like they were best buds and trying to scare Xander into an early grave.

Though considering, you know, vampires, it could be both.

Spike is acting weird and kind of territorial throughout this too, of course, because there’s no better time to change up your normal behavior than when you’ve got a somewhat hapless blind human around to sit on.

Of course, Xander can kind of see (ha) why.

He’d thought Spike and Drusilla were the super creepy gooey romantic murder couple, but that was—well, no, they still were, but Drusilla was somehow worse with Angelus.

And where Spike calmed Drusilla down from where she got upset or confused Angelus seemed to enjoy bringing up old terrors and, from the sounds of it, introducing new ones.
Also from the sound of it, Drusilla didn’t seem to have an issue with it.

Xander shivered.

Now Drusilla and Angelus were off in a corner (or maybe the center of the room, Xander couldn’t exactly look and check), Angelus murmuring things (Xander didn’t want to know) that made Drusilla shriek with laughter.

Somehow in retaliation, Spike shoved Xander onto his belly and took up shop sitting on his back. From the sounds of it, he’d grabbed a book sometime beforehand, and was now switching between simply sitting on Xander and lying on his back.

Xander didn’t really mind; turns out he’d somehow burned his hands when he’d been impaired from the brownies, and Spike had gotten his hands on some kind of burn lotion. So Spike was dabbing on a new layer of the gel like stuff on his hands in return for using him as some sort of living seat/space heater—not very different from their sleeping arrangement, really. And Xander was still a bit… well, nervous of Angelus would be both an over- and understatement what with the reputation for torture and also Xander’s ability to poof away, but Angelus wasn’t Drusilla or Spike. While Spike wasn’t happy with Angelus taking up all of Drusilla’s attention, Xander was happy that it meant he got some space from Angelus’ intense focus. And Spike was good to talk to when he got confused, so…

Spike kept him from being bored with stories about the various demons and occasional hunter he’d run off and/or killed, his book mostly forgotten. Xander was uncomfortable with the first story about the hunter he’d killed before he remembered the guy who’d been after Were-Oz and offered to split what Xander’s eyes were apparently worth. If hunters were all like that, then they were entirely aware of the terms and conditions involved with hunting expeditions. And going after Spike…

Spike had growled when Xander shared the rather unique experience, which had Xander laughing; with him laying over Xander like this, the rumbling against his back was mildly ticklish. Spike’s worry for him was also funny, though.

“If someone ever actually came after me for my eyes it’s not like they’d get very close, you know?” Xander flicked and wiggled his fingers demonstratively. “Besides, not really a seer/future-seeing type person, so this shouldn’t actually be an issue, right? Right. The hunting guy asked if I wanted to split the money he’d be cheating some stranger out of, and didn’t exactly push when I said no, so seer eyes probably aren’t even worth that much, anyway.”

“Last couple of seer eyes I saw go to the black market went for a cool billion, love, and they weren’t even a matching pair.” Spike rumbled against his back. Xander thought he must be in his game face from what he could hear… while all the vampires he was on a somewhat friendly basis with could speak clearly through their vampire teeth, along with snarl like a freaking lion when out of game face, there was a particular, hmm, inflection when they talked while showing off their vampire-y selves. Xander couldn’t tell right then, though, as he still couldn’t see, so…

“So maybe it was just Buffy that kept him from pushing… Not sure how much use mine would be worth right now even if I were a seer or whatever what with the non-seeing blindness thing I’ve got going on. Not that I am a seer, of course, because I’m not, I’m just very good at giving odd advice, but still. If there was a market for my sort of advice giving eyes, would the price go down without the pupils?” Xander laughed and offered up his hands to Spike again when he felt a tap at his wrists. Spike grumbled more, unimpressed with his logic. “Get your own pair of Harris exclusive eyes! Pupils not included, seer powers not included, blue colour only sometimes included, call now while supplies last!”

“Well,” an entirely unexpected voice replied, “that’s one number I’m definitely interested in calling.”
On top of him, Spike had shifted, no longer as relaxed lounging across his back as he was. “Best be thinking of backing off, girl. Me and my boy here were having a private conversation here.” Menace didn’t quite fit the tone Spike was using, but there was definitely threat there. Xander tilted his head, turning to the surprisingly familiar speaker.

