Nothing the Same - Book Two

by orchidluv

Summary

Picks up immediately after the first story. Re-working of seasons 3 & 4 of the show from Acathla through Graduation. Xander helps clean up the mess post-Acathla. Spike sets up a court and Xander moves in with him. Xander learns there is a community of peaceful demons in the town and gets to know some of them. The changed relationships between the parties means that nothing happens the same way as canon.
With Angelus banished to hell and Acathla defeated, Spike and Xander hadn’t left the mansion in a week. They’d barely gotten out of bed, only occasionally surfacing to eat something and make love on the kitchen table. They’d spent hours every day exploring each other’s bodies and afterwards, breathless and sated, had spent further hours just cuddling before falling asleep in each other’s arms, only to wake and start the cycle all over again. Xander had been a willing and enthusiastic pupil, dedicating himself to learning the joys of what Spike had once termed “friction”.

Yep, that’s how his life should have gone last week, no question. Leaning back against the white fiberglass, the wind blowing steadily against his closed eyelids as he lifted his face to the sun, Xander indulged in a little wishful thinking about the sex-capades he should have been indulging in over the past week. At least his fantasy life had some material to work with now and he let his mind drift, lassitude overcoming him as his body lapped up the brilliant sunshine. The noise of the engines and the slap of water against the bow created a weird pocket of noisy silence around him as the crew opened up the engines and headed back to the marina.

No way had he actually spent the week attending classes, taking final exams, visiting the hospital, and studying. No way. That was some other crazed person imitating the Eveready Bunny.

It was his own fault. He was the one who had jerked awake first thing in the morning after his first, and unbelievably, so far only night with Spike and scrambled out of Angel’s over-sized bed muttering profanities under his breath as he hastily yanked his pants on, only to discover they were Spike’s jeans that he’d grabbed by mistake and that was why he’d found himself hopping around the bedroom, still half asleep, trying to pull on a pair of jeans that were way too tight.

Spike had woken immediately in that annoying way he had of being alert and ready for trouble an instant after being sound asleep. He propped himself up on one elbow, eyebrow raised in amused question as he watched the Xander floor show. “Problem, pet?”

Xander sat down on the floor and tugged the recalcitrant jeans off. Not bothering to stand, he rolled over and grabbed his own pants, beginning to pull them on as he answered. “I’ve got a math final!”

“It’s Sunday, luv.”

“I know, I’ve only got today to study and I haven’t even looked at the book in a week.”

Xander got to his feet, still fastening his pants and leaned over the bed for a quick, thorough kiss. “I’m sorry, Spike.” Although seriously tempted, he evaded Spike’s staying hands which were trying to wander into interesting areas. “I’ve got to go pick up my books. I’ll be back in about an hour.” Snagging his shirt off the floor, he ran out the door, leaving Spike staring after him in bemusement, before he flopped resignedly back down on the bed and pulled the covers over his head, hoarding Xander’s scent inside the cocooned bedding.

That was where he’d gone wrong, Xander decided. Instead of staying in bed for a long day of practical how-to lessons in pleasing your lover, he’d spent the morning at Angel’s desk studying. Spike had gone back to sleep and Xander’s only break from serious math cramming came in the afternoon when he’d gone to see Giles at the hospital.

The week had gone downhill from there.

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Spike woke up in late afternoon, mildly disgruntled to find himself still alone. He emerged from his cocoon of blankets, the warmth and scent of his boy having long ago leached out of the fabrics, and lay still, listening hard.

Xander was upstairs. Spike swung his feet to the floor and stretched languorously. Cats had nothing on vampires when it came to full-body stretches, giving each muscle group its due attention in turn. He snagged the pants Xander had unsuccessfully tried to put on earlier and made a mental note to buy Xander more clothes. His boy had returned to wearing his thrift store rejects, saving the clothes Spike had bought him for special occasions. Spike suspected Xander was uncomfortable wearing the new clothes. Their fit and style made the boy stand out and Xander had gotten far too comfortable lurking in the background. It hadn’t been worth bothering with while impending doom was hanging over their heads but he had plenty of time now to ensure that Xander had clothes worthy of a Claimed human.

Padding upstairs on silent bare feet, Spike found Xander in Angelus’ study, reading intently. Papers with scrawled equations lay scattered on and around the desk and Xander was muttering over a problem that was clearly eluding him. Surprisingly, there were several demon texts stacked on the desk as well. Spike picked one up idly.

“Encyclopedia Demonicae?” he asked curiously.

Xander groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’m supposed to memorize the entire cryptok group by tomorrow.”

“Crypt’k,” Spike corrected absently, using the glottal stop. “High school branching out?” he asked as he leafed through the book.

“Giles,” Xander said gloomily.

“Tell him to get stuffed,” Spike suggested helpfully.

“I do want to learn about demons, I just don’t want to do it this week.”

“Still thinking ‘get stuffed’ covers it, pet. Do it in your own time.”

Xander made a face. “I can’t. He’s so bored and so depressed; it’s the first time I’ve seen him looking forward to anything. They aren’t letting him out of the hospital for another couple of days, so I’m going to see him every afternoon after school and he’s going to quiz me on a new family of demons.”

Spike frowned but Xander shook his head. “It’s ok, Spike. It’s just a problem this week. Like I said, I want to learn about demons and, even though he works there, Giles isn’t really clued in to what’s happening at school. He doesn’t teach any classes and I don’t think he even realizes it’s finals week.”

“Don’t want him using you to cure his boredom.” Spike considered visiting the Watcher and explaining things to him.

“No. You are not intimidating someone who’s already in the hospital because Angelus tortured him.” Xander’s gaze was stern but his lips were twitching. Spike glared. Annoying git wasn’t supposed to be able to read his mind like that. As usual, Xander wasn’t impressed with his glare.

Giving up on intimidating either Xander or the Watcher, at least for now, Spike executed a tactical retreat to the kitchen for blood. Warming the last two bags, he considered his options for the evening.

He needed to begin showing himself around town, letting everyone know he was in control again
and that he’d been the victor in the power struggle with Angelus. He wanted to find a new place to live as soon as possible - someplace that was a proper vampire lair, not his Sire’s pretentious, king-of-the-dungheap monstrosity, deliberately chosen, despite its unsuitableness for vampires, to show Spike up. Spike snorted as the microwave dinged. Typical Angelus, he’d always been one to overdo things. Spitting his own bloody face was all it was, living in a place like this. No tunnel access and bloody great windows everywhere you turned. No telly, either.

Firmly squashing his conflicted thoughts about Angelus, Spike poured the blood into a mug and carried it back to the study, where he perched on the edge of the desk. Xander continued studying, putting out one hand absently to caress Spike’s thigh as he read.

“How’s it going?” Spike asked. He didn’t really care, except it was obviously important to Xander.

“Sorry, Spike, it’s going to be another couple of hours.” Xander looked up apologetically. “Would you rather I went back home?” he asked, hesitantly.

“Don’t talk daft. Want you with me,” Spike reassured him immediately, leaning over to kiss him. Xander’s lips were warm on his, their tongues dueling as they explored each other’s mouths. Xander didn’t flinch or draw back even though Spike knew his mouth tasted of blood. Xander finally withdrew reluctantly. “Math,” he sighed.

“Thought American teens weren’t supposed to be interested in school,” Spike grumbled mildly, capturing Xander’s withdrawing hand and twining their fingers together.

“Don’t want to be dating a stereotype do you?” Xander lifted their joined hands and kissed Spike’s palm before turning resolutely back to his book.

Sighing, Spike sipped his blood, toying with Xander’s fingers with his free hand and letting his thoughts drift to the problem of where to live. He needed a Court that would be suitable for both himself and Xander and that was going to be tricky. Humans and vampires had very different ideas about what was suitable living space. While plumbing and electricity were nice - Spike had always appreciated the modern convenience of unlimited hot water for bathing - they weren’t necessary for vampires. Humans, on the other hand, needed lots of plumbing and such-like to keep them happy.

Collecting minions was a problem that would solve itself. Fledges were attracted to vampire courts like ants to sugar. Companionship, security and the nearly universal desire to be near the center of power would bring Spike more useless minions than he wanted or could possibly use. The problem would be attracting potential lieutenants - older vampires with enough strength and sense to be useful allies. Spike gave a mental shrug. Once he’d found a suitable place to set up his Court, the Hellmouth had a way of drawing demons towards it. Practically a bloody tourist destination for demons. As acknowledged Master of the Hellmouth, vampires would come to him and he could pick and choose.

“Gonna have to go out tonight, pet.”

Xander looked up. “Huh?”

“Gotta spread the word that Angelus is gone and I’m back in control.”

Xander looked suspicious. “Spread the word how?”

“Stop by the local bars mostly.”

“Is this going to involve a lot of fighting off challengers?”
Spike shook his head. “Too soon for that. Anyone with ideas along those lines is going to wait to see who steps up first. A vampire who succeeds in killing their Sire is either lucky, good or sneaky. Challengers will want someone else to test which one I am first.”