“Theresa? Is that…” Xander’s confusion cleared, and he scowled. “Oh my god Angelus, that is such a, a dick move! You killed Theresa and turned her? Probably only to annoy Buffy, too, that is so, ugh, really?”

“I wouldn’t be annoyed at Master Angelus, Xander,” Theresa said, sounding amused and now a little bit lisp-y. New vamps always had a bit of a lisp when they went fang-faced, though Theresa seemed to have avoided sounding like she’d stuffed cotton in her cheeks. “It’s so much better as a vampire —”

“Not going to stay one long,” Spike interrupted, “if you can’t catch a bloody hint.”

“The uninformed must improve their deficit, or die,” Xander supposed with a small smile Theresa’s way (unless she’d moved), shifting under Spike.

“And people think you’re crazy.” Spike mussed Xander’s hair, scratching at the base of his neck and probably leaving specks of black nail polish in his hair. It was better than when Drusilla left her red polish, anyway.

Regardless, it felt nice, if a bit scratchy. Did he get cut there again?

As ever, Xander wasn’t sure if he should really be pushing into the pleasant feeling or not.

“I’m not saying kill Theresa, Spike—Theresa, I hope you weren’t getting that from what I just said.” Xander craned his neck, hearing her shift and figuring it was only polite, only for Spike to use his grip in his hair to push his head back down.

“Gonna snap your own fucking neck.”

Xander poofed his head to In Between to escape Spike’s grip, and tried elbowing him—flinched, because of course he’d also accidentally hit his palm against the bed, and poofed his hands away as well. With minimal shoving, Spike let him up enough to roll over onto his back before sitting on his stomach and catching hold of his forearms. When Xander only brought back his head, and not his hands, Spike growled.

Xander grinned, and brought his hands back into aching reality. Wiggled his fingers to show they were still a bit damp with ointment.

“Well that’s certainly not a trick you showed off at school.”

“Actually I do it all the time, enough that Willow worries and Giles thinks I’m somehow going to get in trouble… you probably didn’t notice it because you were still under that whole Hellmouth Blindness thing.” Xander wanted to know at what point after (or while) being turned into a vampire that Hellmouth blindness stopped being a thing.

“Oi, you still hanging about?” Xander started to wonder about Hellmouth deafness, since Theresa obviously wasn’t Spike’s favourite anything and was still hanging about… Xander didn’t mind her around, she was nice when she was non-vampire-y and aside from a sudden lisp hasn’t seemed to change.

He turned to where he guessed she was at, grinning.
“You don’t need to see into the future to get that away from Spike might be a better—” he turned, focused slightly to the right of where he was looking.

“Head West, else dire misfor—kkck!” A sudden coughing fit had his throat feeling raw and wet, and he could barely breath through each wracking cough. What the hell? A moment of reprieve had him gasping, before a new wave had him curling upright—as far as Spike would let him—trying to clear his airway. He could taste blood.

Distantly he could hear a familiar crumbling sound, one that was usually followed by Buffy complaining about ashes and dust on her clothing, and the soft shuffle of Drusilla’s slippers.

“Bloody hell, the fuck you do that for, Peaches? Boy’s gone and choked on his words.”

“Naughty, naughty.”

“Hmm, well maybe next time he’ll learn not to go giving away his significant advice to the unworthy. It’s unlikely she would have given his words the care they deserve.”

If Xander could just get the air and the time for it, he’d call bullshit. As it was, he was distracted by the wetness he’d coughed into his hands. Not saliva, judging by the coppery taste it left in his mouth. Blood? Really?

Spike snorted, and pulled at Xander’s hands. Either to look at them for further damage, or possibly because of the probable blood on them, Xander wasn’t sure. The coughing had at least slowed down enough that it was a few weak coughs—and those mostly because Xander could feel an achy tickly rough feeling in his throat that had him worried about if he could actually tear something there? The idea of a cut in his throat brought him back to his mom making him check through all of his Halloween candy for razorblades, because you never know Alexander, and that reminded him of her doing drugs=inevitable blindness thing…

And he had been doing such a good job of not freaking out about the blindness, but it was hard not to freak out when all he could taste was blood, he couldn’t see, his hands hurt, and it was incredibly likely that Theresa had just been dusted. By Angelus, if he was inferring correctly.