“I take it the fact that you didn’t actually kill Angel isn’t going to come up in the conversation?” Xander asked dryly.

“Ruins a good story if you put too many details in,” Spike answered flippantly. “If the Slayer wanted her bragging rights, she should have stayed in town.”

“Can I help? You know, be your Greek Chorus of awed admiration or something?”

Spike shook his head. “Sorry, luv. Better if I do this on my own.”

Spike had kissed him again and wandered off, saying he was going back to bed and Xander reluctantly turned back to his math text.

He was incredibly relieved that Spike didn’t want him to leave. This was the longest they had ever spent together at one time and Xander had been worried about overstaying his welcome. He knew he tended to be overly sensitive about things like that. It hadn’t helped that, when he’d gone home to get books and some extra clothes, his parents obviously hadn’t even noticed that he hadn’t been there for several nights. His father had just told him to be quiet and hadn’t even looked up from the television when Xander started to explain where he’d been. His mother had still been in bed when he’d knocked quietly on the bedroom door, pulling the covers over her head and saying she was sick when he tried to talk to her. Years of experience with his mother being “sick” in the morning had taught Xander that it would be hours before she was ready to talk to anyone.

Sighing, he’d retreated to his own room and quietly packed several days worth of clothes. He carefully folded the clothes Spike had bought him and put them in as well, in case the vampire decided they should go out one night. Leaving a note on the kitchen table, saying that he was spending a couple of nights with a friend, Xander left his parents’ house, as unnoticed in leaving as he had been on entering.

Returning to the mansion, Xander had settled himself in the study, unloading his school books and dropping the bag of clothes on the couch to be put away when Spike woke up. Sitting down with his math book, he began studying what was still his worst subject. It was still fairly early, he’d go see Giles at the hospital when his brain started to fry and he needed a break. With luck, Willow would visit Giles in the morning and they would miss each other.

Spike entered the bar as conspicuously as possible, striding through the door, his duster flaring dramatically behind him, and stalking toward the bar. He snarled at a couple of inoffensive Mimtoi demons that he chose to take offense at, sending them scurrying away from their seats at the bar. Perching one hip on a stool, Spike lit a cigarette and barked an order for whiskey. The bartender, who’d seen enough dominance displays to know when to be silent and respectful, quickly poured him a double shot and moved away to the far end of the bar where he studiously began polishing glasses, hoping Spike wasn’t planning on starting a fight inside.

Looking around arrogantly as he drained the glass in one swallow, Spike wondered who would be the first to approach him. Without looking, he sent the now-empty glass hurtling through the air
towards the bartender, who plucked it out of mid-air with inhumanly quick reflexes. “Another.”

He drank the second glass more leisurely, pausing between sips to smoke. He’d stopped smoking around Xander, worried about his boy’s lungs, and the taste of nicotine and alcohol was a familiar pleasure after several days abstinence. Turning, he looked enquiringly at the fawning minion who was approaching nervously. Spike looked over the woman’s shoulder and saw her companions whispering together with the nearly silent whispers of preternatural hearing. He didn’t have to be able to hear them to know that she’d been drafted by the others as either the least likely to be killed or just the most expendable in their little group.

“Master Spike,” she began, with a subservient dip of her head. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Sir. Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

“Depends on the question, don’t it?” Spike let her wonder which questions were acceptable and which weren’t as he deliberately looked away from her, demonstrating how little worry he had about turning his back on an enemy. A fledgling new couldn’t take him with a crossbow and surprise on her side. His lips tightened as he remembered how the Slayer had blown just such an opportunity on Angelus, leading to his Sire’s re-souling and exile to a hell dimension.

“There has been talk that you and Master Angelus have both been recruiting minions.” It was obvious she was trying her best to be diplomatic as she tried to figure out the current pecking order in town. Spike didn’t react, continuing to stare at the far wall and smoke silently, waiting to see what she would say next. There were a dozen vampires in the bar and a handful of other demons all watching and listening avidly, even the ones who were pretending they weren’t.

“It’s been several days since anything has been heard from either one of you,” the fledgling went on when it became apparent that Spike wasn’t going to say anything. Spike swung his gaze slowly back to her face. “Asking if there was trouble between us?” he asked mildly.

She relaxed at his quiet manner. “Yes, and we were wondering…” she nodded towards her companions, all of whom became suddenly very interested in their drinks. Spike was up off the bar stool and had a fistful of her blonde hair before she could turn back. Smaller than him and too stupid to live, she made the beginner’s mistake of reaching up with both hands and trying to free herself from his grip. Spike yanked her head down, controlling her easily as he smashed his foot into her knee, breaking it with an audible crack.

“Wondering? Wondering if I couldn’t take him? Wondering perhaps, if I couldn’t snap his legs like twigs?”

She screamed in pain as her leg buckled uselessly underneath her and Spike dropped his hair hold, letting her fall towards the ground, only to grab her forearm with both hands. The snapping sound echoed loudly in the now-silent bar.

“Or maybe you were wondering whether I was still Master in this town.”

Pinning her head to the ground with one foot, Spike looked across the smoky room at her companions, who had risen to their feet but otherwise remained frozen, staring at him in shock. With one swift movement, he threw a stake at the closest one, dusting him before he could move.

Looking down at the crippled minion under his foot, he bent over to haul her up, ignoring her moans. Snapping her neck, he dropped her again and nudged her contemptuously with his foot. “Do you
think she’s still wondering about who’s Master of the Hellmouth?” he asked the room at large.

Silence answered him and Spike grinned to himself.

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Xander spent finals week deliberately avoiding Willow. Even though Spike had fully recovered, Xander wasn’t ready to forgive her after she had so nearly gotten Spike killed. Fortunately, it was fairly easy to avoid her during a week that was about tests and studying. For their joint classes, he simply arrived as early as possible and settled himself in the back of the room, pretending to be buried in last second reading as she entered. Willow was always alone - Buffy hadn’t returned and no-one had heard from her as far as Xander knew. Xander kept his head down and ignored Willow’s pinched, tired look and hopeful glances.

He was guiltily relieved that he didn’t see Oz around. They didn’t have any classes together but he didn’t see Oz and Willow hanging out between classes either. He still needed to have the promised talk with Oz about the re-souling spell and he so didn’t have the time or energy for that with finals happening. He really didn’t want his fresh estrangement from Willow to affect his friendship with Oz but he was so busy and tired that he was worried that he’d accidentally screw things up with Oz by saying something stupid. Luckily, either Oz was pulling one of his disappearing acts again or… Actually, Oz pretty much had to be on one of his band-related trips because the idea that Oz was holed up somewhere studying was just impossible to believe. Not Mister Learn-by-Osmosis.

Wondering if Oz had figured out a system for getting the school to let him take tests on his own schedule and wishing he could work out something similar, Xander repressed a sigh as he was handed yet another test paper. Only two more tests and he was done. Thank god, Giles’ quizzes didn’t affect his grades.

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“Hey, check it out, you’ve got fingers again,” Xander exclaimed as he entered the hospital room.

Giles glanced down at his hands. “Fortunately, I have always had fingers, although I must agree, at times I wondered whether they were still there under the bandages.” His eyes were haunted as he stared at his now-visible fingers. The heavy, concealing bandages that had shrouded his hands since the surgeons had painstakingly re-built the shattered bones had been replaced with lighter ones. The splints on each individual finger were now visible and, in some ways, the damage looked worse, now that you could actually see how thoroughly Angelus had destroyed Giles’ hands. The physical injuries were healing but the exposing of the torture inflicted wounds was obviously giving Giles too much to think about.

“So, when are you getting out of this place?” Xander asked brightly, hoping to distract Giles from his dark thoughts.

“There is some talk about letting me go to a rehab center,” Giles said without a trace of excitement or anticipation in his voice.

“Rehab? Like physical therapy? Are you ready for that?”

“It’s more a question of not being able to do for myself at home yet,” Giles answered with obvious frustration. Five days in the hospital had done nothing for his temper but he seemed surprisingly depressed at the prospect of being released.

“Is something wrong - besides the obvious?” Xander had gotten to know the librarian pretty well
over the last few days. He had continued to visit Giles daily, reading to him, talking to him, trying to keep Giles’ spirits up as his injuries slowly healed.

“Joyce Summers stopped by. She received a post card from Buffy, saying she was sorry but that she needed some time to deal with things.”

“No mention of when she was coming back?” Xander guessed.

“No. The postmark was from Los Angeles.” Giles lifted his hands in frustration. “It will be weeks before I can drive. I still can’t even use a telephone without assistance. I’m her Watcher, I should be doing something to find her and I am stuck here in hospital like a useless berk.”

“You kind of saved the world, Giles. You’re entitled to a little healing time.”

“What?” Wondering at Giles’ surprise, Xander’s own eyebrows went up. “Well, yeah. I mean, if you had told Angelus how to wake Acathla, Buffy and Spike wouldn’t have gotten there in time to do anything except enjoy a one-way ticket to hell.”

Giles looked at him blankly for a moment, then smiled. “Thank you, Xander. That is a very kind view of my role.”