“Now I can’t say without hearing the whole of it, but it seemed like she might’a found some use in whatever warning he was going to give.”

Xander could feel his face twisting in confusion as he tried to think what he’d been about to tell Theresa, exactly…

…but had he said anything? Maybe Angelus had just seen his eyes go blue and had dusted Theresa before Xander could say anything.

“How,” Xander paused to clear his throat, voice gravely, “could she have gotten anything from a cough? I didn’t say anything.”

Spike had twisted his hands slightly behind, to where there was a new weight on the bed. Probably Drusilla, he decided, when the slightly ticklish feeling of the blood being licked off his hands. He didn’t think that would be terribly tasty, what with the ointment Spike had been slathering his palms with, but the only pause in the licking was Drusilla making a soft shushing noise.

“What you talking about? You were in the middle of telling the bint to head west to avoid something like dire misfortune. Huh, you got blood on my shirt.”
“Oh, terribly sorry,” Xander cleared his throat and winced at the taste, “I got blood on your shirt? I’m sure this is a new experience for you; I bet you’ve never gotten blood on your shirt before. Let go of my wrists so I don’t get any more of my blood on you, why don’t—hey, hey, hey! That was snark, not invitation!”

Spike only hummed, tilting his wrist further so Drusilla’s little kitten licks could more easily get to his palms. Her tongue wasn’t rough like a cat’s, but his hands were still burned and it hurt.

Something wet and room-temperature and not-something-he-was-thinking-about swiped cross his lips. Xander leaned back in Spike’s hold and gave him an unimpressed look. Kept his mouth closed because Spike definitely wouldn’t hold back the (don’t think about it!) licking just because he might end up licking inside Xander’s mouth. All he could taste right then was blood, so it might actually be something Spike was going for.

“I’m going to cough right in your face.”

“Waste not, want not,” was the only reply he got before being ignored in favor of more licking.

The bed shifted under new weight, and another hand took hold of his wrist from Spike.

Xander, in the tradition of all Harris men faced with something they didn’t want to face, didn’t think about it at all when Angelus cleaned his palm with broad swipes of his tongue.

(It fucking hurt. Also, gross vampire spit.)

“Now then, what were you saying about your significant advice to… Theresa, was it?”

“Nothing,” Xander frowned, “because I didn’t say anything. What advice could I have given Theresa? You just staked her.”

“Because you were going to waste your significant advice on her.”

“Is that something you’re actually going to do now? Stake anyone who I may give significant advice to? Because that’s not cool. And why do you think I would have given her more blue-eyed advice?”

“Kitten has gone and lost a page of his script.”

“What? No, I haven’t. If anything you guys have gone off on a different script entirely. I’m still in Wonderland while you guys are all out, out damn spot with Hamlet.” He wiggled his fingers again for example. Drusilla bit his index finger in retaliation, and wouldn’t let go. He’d wiggle his fingers more, or even disappear the digit In Between, except her teeth were feeling extra sharp and he couldn’t see her face. He couldn’t be entirely sure that she wasn’t going to chew through his finger because he was teasing. He debated adding that the Hamlet thing worked extra because of all the daddy issues collected into one room, but didn’t want to include himself in that.

He also thought that Angelus would probably have more than words about that, and knew Spike would do something.

(He wasn’t sure WHAT, but Spike would probably do something. He was pleasantly unpredictable like that.)

“Script or no, I’d rather we get on the same bloody page here. Seems like pet doesn’t remember his few words of wisdom for dustpile over there.”

“I didn’t forget anything.”
“Well that’s not very convenient.”

“I’m not forgetting anything. I remember everything!”

“Kittens thoughts twist and twine at no ones convenience, least of all his own.”

“And that is beside the point because I did not forget anything!”

Drusilla sighed into his palm; he could feel her smile. “Thoughts so twisted and knotted together, Kitten doesn’t notice when his yarn gets snipped.”