“I’m just saying: give yourself some credit. If I’d helped saved the world, I’d still be bragging about it months later.” He grinned. “Ok, make that years.”

He was relieved to see the librarian smile. Giles had had a difficult, frustrating week and too often was grim and silent, or worse, apathetic. Xander had been shaken the day he had arrived at the hospital to find Giles watching a soap opera. “Think of it like a half-way house for prisoners,” he suggested. “You’d be out of this place and getting ready to go back home.”

Giles looked slightly less gloomy and Xander swung his backpack onto the bed. “I got the books you asked for.”

He no longer had to read to Giles. The librarian could turn the pages for himself now, though sometimes he had to ask for help with pages that were especially fragile, or tended to stick together. Xander brought the books the librarian asked for and read with Giles, taking notes for him and changing and labeling the tapes in the tape recorder Giles was using to make notes on. Giles had a new research topic every day and Xander willingly searched for whatever Giles asked for. He was pretty sure the librarian was just keeping himself busy but that was fine.

Towards the end of the visit, Giles announced he’d decided to go to the rehab center. He didn’t have enough insurance to cover a live-in nurse at his home and he turned down Xander’s tentative offer to stay with him and help him, pointing out dryly that he wasn’t sure their relationship would survive the more intimate assistance needed.

Xander had digested that and then turned beet red as he realized that Giles must still need assistance in the bathroom. He so didn’t want to think about the librarian that way. He bit back his automatic joking response - ok, the first three things he started to stay - and ended up just saying with a small grin that the school board would probably agree with that assessment. Secretly, he was deeply relieved that Giles had turned down his offer. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to help, but he couldn’t stand the thought of losing what little Spike time he had currently.

Still, it was good to see the librarian becoming a bit more like his old self. Hopefully a rehab center would have more for Giles to do than lie in bed and read and watch tv.
Spike stared thoughtfully at the old building. The Depression had hit Sunnydale hard and a number of small manufacturing companies had gone bust and their factories had remained boarded up ever since. This one had clearly been run by a frugal soul - there were small, spartan living quarters on the third floor for the workers, which would be perfect for minions, and a large comfortable suite near the back of the second floor which would serve for himself and Xander. It had a separate entrance, which would allow both himself and Xander to come and go without having to walk through the rest of the building. The remainder of the second floor was set up as offices, large enough to house his lieutenants who could be trusted in relatively close proximity to Xander. The ground floor was a single open room, presently cluttered with remnants of the old manufacturing equipment. The rusting metal could easily be removed by minions, leaving space for the formal court and for the minions to hang out.

He’d been looking for a new lair for several nights now and this was the most suitable place that he’d found. He’d rejected numerous others because of their location: either they were in areas too dangerous for a human to walk through even during the day or too close to residential housing where minions might be tempted to hunt. Hunting too close to home inevitably brought attention to the lair and, even in Sunnydale, that was a bad idea. Other possibilities had had a good location but unsuitable facilities - no separate rooms, multiple skylights, or no working plumbing.

Making up his mind, Spike turned and walked away. Tomorrow night, he’d begin recruiting a couple of minions he’d had an eye on that were a little older and one at least had shown glimmers of more intelligence than many fledglings showed in their first decades. He’d set them to work cleaning the building and making it ready for Spike and Xander to move in.

Probably time he talked to Xander about living with him permanently.

Xander hoped their diurnal/nocturnal issues this week weren’t a portent of things to come. Spike was as busy and preoccupied as Xander, only Spike was busy at different times, leaving every night somewhere around the time that Xander collapsed, exhausted, into their mutual, but all too rarely shared, bed. Xander woke each morning to find Spike snuggled against him. The temptation to stay wrapped in the strong arms, to wake his sleeping lover with kisses that moved down his body to interesting places was nearly overwhelming and Xander frequently regretted the days when finals had meant little to him and he’d been happy to coast along in blissful slacker-dom, content with D’s for grades.

Those days were gone. It had become a secret source of pride to Xander that he was doing well in his classes, one he wasn’t willing to give up. He would never admit it to anyone but he got a warm glow of accomplishment every time he received an A on a test. For much of his life, he’d been the stupid one in the group. Willow had always been way smarter than him. Jesse had been as intellectually lazy as Xander and they had had a lot of fun finding ways to get Willow to do their work for them. Willow had tried to make them study at first but had caved in years ago to their pleading eyes and coaxing smiles. In hindsight, Xander knew that they’d taken advantage of Willow’s own need for approval and acceptance, using it to con her into giving them way more help than they should have gotten.

It had been a shock last year to find that he could study and learn on his own when he needed to. In his entire life, no-one, not even himself, had ever accused him of being smart. It had been as much a surprise to Xander as it was to all his teachers when he started doing well in his classes. He still didn’t contribute much to class discussions but he did the homework and actually studied, a weird
out-growth of his vampire research and the desperate loneliness of much of the past year. Pre-Spike loneliness, he thought with a smile.

Even with their different hours, he wasn’t lonely now. Just knowing Spike was there was enough. The week had been frustratingly busy for both of them but neither could adjust their hours to the other’s free time right now. Fortunately, school was out at the end of the week and then Xander could become more nocturnal.

They did have the early evenings together, Xander had worked out a system of rewarding himself for each chapter read, each equation mastered, with a little nookie time. He was finding he could even concentrate on math, snuggled up against Spike on Angel’s leather couch, if he knew that as soon as he had the problem figured out, he got tongue action as a reward.

Fortunately, Spike was able to help with his extra-curricular studies. In addition to his regular finals, Giles was quizzing him on the various categories of demons he had Xander studying. During his daily visits he still hadn’t been able to bring himself to tell Giles that he had too much going on to continue with the course in Introduction to Demons 101 that they had planned, back when Xander didn’t have final exams and an available partner to explore gay sex with.

Sadly, it was all too obvious that Giles had seized on the planned course of study as a distraction from the mind-numbing boredom of being stuck in first the hospital and then the rehab center while his injuries slowly healed. Hating the hospital himself, Xander had hidden his reluctance and brought the books Giles asked for from the library. He really was enjoying learning more about the unbelievable variety of demons in the world, he just wished he could postpone it a week or two until finals were over. But every time he saw Giles staring vacantly out the window, his eyes haunted; every time he saw the humiliation on Giles’ face when he had to ask for help with routine tasks, Xander’s time-management issues seemed awfully petty.

He’d found that he could keep Giles focused and interested by bouncing some of Spike’s information off him. Spike often read over Xander’s shoulder as they snuggled together on the couch, frequently scoffing at what the authors were saying. He would ridicule some of the theories and frequently filled in gaps in the books from his own experiences. Giles was fascinated with Spike’s contributions, regardless of whether he agreed or disagreed with them, and frequently sent Xander home with a list of questions for the vampire. Xander wasn’t sure but he suspected that Spike enjoyed dictating answers, despite his grumblings about “helping the enemy”. Spike had been the youngest in his vampire family. Xander suspected that, like himself, Spike was secretly enjoying not being considered the stupid one in the group. For all Xander knew, Spike was actually considered young and inexperienced in the demon world but he had way more knowledge than even Giles did about demons and Giles was the smartest person Xander had ever met.

Walking home from the hospital Friday afternoon, Xander wondered when he’d begun to use the word “home” in association with the mansion. He’d been staying there since the night Spike was injured, but it was Angelus’ house and they were moving out shortly anyway. With an inward smile, Xander realized that it had become “home” because Spike was there.

He didn’t think he’d ever forget how happy it made him when Spike asked him to move in with him. It had been clear from Spike’s descriptions and the hint of anxiety in his voice that Spike had spent a long time trying to find a place to live that would be right for Xander as well. Spike was taking him to see it this weekend but Xander didn’t care what it looked like. It was a home that Spike had picked out for them. That was all Xander needed to know about it.

It was with a huge sense of relief that he handed in his last test paper. It was Friday, it was the last day of school, and he was seriously ready to party. Ok, that was a lie. He wanted to sleep for a week,
but he’d be ready for the party then.

Lying on the white deck of the boat, Xander briefly thought of how great it would be to share this with Spike. He could almost feel the lean muscular form pressed against his own, feel the soft, cool skin wrapped around him as the wind cooled the hot sun. Could almost feel the arab-style robes enveloping the vampire from head to foot. He sighed. Sunbathing was not something he would ever be able to share with his lover.

Cordelia had been surprisingly cooperative, she had not only volunteered her father’s yacht but also provided a couple of the Chase family’s gardeners to help them shift Acathla. Apparently, a hospitalized Giles trumped Cordelia’s social schedule. Xander hadn’t asked, and wasn’t sure he wanted to know, what she had told the three guys who sweated to shift the heavy stone figure first onto the boat, then over the side into the ocean. From the fact that one of them kept making the sign of the cross every time he looked at the ugly statue, Xander wasn’t sure if Cordelia had made up some whopper of a story or actually told them the truth - either could have produced that reaction.

It had been anti-climactic, watching the stone demon tumble over the side of the boat and drop like, well, a stone out of sight in the dark blue water two miles off-shore. Giles had asked him to go with them and give him a report, saying that Cordelia felt procuring the boat and the helpers was sufficient assistance. Which, to be fair, it probably was. Xander had never been out on a large boat, or anything bigger than a canoe, and had agreed eagerly even though it meant missing another day with Spike. He’d rationalized the trip by reminding himself that it really did need to be done and he could stay up late with Spike when he got home, since he didn’t have to worry about school anymore.

He’d thoroughly enjoyed the trip, despite the fact that the three men Cordelia sent regarded him suspiciously the entire time and barely spoke to him. Hopefully, Cordelia hadn’t told them it was his statue they were disposing of in such a flagrantly questionable manner. He’d simply done his best to stay out of their way and tried to look like someone who would never have a demon statue in his living room that needed to be disposed of.

It didn’t matter. Life on the Hellmouth had certainly taught him to relish the good times since bad things could be lurking around the corner, sometimes all too literally. He’d been out to sea on a yacht and tomorrow, he and Spike were moving in together, officially. Life was good.

Sitting in the bow of the boat, eyes closed, the sun beating down, the wind blowing the heat away, Xander relaxed into the rhythmic rise and fall and let his thoughts be swept away on the breeze, simply basking in an experience he might never know again.
For the first time in a week, Spike wasn’t jolted awake at the crack of bloody dawn by Xander trying to quietly dress and leave the bedroom - a process which inevitably led to a certain amount of noisy fumbling around in the dark as Xander refused to turn a light on in a misguided effort at not disturbing Spike. Today, for a change, Xander hadn’t stirred until mid-morning and then he’d simply shuffled sleepily to the bathroom and returned a short time later to snuggle back under the covers with a contented sigh. Drowsing comfortably against the warmth of his boy’s strong back, Spike drifted back to sleep with the sound and smell of his Claimed surrounding him.

An hour or two later, the rumbling sounds from Xander’s belly roused Spike and told him that he would soon be losing his pillow to the kitchen. Sure enough, Xander shortly began stirring and trying to slide out of Spike’s encircling arms. Spike tightened his grip and threw an imprisoning leg over Xander’s for good measure, which earned him a chuckle and Xander turned his head to look back over his shoulder at Spike.

“Morning.”

“’S right. Dreadful time o’ day,” Spike muttered without releasing his hold. He felt Xander turning in his arms to face him but didn’t open his eyes, hoping Xander would go back to sleep for awhile longer. Instead, he felt a gentle kiss as warm, soft lips coaxed his to open.

“Morning’s not so bad when you can spend it in bed.” Xander’s quiet voice was filled with laughter and Spike opened his eyes to see amused brown eyes watching him from bare inches away. His own lips curved and with one swift movement, he rolled them both over so that Xander was beneath him.

Settling himself comfortably on top of the warm body, he looked consideringly down at his boy. “You offering to make waking up worth my time?” he purred.

Xander opened his mouth to answer and Spike pounced, seizing his lips in a long, ardent kiss, his tongue darting inside to explore. Xander answered enthusiastically and Spike’s hands slid up to close in the dark wavy hair. Xander’s hair had grown, brushing his shoulders in back and Spike loved burying his hands in the crisp waves. Holding Xander’s head still, Spike used his dominant position to control the kiss, devouring his boy’s mouth, his lips sliding over Xander’s for an endless moment.

After a long minute, Spike abandoned the warm lips and his head dipped as he trailed kisses down the lines of Xander’s throat, relishing the feel and smell of the blood throbbing in the veins so tantalizingly close to the surface. He shifted further down until his tongue was teasing and worrying at his claim mark as Xander arched his head back, exposing more of his throat to Spike’s ministrations.

“You taste like the sun,” Spike murmured, his lips busy now along the tanned flesh of Xander’s chest. The previous day’s boat trip had left Xander with a fresh tan and Spike could sense the prickle of residual heat along Xander’s shoulders where they still glowed faintly red from the sun and wind.

“Do you miss the sun?” Xander asked, his own hands running caressingly along the pale skin of Spike’s back.

Spike glanced up at him, hearing the seriousness underlying the curiosity. “Not the way you’re thinking, pet. Born in Victoria’s London, remember. It was a dark, filthy place back then. Coal dust could black out the sun for days at a time. Then too, had pretensions of being a gentlemen.” He smirked at the scoffing noise Xander made and bent his head to nibble at Xander’s nipples. “Be glad
it didn’t last, luv,” he said, pausing to tease at one nipple with little cat licks. “Victorians were bloody boring for the most part.” He switched to the other side as the first nipple tightened under his attentions and Xander began to push up into the sensation. “Back then, no gentleman would be so crass as to display his flesh where a lady might see it.” Spike snorted in disdain at the memory of the prudishness of an earlier century. “Meant no sunbathing unless you were covered from neck to knees. Not a whole lot of point under those conditions. But I remember strolling in parks on warm spring days and being glad winter was over. So, yeah, I do miss it.” He shrugged indifferently. “Part of the trade off for eternity, luv.”

Xander reached up and brought Spike’s head up to his for another long kiss. Spike didn’t dissuade him, even though he sensed the kiss was in sympathy for a loss that didn’t really trouble the vampire. Sure, it’d be nice to feel the warmth of direct sun again without it being a fatal experience, but he did fine with the warmth of fire, hot water, and especially the heat of willing, human flesh beneath his own cooler body.

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Late that morning, Xander reluctantly left the mansion and Spike. Now that finals were over, his days were mostly free and his time his own, but there were some obligations still remaining. After snogging, as Spike called it, for a long, lazy time, Xander’s stomach had insistently demanded attention and could no longer be ignored. Spike had been up and out all night again and had gone back to sleep after Xander had torn himself away to find something to eat. Now, walking across town, he found his good mood fading as he considered whether he should stop at his parents’ house and tell them he was moving out. Guiltily, he shelved the idea for now, deciding he would leave a note when he went back for the last of his stuff. He was depressingly sure that his parents wouldn’t even have noticed that he hadn’t been there in a week. Despite a lifetime of experience, it still hurt to have their indifference actually confirmed and he decided he didn’t need to deal with it today. His errand was going to be hard enough without that adding to his nervousness. It was only when he was standing outside the small white house that Xander realized what a stranger to this area he’d become. Not long ago, this street had been almost more familiar than his own. He’d known everyone on the block, knew which houses had the best candy on Halloween, which neighbors didn’t mind if you played in their sprinklers and which ones would yell at you if your ball strayed onto their carefully tended lawn. Now, staring at the For Sale sign hanging in front of the empty house that had once been a second home, Xander couldn’t even remember the last time he’d been on this street.

He hadn’t realized that he had changed all his old habits until this moment. The grocery store, the high school, the movie theater; this street was on a direct route between his parents’ house and all of those destinations. When had he stopped walking down this street? When had his feet automatically begun avoiding Madison Street and start walking down Cyprus instead?

Turning his back on the empty house, Xander crossed the street to another familiar house and knocked on the door.

“Hi, Mrs. Cooper,” he greeted the woman who answered the door. Mrs. Cooper had lived there for longer than Xander had been alive and knew everything about everyone in the neighborhood, she was bound to know about Mrs. McNally.

“Xander? My word, it’s been a long time since we’ve seen you around here.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that.” He shuffled his feet awkwardly and then just asked flatly: “When did
Mrs. McNally move out?"

Mrs. Cooper was a small, plump woman who almost always seemed to be smiling. Her smile died at his question, and she glanced automatically across the street at the white bungalow. “It’s been almost a month now,” she answered gently.

Words failed him and he just stared miserably at her, waiting for her to blame him. He deserved it.

Instead, she nodded her head towards the chairs on the porch. “Have a seat, Xander. I’ll get us some lemonade and we’ll talk.”

He did as he was told and Mrs. Cooper came out a minute later with two glasses, the screen door banging closed behind her. Handing him one, she sat down next to him, taking a long drink and letting her eyes linger on the empty house across the way.

“She moved out about a month ago,” Mrs. Cooper repeated. “She put the house on the market a few weeks before that, but you know how long it takes to sell houses here.” There was a soft tinkle of ice as she set her glass down on the porch. “She gave up hope after a year, Xander. She just couldn’t take the loneliness anymore. Said she was going to move in with her sister.” She looked at Xander sympathetically. “She made sure everyone on the block had her new address, just in case Jesse ever came back.”

Xander stared across the street at the house that had been his second home for most of his life. He’d come over to try once again to talk to Mrs. McNally. Somehow, he’d hoped to find a way to let her know Jesse was dead. It had never occurred to him that he would find an empty house. That he’d lost touch with her so completely that he didn’t even know she had moved away. He started as Mrs. Cooper’s plump hand patted his.

“Not your fault, Xander. I know you tried but it’s hard on a parent to lose a child. It’s worse when you don’t know what happened or even if they’re dead or alive.”

Her words, intended to be comforting, just twisted the knife. He should have found a way to talk to Jesse’s mom, should have been able to find a way to let her know that Jesse was dead. Shouldn’t have chickened out about talking about vampires. Even if he couldn’t bring himself to tell her that he had killed Jesse, he should have at least found a way to tell her Jesse was dead.