“Y’don’t think our boy here’s unraveling?”

“Hmm,” Dru nipped his palm, “his knots keep him together.”

Xander would have gotten up to pace, he felt so agitated, if Spike weren’t still sitting on him. As it was he pulled his hands free—or rather made them disappear, leaning back on his wrists. Spike at least usually wasn’t like this. He could imagine Drusilla getting confused—maybe he WOULD have said something, but he hadn’t said anything to her before Theresa was dusted. He hadn’t. And he could believe Angelus screwing with his head but Spike trying to screw with him this way…

Making him uncomfortable using sex or something, sure, but Spike didn’t do that. He didn’t try to mess with his head that way. It was Angelus who had fun riling up Drusilla, not Spike.

_Spike_ didn’t mess with him like that.

It made Xander really… uncomfortable, the thought that he could have forgotten—

But he hadn’t! He definitely hadn’t. He remembered every bit of unsolicited advice he’d given out, and he hadn’t given any to Theresa the Vampire. He hadn’t forgotten, he hadn’t.

_What you claim not to know is merely what you’ve denied_, said a voice he’d never heard, yet knew nonetheless. He wanted to scratch her face to ribbons, even if she only existed in his head.

(In this reality, _in this reality she only exists in his head_, and in other realities _she was much, much stronger than he_.)

_But Alice was stronger. Always._

_I don’t need to recapture vagrant memories_, he hisses back in his head—or aloud, he doesn’t really care. He didn’t want to hear anymore. He didn’t—truth or not, he didn’t want to hear that he could be losing his mind _that_ way, because all he was could be summed into memories even with the memories that weren’t in the most technical way his own.

Spike starts to say something, as does Angelus, but Xander doesn’t want to hear anything more. Doesn’t want to hear that he could be forgetting—but he _wasn’t_—because that idea was frankly more terrifying than getting his eyes plucked out for auction. Worse than contemplating that Spike _would_ mess with him that way and worse than thinking on a life where he can’t see his girls.

Poofing outside, he heads towards home—probably home. He just didn’t want to poof there immediately, with how agitated he was feeling. He could just imagine how he was going to bring up his (hopefully, probably) temporary blindness to his parents while feeling like he could just crawl out of his skin.

He didn’t think too long on if he could actually do that—
There’s more than one way to skin a cat—

And continued down the street. He couldn’t feel heat on his shoulders, so he assumed it was anywhere between dusk and pre-dawn; with how humid it’d been during the week, he couldn’t say much temperature-wise.

He also couldn’t trust anything that either Spike or Angelus said about time (Drusilla getting rather confused on the point, sometimes), so he was left assuming that he hadn’t missed school (probably), and that if he stayed out ‘late’ enough he could reasonably ask his parents what day it was.

He wondered if Hallmouth blindness—and, hah, what a thing for him to say what with his current condition—would be able to help him out with explaining some way to his parents what happened.

Someone mugged him? Hit his head really hard? A head injury could do some crazy things, if he was remembering Giles’ lectures correctly, so maybe random blindness was explainable.

Ch-thup, ch-thup, ch-thop, ch-thup, ch-thop, ch-thup!

Xander cocked his head at the noise. It was getting closer, which could be alarming except it was kind of familiar? If only he could see…

CH-thup, CH-thup, CH-thop, got closer, louder, and then Xander could hear rapid breathing, kind of panicked, a bit high pitched? It was really familiar, somehow, but he couldn’t quite…

“….lp….. heLP…… HELP ME… a monster!”

Ah.

Lady running away from a monster. Xander could bet she was regretting those flip-flops. Difficult to run in, and loud enough that even if you got away from the baddie they could probably still hear where you were going.

Ms. Flip flop kept running past him—smart lady, Xander wasn’t a vampire but he could have been—only slowing enough to breathlessly tell him to “r-run!”

Xander didn’t run, if only because he would inevitably run straight into something painful—

It was a minor miracle he’d avoided walking into anything so far—

But he appreciated the heads up regardless.

With the sounds of flip-flops fading behind him fast, the lady having turned a corner at some point, Xander strained to hear whatever had her spooked.