He left shortly after that. Mrs. Cooper extracted a promise from Xander to stop by once in awhile, and he gave his promise willingly. Talking to her had brought back a lot of good memories and she’d made him laugh with her own memories of he and Jesse as grade schoolers playing on the block. He left with the scrap of paper with Mrs. McNally’s address tucked safely in his pocket, although he wasn’t sure he would ever use it. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to talk to Mrs. McNally about Jesse, he suspected trying to write something would be twice as hard.

“Hey, Oz, how’s it going?” Xander’s second errand was trying to track down Oz. As relieved as he had been that Oz hadn’t been at school all week, he’d promised to talk to Oz about the spell. He couldn’t put it off any longer. Luckily, he found the currently black-haired guitarist in the garage behind his house. Oz’s father sent him back behind the house, telling him Oz was practicing but wouldn’t mind being disturbed. The garage had been converted to a practice room and Xander winced as he approached at the sour notes coming from the room. Apparently Oz was trying to learn a new chord and it wasn’t going well.

“Hey.” Oz looked up at Xander’s knock with an easy smile. He straightened a little and rested his
arms on his guitar. “Come on in.”

Xander opened the door all the way and came in, looking around with interest at the full-blown amateur studio. “Nice set-up.”

“Helps keep my parents sane.”

“I didn’t see you around last week,” Xander began hesitantly.

Oz shrugged slightly. “Had a gig.”

“So, do you have to make up the tests you missed or what?” Xander knew he was stalling, but he was also curious, having wished so frequently last week that he could re-schedule finals week to a better time.

“Summer school,” Oz answered dryly. “Have to make up my incompletes.”

“That sucks.”

“My choice.”

That seemed to cover the Oz academia issue. Before Xander could frame the subject he was supposed to be talking about, Oz spoke.

“How’s Spike doing?”

Feeling a warm rush of gratitude - even Giles rarely expressed a friendly interest in the vampire - Xander felt his nervous tension evaporate. “He’s great. Completely healed and full of scorn for how long it takes us mere mortals to heal up.” He lifted his formerly casted arm in explanation.

“Gladness.” And Oz sounded like he meant it.

Xander hesitated, then just asked. “Can I talk to you?” At Oz’s lifted eyebrow, Xander grinned. “I know, we’re already talking. Just needed a lead in.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Yeah, well, you remember telling me about the spell Willow did in the hospital?”

Oz nodded, his gaze sharpening and Xander found himself explaining the situation at length: the re-souling spell, the kind of magic it was, the risk to Spike, that Willow and Buffy had lied about it, and the actual outcome with the re-souled Angel banished to a hell dimension. Oz listened to the entire story without commenting, his hands moving absently over the guitar as if drawing comfort from it.

“Willow and I have barely spoken since that day,” Xander finished. “She’s your girlfriend, Oz, and I don’t want to put you in the middle of this or make you choose sides or anything. I don’t want to lose you as a friend but Willow doesn’t seem to even understand why I’m angry and I don’t know if we’re ever going to be able to be friends again.”

Oz looked troubled beneath his unruffled surface and he didn’t say anything for a long time. Xander waited, forcing his body to be still and not betray his nervous tension at the thought of losing another friend.

When Oz finally spoke, his words seem tangential to the issue at first. “The gig we had was for Friday last week. I went to L.A. on Tuesday because I wanted some time to work through some stuff.” After a pause, he continued quietly. “I love Willow, but the person in the hospital room doing
that spell scared me. It didn’t feel like Willow anymore.” Xander remembered Oz saying that Willow had been alien, that he would have walked past her on the street without recognizing her.

“I bailed,” Oz admitted. “Finding out my girlfriend could do magic and not just little stuff but huge messing-with-souls magic was seriously freaksome. It was hard for me to even be around her. So, I left.”

Xander didn’t know what to say. Oz was so good at hiding his emotions he hadn’t even realized that Oz could have used someone to talk to himself. “What did you decide?”

“That she dealt with the werewolf so I should be able to accept the witch.”

Put that way, it made a lot of sense. Too bad Willow couldn’t accept vampires the way she’d accepted Oz’s wolf side. “So, are you two good?”

“Yeah. Willow’s trying to find a way to locate Buffy by magic but she’ll talk to Giles about it before doing anything.”

“Are we ok?” Xander asked hesitantly.

“We’re good.” Oz cocked his head thoughtfully. “Maybe between your disapproval and my support, she’ll find a good balance.”

“Maybe.” As relieved as he was that he and Oz were ok, Xander couldn’t find a lot of optimism that Willow would be swayed by his opinions any more. Those days were past.

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Spike was sitting on the couch, reading, when Xander returned to the mansion.

“Poncey bugger was too righteous to own a telly,” he complained in greeting, not for the first time.

“Just as well,” Xander answered cheerfully, his good mood largely restored by his conversation with Oz and knowing it was hours before Spike had to go out tonight. “Cable porn could have cost him his soul years ago.”

Spike snorted in appreciation. “Too right. If getting it on with the Slayer was enough to make him lose it, pretty much anything would have done the trick.”

Xander pulled the book out of Spike’s hands and tossed it to the other end of the couch before straddling Spike and regarding him seriously. “Speaking of… it seems to me that someone made me their Claimed human a while back.” He scowled accusingly. “Got to say, there hasn’t been a whole lot of claiming going on around here and I have a problem with that.” He poked Spike in the chest with an emphatic finger. “Someone better start putting out before I start to feel unloved.”

Spike’s jaw actually dropped at the sheer effrontery of that statement. “Oi! Thought you said you did well in your history class? With that kind of re-writing history…”

Xander kissed him hard and stopped the indignant response in its tracks. Lifting his head again, he asked with infinite reasonableness: “You’re the one who’s supposed to be evil, aren’t you? What happened to having you’re evil way with me?”

With a growl, Spike surged to his feet, causing Xander to yelp and cling to Spike’s shoulders to keep from falling. “I’ll show you evil.” Spike growled and carried Xander down to the bedroom. It should have felt ridiculous, since he was larger than Spike, but Spike’s strength made it an effortless trip and
Xander used the time to pepper kisses along his vampire’s face and neck.

Spike tossed him to the bed and pounced like the predator he was, gleefully ripping Xander’s shirt open and growling again as he attacked Xander’s nipples. They wrestled together, wriggling across the bed as they yanked and tore at each other’s clothes, seeking the skin that lay below.

Finally nude, Spike pinned Xander’s arms to the bed. “Wanting to be claimed, are you, boy?” he growled mockingly.

Xander’s eyes were black with arousal as he stared up into Spike’s yellow ones. “Yes,” he answered simply and Spike kissed him passionately.

As their tongues dueled, Xander clung to Spike, his hands sliding south until he was cupping the taut buttocks in both hands, spreading his knees and pulling Spike closer against him. They were both hard already after the week of near-abstinence and their hips quickly fell into rhythm, thrusting and sliding their erections together, both too close to climax for either to last long.

Tension built quickly, their thrusts growing urgent and more rapid, riding the cusp of orgasm together. Spike tore his head free and morphed into game face and Xander willingly tilted his head, exposing the claim mark. Spike slid his fangs into his mark, renewing his Claim. The exquisite sensation of Spike’s teeth piercing his skin, the slight pulling as Spike drank from him, sent Xander over the edge and he erupted into orgasm, his cum spurting out to be joined by Spike’s seed as Spike lifted his head and cried out his own release.

After a long moment, while Xander’s breathing gradually returned to normal, Spike purred into Xander’s ear: “Still feeling unloved, pet?”

“Getting better.”

Laughing, Spike rolled Xander into a more comfortable position. He had business to take care of tonight, but for now, there was time to just revel in the warmth of his Claimed lying beside him.
Xander had just entered the courtyard outside Giles’ apartment for his daily visit with the librarian when the apartment door swung open and Willow stepped out. Saying something over her shoulder as she exited, she didn’t see him at first, but it was already far too late for Xander to retreat. Pulling the door closed behind her, Willow turned and saw Xander standing there. They both hesitated, startled and uncomfortable at the unexpected meeting and Willow’s tentative smile died when Xander simply looked at her impassively.

“How’s Giles?” he asked, seizing on a neutral subject to break the awkward silence.

“He’s fine,” Willow looked like she was about to say more but Xander just nodded and started to walk past her towards the door.

“How long are you going to keep this up?”

Xander dropped his hand from the doorknob and turned back to face her. Willow was staring at him, baffled confusion and anger in her eyes. “Willow, do you even get why I’m angry?”

“Because I did the re-souling spell and you didn’t want me to.”

“No, that’s not it. Well, that’s part of the problem, but it’s pretty far down the list. Willow, you almost got Spike killed.” Her expression didn’t change in the slightest and Xander shook his head, wondering if there was any point to this conversation. Looking at Willow’s closed face, he didn’t think so but, remembering what Oz had said, he gave it a shot anyway.

“If I did something that put Oz in the hospital and almost killed him, would you be angry?”