After at least a minute of silence, Xander shrugged and continued on his way.

He didn’t doubt that she had seen a monster, but if it wasn’t right on her tail then it probably found a slower snack.

Which was still distressing, but less Xander’s problem at the moment.

He’d make it to the end of the street, at least, and then poof his way to his house’s front entryway—

He hadn’t heard anyone walking next to him, but he still turned to his left and said

“Do not cling to your traditions, else you’ll find yourself grasping at air in the future.”
His throat hurt a bit, still, from whatever had him coughing earlier, but from the growling his little prediction got he could guess he’d be hurting a lot worse if he didn’t get out of there quickly—

His parents aren’t home when he poofs to the door, so he slips In Between straight to his room and takes a nap rather than think about if that was helpful or not.

In the morning (he thinks?) he poofs his way to Willow’s place and loiters on her front step. Her parents always headed to work at around 5am, and he didn’t think he was there that early… he just hoped Wills still checked her front step like she did when they were kids and Xander met her before school just about every weekday.

The sun has warmed his shoulders by the time he hears the front latch to her door open. He turns to her with a smile.

“Well look who the cat dragged in. You know Oz was really worried about you, mister!”

Xander winces, but opens his arms to a hug—feels better when she immediately steps close. “Yeah, I probably wasn’t doing the very best when I left him, but I didn’t give him much of a choice… That one friend of his? D-something? Yeah I think he uses the same cookbook as dear old Ted—well, maybe not exactly,” he amends over her gasp, “but his secret ingredient sure wasn’t extra chocolate in those brownies!”

“Xander he pu-put drugs in brownies? And you—what am I saying, of course you ate them! Xander!”

“What? It’s not like I knew they were illicit brownies!”

“No but you probably took the whole tray of them, didn’t you? You—oh, god, Xander please tell me you didn’t eat a-a whole tray of drug brownies!”

“I, well—”

“Xander that’s really dangerous! You could’ve, you could’ve overdosed, or, or you could have—Xander, Xander look at me, Xander look—”

Xander tried, he really did, but short of feeling for her to pull her back into a hug, it was really difficult getting eye contact in his… condition. And his mild hope for putting off the talk of this… situation died a quick death the moment Willow stopped her fussing with a short click of her teeth.

Xander tried not to get distracted by how odd a thing to focus on that was.

The hands that cradled his face smelled strongly of that heavy hand cream Willow put on every night.

“Xander… what’s wrong with your eyes? What’s…”

Xander shrugged.

“Yeah, well, you thought you were only making one joke with that ‘cat dragged in’ thing, but you were actually making with the jokes on that first ‘look’ part, too. And, you know, we’re probably all going to laugh, and laugh, and laugh about this, but, ah, do you perhaps remember that thing my mom said when we were kids? To scare us off drugs?”
Willow’s horrified silence was enough of an answer.

Then, another question came to mind.

“And, uh, do you mind telling me what day it is? ’Cause really it’s a tiny miracle I know it’s daytime.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I thank you all for your lovely reviews, even if I have gotten rather lax in responding and letting people know that I am, in fact, getting these reviews and I am, actually, getting all feels-filled because REALLY REALLY you are all lovely. I do not have the words to properly express how glad I am to have lovely people like you leaving me such nice thoughts.

I still have another 2-ish days off, and in between hiking and swimming I will be getting as much writing as I can possibly get done.

For those also waiting on Tony Spark… I have half of Iron Man done. Now I just have the more difficult half to be done. But that is another thing I am working on right now.

~Doodled93~

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed reading what I have (so far) posted, but in the interest of keeping everyone up to date...

Note that terms like 'crazy', 'insane', and the like are used in this fic, along with some distinctly not-pc thoughts surrounding it, but going to say right now that mental health is not something to be brushed off with a dated throwaway term.
It's not ok to call someone crazy, or insane just because they think differently than you do. Someone who decides to joke themselves about their own mental health is up to them, and does not give you permission to do the same.

The terms in this story are meant in the same line of thought they're used in Alice in Wonderland, keep that, and the day-and-age that BtVS is set in, in mind.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!