“Yes, I’d be upset, but that’s different.”

“Why? Because Oz is human and Spike isn’t? Or because you don’t care what happens to Spike?” Willow’s eyes fell and a trace of shame crossed her face. “Tell you what, I’ll answer for you. I don’t think it’s because Spike isn’t human, that’s just your excuse. Let’s face it, Oz isn’t completely human anymore and you put Spike in danger to try and save Angel, who lost his humanity card a long time ago. So, that just leaves Door Number Two: you don’t like Spike, so you don’t care if he gets killed. Hell, it might even be a bonus for you. That’s why I’m mad.”

“Tell me that you’re not going to hold a grudge if I try and kill Oz because I don’t like him.”

“I didn’t try to kill Spike,” Willow protested.

“From where I’m standing, not a whole lot of difference in where it ended up.”

Willow looked down and Xander waited. Finally, she sighed and looked back at him with tears in her eyes. “It didn’t go the way it was supposed to. We just thought that, if we could re-soul Angel, there wouldn’t have to be a fight at all and no-one would get hurt. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“I know you didn’t. Why didn’t you tell Spike and me what you were doing?” That was the crux of the problem for Xander.

“You would have tried to stop us.” It was said in a barely audible whisper.

Xander reached out and pushed a lock of the shining red hair back from her downcast features so he
could see them more clearly. “See, that’s kind of the problem, Willow. How can I be friends with someone who is always going to place someone else’s interests over mine?” he asked gently.

“I don’t,” she protested, looking up at him sharply, “but Buffy loved Angel. The spell was important to both of them. I had to try.”

Xander’s eyes hardened and he pulled the hand that had lingered in her hair back sharply. “Then you shouldn’t have a problem living with the consequences either.” Giving up, he turned away.

“So you’re just going to stay mad at me? Why? You told Oz that Spike is all better, so why can’t you forgive me?”

“Spike almost died. The fact that he didn’t doesn’t make it ‘all better’. And you haven’t said anything to make me believe you wouldn’t do the same thing all over again.”

“You say I chose Buffy over you? Well, you seem to be choosing that vampire over me.”

“I am.”

The words dropped like pebbles into still water, sending ripples of shocked silence reverberating outward.

“How can you?” Willow had the betrayed look in her eyes that had become so familiar over the past year.

“Because I love him.”

“What? Are you saying you… You can’t be. He’s a vampire.” Willow’s stunned protests tumbled over each other incoherently. Xander didn’t worry about her knee-jerk “you’re not gay” reaction, just answering her last statement. He knew that was the real problem for Willow, not her surprise at him being in love with another guy.

“You didn’t have a problem with that when it was Buffy.”

“Angel had a soul.”

“So what? As far as I can tell, he’s a jerk with the soul and a monster without it. I’ll take Spike any day over that.” Xander effectively ended the argument by pushing Giles’ door open and stepping through, shutting it firmly behind him.

Which brought him face to face with Giles.

“There’s probably no chance you didn’t hear that, is there?”

“Sorry, I’m afraid not.” Giles’ gaze was sympathetic. When Xander seemed at loss for words, Giles admitted, almost sheepishly: “I had noticed that the two of you were being very careful not to be here at the same time. There’s only so long that can happen before it has to be deliberate. I’m afraid I intentionally delayed Willow today, hoping you two could work things out. I apologize, it was obviously the wrong thing to do.”

Xander couldn’t help noticing that Giles hadn’t mentioned the revelations at the end of the argument with Willow. Wondering if he should just leave it alone, he still found himself saying: “So… are you going to tell me I’m crazy for being with Spike?”

“Would there be any point?”
When Xander just smiled faintly at him, Giles nodded thoughtfully. “If there is one thing I learned in my youth, it is that the absolute worst thing to tell a teenager is who they can or cannot have for a friend. It certainly proved true in my case.” Xander opened his mouth and Giles gave him a stern look. “And no, I will not discuss the details of my hypothetical misspent youth with you.” Xander shut his mouth, mildly disappointed, as Giles continued with a small smile. “After all, as a faculty member, I am supposed to be a role model for the students. It wouldn’t do to tarnish your undoubtedly shining image of me.”

It took a moment for Xander to realize that Giles was joking. His tone was as dry as it usually was and only the deepening lines around his eyes betrayed the librarian’s inward laughter. Relieved, he gave Giles a broad smile. “So, you of the mysterious misspent youth, what’s on the table for today?”

“The Dakram sub-group,” Giles answered readily. He gestured with his still-splinted fingers towards the books spread out on the table.

To the Watcher’s vast relief, his hands had healed sufficiently for him to be able to live independently again, although he was relying on microwave-able food and non-buttoning clothing. Somehow, spending time with a Giles wearing t-shirts and sweat pants had shifted their relationship subtly. In putting aside his armor of tweed, Giles had relaxed considerably, and allowed Xander to catch glimpses of the human behind the mask of librarian and Watcher.

That said, he expected Xander to read the assignments he set, no matter what, and tested with the zeal of a… a… a really zealous thing. Xander couldn’t actually think of an example a crazed tester, but he was sure there was something sadistic about Giles’ love of quizzes. Luckily, Xander found reading about demons fascinating. There were a gazillion different types: from harmless to lethal, nearly microscopic to gigantic, and the range of powers and weaknesses was dazzling. Spike enthusiastically assisted Xander in his studies, feeling it would help keep Xander alive on the Hellmouth if he knew more about potential opponents. He supplemented the book knowledge Xander was slowly accumulating with his vast personal experience with different demons, frequently regaling Xander with stories that were as appalling as they were hysterical. He would have suspected Spike of pulling his leg, but every time he checked, Giles’ dry volumes supported Spike’s frequently lurid descriptions. Even if Spike hadn’t actually fought/shagged/eaten or whatever all the demons he claimed to have, he certainly knew his demon trivia. If Jeopardy ever offered a demon category, Spike would so rake in the money.

His straying thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing. He answered as usual - it was still difficult for Giles to pick up the phone without fumbling the receiver and he had asked Xander to answer it whenever he was there.

“Mr. Giles’ house.”

“Is Mr. Giles there?”

“Yes, may I tell him who’s calling?” Despite his bland receptionist tone, Xander recognized the voice. It was Mrs. Summers, calling as she did every day, desperately hoping for news. Giles was spending hours every day on the phone, contacting police departments, shelters, hot lines, hospitals and crisis centers, hoping for leads on Buffy. So far he’d drawn a complete blank.

Xander handed the phone to Giles and tried to concentrate on the faded ink of the hand-written book he was reading. He couldn’t help overhearing as Giles reported his findings, or lack thereof, to Mrs. Summers and clumsily tried to reassure her. It wasn’t the first time he’d overheard their conversation and it sounded depressingly similar each time. Buffy had been gone for almost two weeks now and Mrs. Summers was absolutely frantic.
Although he tactfully kept his mouth shut on the subject, Xander personally thought that Buffy was fine and would return when she had gotten over the shock of needlessly sending her boyfriend to hell. He didn’t miss her frequently grating presence and near constant disapproval of him at all.

Mrs. Summers, on the other hand, troubled him a lot. The position she was in was so similar to what Jesse’s mom must have gone through, that Xander sometimes thought the universe was trying to teach him some cosmic lesson about how what goes ‘round comes ‘round. He’d never met Buffy’s mother but it was impossible not to equate her with Mrs. McNally in his head and he was feeling almost unbearably guilty for withholding information from her.

Giles was going the secret society route, pretending to be only a concerned teacher helping to look for a favorite student. Mrs. Summers was obviously grateful for the help, but Xander could hear the worry and despair growing in her voice as time passed without any word.

When Giles let the phone drop to his lap, Xander silently put the receiver back on the cradle and waited as Giles put his head down, his forearms resting on his thighs, his still mostly useless hands dangling limply. After a long silence, Giles raised his head, his eyes suspiciously bright, and said with determination: “Where were we?”

With Mrs. McNally’s unused address weighing heavily on his conscience, Xander finally broached a subject he’d been avoiding. “Giles? Do you think it would help if we told Mrs. Summers about, you know, the Slayer, and Angelus, and everything?”

Giles drew himself up until he was sitting rigidly upright in his chair and, for an instant, Xander had the confused impression that the Englishman was suddenly wearing one of his three-piece suits. The Watcher persona was front and center as Giles answered stiffly: “I hardly think that trying to explain vampires and Slayer lore would do anything to relieve the poor woman’s anxiety, Xander. More likely, she would think, either that I had gone barking mad, or that I was playing some dreadful practical joke on her. Neither would provide much comfort.”

Ok, there was that. “But I keep thinking that knowing why Buffy ran away would at least help a little.”

Giles shook his head emphatically. “I can’t see how knowing the reason that Buffy is missing would make anything better. Unfortunately, only her return will do that.”

With that, Giles firmly turned the subject back to the demon texts, assigning Xander several chapters to read and bringing their day’s session to a close.

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As a vampire in his prime, well over a century and with two Slayers under his belt, Spike should have been long past these ridiculous feelings. The kind that humans called “butterflies in the stomach.” Since the splintering of his family, he’d rarely been one to care about other’s opinions. For the most part, he did what he wanted and the rest of the world adapted to him.

Of course, Drusilla had been the exception. From the night he first opened his eyes after mortal death, he had gladly danced attendance on her, catering to her every mad whim, and following where her visions led them. Sire and lover, seer and madwoman, Dru had been Spike’s world for over a century.

Humans who said vampires couldn’t love spoke from ignorance and arrogance, their denials a flimsy justification for extermination. Demons of all sorts loved and hated indistinguishably from humans. The airs and pretensions ‘Angel’ had laid claim to, after he’d stopped bemoaning the soul he’d been
cursed with and begun to take pride in it, had both amused and infuriated Spike. There were vampire couples who had stayed together for centuries and Masters who cherished human pets for decades. Even a pair of brainless gits like Lyle and Tector Gorch shared loyalty and brotherly affection that many humans could envy. Most human couples didn’t last a decade.

No, Spike reminded himself, he wasn’t unusual because he was capable of love, he just had the bad luck to fall for partners who needed a bit more caretaking than your average vampire. Dru’s strength, like forgery-flawed steel, had been shot through with weaknesses, and Xander was a human. It had taken time and energy to keep up with Drusilla’s flighty moods and sometimes dangerous whims. Xander was far less likely to suddenly go dancing off a precipice but he had human needs that had to be considered. Actually, Xander’s human moods and sensitivities were delightfully easy to fathom. Drusilla’s hypersensitivity to slights had stemmed from her insanity and had been frustratingly unpredictable.

Xander was not likely to wander vaguely into the middle of a group of vampires and ask them to make tea for his dolls, so he should be a snap to protect from minions attached to Spike’s Court. With that comforting thought, Spike found some of his nervousness fading as he brought the DeSoto to a stop in front of the factory with his usual flair for the dramatic.

“This is it, luv.”

Xander climbed out of the car in the early twilight. The block was an industrial one, the buildings that weren’t boarded up were already closed for the night. Despite that, it was surprisingly well lit and the wide streets had been designed for truck traffic. Spike watched with concealed anxiety as Xander studied the building and the neighborhood, and relaxed as Xander turned and smiled at him.

“We’ve got a separate entrance in the back,” Spike said, and led Xander around the east side of the building.

Three minions were staying in the old building already, having been given their choice of third floor quarters in exchange for doing the grunt work of cleaning the place up. Seeing the puzzlement they didn’t dare express, Spike had pointed out that they could do anything they liked with the third floor, but he wasn’t a minion to live in his own, or anyone else’s filth.

He’d warned them that he was planning on moving in today and the place had better live up to his explicit instructions if they didn’t want their dust to be swept up by a fresh batch of more satisfactory minions. Young enough to be easily intimidated and eager to be part of a new Court, the three were also mature enough to follow instructions. After his experience with the Anointed One’s largely useless minions, Spike wasn’t about to let any Tom, Dick, or Lestat into his Court. After these three, minions would have to prove themselves before being accepted.

Leading Xander up the back stairs, Spike pushed the door open and let Xander enter first. The door was unlocked. No point in locking it: a deadbolt wouldn’t keep any demon worth worrying about from entering and any human burglar would be a snack for the minions. The back door opened into the kitchen and Xander glanced around with the mild curiosity of a non-cook, walking out through the opposite door to the living room. His eyes widened appreciatively when he saw the oriental rug, the leather couch and loveseat, and the big screen tv. “Wow! This is great.”

“Bedroom and bath are back through there,” Spike said casually, as if relief wasn’t pouring over him in a wave. It was obvious that Xander liked the place - as Spike’s sharp eyes surveyed the dust-free corners and the new drapes covering the windows, he judged that the minions had earned their keep. Relaxed now, he followed Xander into the bedroom and found him bouncing experimentally on the mattress of the king-sized bed. As ordered, it was made up with cotton sheets in bold geometric patterns. Spike had heard enough disparaging remarks about Angelus’ red satin sheets that he wasn’t
about to admit that he had slept on similar sheets for years.

“Thought we’d finish the tour first, pet, but if you can’t wait to try out the mattress…” he shot Xander a salacious look, reaching for his belt buckle. Despite his joking, Spike knew this wasn’t the time. Until he had spent a night or two under the same roof as the vampires of his new Court, he couldn’t afford to let his guard down that much around them. While he had no concerns about being able to take all three of them, even simultaneously and weaponless against their armed ambush if necessary, it was just asking for trouble to give them a naked and vulnerable target to get ideas about - the kind of ideas that could get Xander hurt.

“You wish.” Xander jumped to his feet and went to check out the bathroom. Given the era of the building, the bathroom was nothing spectacular but everything worked, Spike had made sure of that. Xander just poked his head inside curiously before returning to where Spike stood watching him. He threw his arms around the vampire in a quick, hard hug. “Thanks, Spike. This is great.”

Spike cupped his face in both hands and looked searchingly into the dark eyes. “You alright with living here?”

“Spike, I am way more than alright living anywhere with you. It’s just a bonus that you found such a nice place. Can I see the rest of it?”

“Sure, luv. Want to introduce you to the minions.” Xander’s recently renewed Claim mark would be obvious to the most dull-witted vampire but Spike wanted the added assurance of personally introducing his Claimed to the fledges. They had been told he had a Claimed human who would be living at the factory and that letting his boy come to harm was a guarantee of a long, painful final death but it never hurt to reinforce the message personally.

Opening a door tucked into a niche in the far corner of the living room, Spike showed Xander the narrow hallway that led to the original manufacturing business. The hall ended in a second door that opened onto another, shorter hall at right angles to the first. That hall intersected a broader one which bisected the length of the building, the former offices and conference room of the business on both sides.

“Minions will have to earn the right to live in these, luv,” Spike explained as he walked swiftly to the other end. Once their suite was finished, he’d told the minions to concentrate on cleaning out the downstairs and the former offices were still shrouded with dust and cluttered with the remnants of battered office furniture. “Main stairway up and down is at the other end of the building,” he continued. “Upstairs is small bedrooms, downstairs is pretty much one big room.” He listened for a moment. “Minions are downstairs. Want to meet them or see their quarters first?”

Xander’s eyes were bright with curiosity. “Let’s go down and meet them.”

Xander trailed him eagerly down the stairs to the main floor. The minions had made a start at clearing it out, pushing the old manufacturing equipment against the walls and leaving an empty space in the center. Spike was amused to see they had found a high-backed wooden chair, the back and arms heavily carved, the seat padded with leather, and set it up conspicuously towards one end of the room. Fledglings were so predictable. There wasn’t a vampire turned who didn’t love being near the center of power. Some never got over their love of bowing and scraping before a superior. Others, like Spike, tired of it quickly and either struck out on their own, or took over a Court for themselves. Spike liked the power and recognition of being the acknowledged Master of a territory but he didn’t need the pomp and ceremony that some vampires couldn’t get enough of.

“Oi!” he called, his voice ringing sharply in the large room. “Wynken, Blynken and Nod, show yourselves.” As far as Spike was concerned, knowing a minion’s name was a mark of respect that
these hadn’t earned yet. Although they’d done well with the upstairs apartment, he couldn’t let them feel their place was too secure.

There was a gratifying scramble as the three dropped - in one case literally from the sound of it - what they were doing and ran towards him. They came to a halt a respectful distance from himself and his Claimed, Spike noted approvingly. These three had real promise. Maybe he would learn their names.

He pulled Xander to his side. “This here’s my Claimed. Not only is he off limits, he is to be treated with the respect you’d treat me. If he comes to harm anywhere in town, from any source: demon or human, you three will pray for final death. Got it?”

“Yes, Master Spike,” they chorused.

He saw Xander studying them curiously and added, for Xander’s sake: “Go ahead and introduce yourselves to him.” He didn’t bother to conceal that he didn’t know their names to introduce them himself.

The oldest of the three, a short, stocky vampire with a shock of hair almost as white as Spike’s, glanced at Spike hesitantly, and seeing that he was sincere, bobbed his head slightly, more in Spike’s direction than Xander’s. “I’m Michael.”

“Rafael.” That was the youngest of the three. Spike intended to keep a close eye on him. He was the most likely of the three to try something foolish. Spike would bet a lot of money he’d been named Ralph in his human existence. Pretentious git.

“Jose.” That was the quiet Hispanic one. He’d been turned when he was in his 40’s probably and was physically older looking than the other two vampires. Between the other two in age, he was the most promising to one day become a lieutenant.

“Xander.” That was Xander’s contribution to the introductions. Spike was pleased that Xander was cautious but not scared. He could smell curiosity but not even a hint of fear. Which was good, as the minions would be able to smell the same thing.

“Were your rooms acceptable, Master Spike?” Michael’s tone was courteous but not fawning. Good.

“They’ll do. My boy and I will be moving in tonight. From now on, no-one enters them without my direct permission.” Quick nods all around. “You need me for anything, knock on the outer hall door. The hall that connects to the apartment is off limits as well. Same goes for the outside staircase. Any questions?”

Not surprisingly, there were none. “Good. You can go back to whatever you were doing.”

Spike turned and strode off without another word. Xander fell into step beside him as Spike walked across the room towards the outside door. He’d take Xander up to see the third floor later. For now, they’d head back to the factory and pack their stuff. It would give the three time to talk about them and Xander probably had questions it wouldn’t be wise to let the minions overhear. Until he was firmly in control, Spike didn’t want them finding out that Xander was anything more than a favored pet. Thinking they could use Xander as leverage would lead to stupidity that Spike would rather not have to deal with.
Chapter 4

“Spike? You want to tell me what happened to all my clothes?”

Tapping his foot and glaring at his lover, Xander knew perfectly well what the answer to his question was. He just wanted to hear what his sneaky little vampire had to say about the absence of nearly his entire wardrobe. Clothes that had suspiciously been replaced with the kind of stuff Spike had bought for him once already - silk shirts, jeans and casual pants two sizes smaller than Xander usually bought, and some really soft sweaters that his fingers had lingered over, just a little, before he remembered how ticked off he was. Except for what he was standing in - an old pair of cargo pants and a brown cotton sweater - every other familiar item was gone from the closet.

Not like he could have misplaced his clothes. He’d gone back to his parents’ house only the day before yesterday to get the rest of his stuff, including his clothes. Packing up everything had only taken a few minutes and two suitcases. The hardest part had been when his father had barely looked up from the tv when he’d walked in, just one brief glance and an indifferent “thought you were staying with a friend”. His father had just grunted an acknowledgement when Xander said he was back to pick up the last of his things and told him to bring the suitcases back when he was done with them.

He’d waited for a minute, foolishly hoping for… something. Anything to show his father cared, even a little. But there was nothing, not even a request for contact information. So, he retreated slowly up the stairs to his former room and silently shoved his clothes and a few other things into the suitcases left dusty and used since his parents’ honeymoon. He wrote a short note for his mother and closed the door quietly behind him.

Carrying the old suitcases by their handles, envying people with wheeled suitcases, Xander couldn’t help thinking that he looked like someone inefficiently running away from home. And, yeah, that’s kind of what he was doing. If his parents had been even halfway normal parents, they would never have allowed their child to virtually disappear without more than a cursory note which left no address or phone for them to reach him. Xander was honest enough to admit that he probably wouldn’t have moved in with Spike if his parents’ house hadn’t been such a barren wasteland.

He would have shrugged except for the large suitcase in each hand. No point in crying over things that should have stopped hurting years ago. He’d practically lived at Jesse’s and Willow’s houses for long periods in years past. Nothing new here.

So, it wasn’t like any of his clothes had sentimental value, that wasn’t what was pissing him off. It was the principle of the thing. Spike shouldn’t have just gone behind his back and taken his stuff. He should have talked to Xander about it, offered to replace his clothes, not just made an executive decision. Ok, admittedly, Xander would have refused the offer - the clothes Spike had bought for him were too dressy and too tight, and he felt ridiculous in them. It wasn’t like he’d never wear them again, Xander thought, a little guiltily about the clothes Spike had previously bought for him, still hanging untouched in the closet. If Spike took him to a nice restaurant or something again, of course he would have worn the clothes Spike had bought for him. After all, your good clothes weren’t supposed to be comfortable.

His old stuff was comfortably loose and sloppy. Ok, yeah, he recognized that his purge of all his bright colored clothes last year had been a bizarre form of mourning for Jesse, but he’d gotten used to his nice, inconspicuous dark wardrobe. Everything went with everything else and even Cordelia had stopped openly mocking his clothes because they were too boring to make good jokes about. Spike’s clothing choices would make him stand out again.
Spike looked annoyingly unfazed by his irritation. “Told the minions to burn ‘em,” he answered Xander’s accusing question without so much as a flicker of remorse. “Even I’m not evil enough to inflict those rags on the homeless,” he explained virtuously.

“They were my clothes!”

“Replaced ‘em, didn’t I?”

“That’s not the point!”

“Should be. Not like I left you walking ‘round naked, or anythin’.” A gleam came to his eye. “Though that would be fine, if you prefer,” he offered magnanimously.

Seeing Xander’s scowl darken, Spike put down the piece of pizza he was picking at and hopped down from the kitchen counter. He crossed over to Xander and enfolded him in his arms, ignoring the way Xander tried to shake him off. “You haven’t worn the clothes I got for you even once since then, have you?”

Embarrassment joined his irritation. He’d secretly been hoping that Spike hadn’t noticed that his gifts hadn’t exactly been out and about since the night he’d bought them for Xander. To Xander’s annoyance, he couldn’t help feeling a little guilty at not liking Spike’s gifts. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate them, Spike, but they’re not everyday clothes.”

“They should be, luv.”

“They aren’t comfortable,” he complained, knowing he sounded like a whiny four year old. He felt like someone caught with an unwanted Christmas gift stuck in the back of the closet - oh, wait, except for the Christmas part, that was exactly what he was. “Not comfortable, everyday stuff,” he added lamely, trying to make up for it.

“Need to wear them more than once to know that.” Spike regarded him seriously and Xander had a sinking feeling that this was important to the vampire. “Xander, I’m Master of Sunnydale. I’ve got a certain image to maintain and you’re part of that. I want everyone who sees you to know that I value my Claimed. Dressed in your usual kit, people will think that I don’t care about you.”

“But I know you do,” Xander protested weakly.

“Need everyone to know, luv.” His voice dropped to a sexy purr. “‘sides, you look good in something that shows you off a bit.”

Xander struggled to hold on to his annoyance but images of the dressing room where Spike had conned him into accepting new clothes the first time kept intruding and he felt a flush of heat at the memory of Spike’s teasing caresses through the tight jeans and his husky voice in Xander’s ear saying how good he looked.

“Do this for me, luv?” Spike’s pleading voice finished the job and Xander could feel his resolve crumbling to dust. “Promise - if you still don’t like them, or think they’re uncomfortable after wearing ‘em for a week, we’ll go to the mall and pick something else out.”

“You’re just saying that because you know I hate the mall,” he grumbled. “And I want three pairs of sweats for kicking around the house in. That’s non-negotiable,” he added, trying to sound like someone who had a backbone and would never just cave in completely when faced with a coaxing smile and a pleading voice.

Spike’s smile went a long way towards making him feel better about the whole stupid clothes issue.
“Already in the dresser, luv. Bottom drawer.”

Xander’s spinelessness was obviously a matter of official record - he couldn’t help smiling back at his vampire.

“Do you know anything about the Slayers you killed?” Xander’s tone was a little too casual.

They were sprawled comfortably on the couch in their new apartment watching tv. An earlier wrestling match over the remote had left them laughing and hopelessly tangled, the remote triumphantly in Spike’s hand and Xander proclaiming himself the actual winner due to Spike’s resort to unsportsmanlike tactics. Spike had scoffingly dismissed the idea that distracting his opponent with hands in unusual places was anything other than a completely legitimate move. A bloke faced with the prospect of a Babylon 5 marathon had to use any means necessary to win.

Leaning against the warmth of Xander’s body, encircled by his arm, idly watching some movie with a lot more gunplay and car chases than plot, Spike felt as contented as a sun-warmed cat. They were working on adjusting their schedules to each other and Xander’s summer vacation helped enormously. They slept late in the mornings and Xander would putter around doing his human stuff in the afternoon - visiting the Watcher and the werewolf or just hanging out in the sunshine. Late afternoon and early evening was their time to be together, whether just watching tv or talking or making out on the couch. He was being cautious about being seen around town with Xander and had explained to Xander that they couldn’t go out together just yet. Spike was waiting for what he knew was coming - the inevitable challenge for control of the Hellmouth. The war with Angelus had left things too unsettled in town for there not to be at least one assault, especially while it appeared that he might be vulnerable given his new lair and lack of minions. But this was not the time to take on new minions, not before whoever challenged him was dust. Until then, every minion was a potential source of trouble that Spike didn’t need. He had three who were falling all over each other to prove themselves to him and that was plenty for now.

Stroking his hand idly over the soft cotton of the sweats that Xander insisted on changing back into the second he returned to the apartment, Spike smiled to himself. It had been so worth that trip to the mall. Breaking in at night and rifling through the racks in a couple of different men’s department had used up a fair bit of time but it was a task he couldn’t delegate to a minion. Xander was getting more comfortable in his new clothes as he got used to them. He was honoring their agreement and wearing them whenever he left the apartment and, despite his elaborate sighs of relief every time he slipped the sweats on when he came home, he’d admitted grudgingly that people seemed to like his new clothes.

As Xander’s unexpected question broke the long silence between them, Spike turned his head to look up at him. Xander continued to stare at the telly but, from the faraway look in his eyes, his thoughts weren’t on the hero currently dodging an improbable number of bullets. “Like what, pet?” he asked, curious about what his boy was thinking.

“Did they have families?”

“Dunno. Could be. Slayers fight alone. Usually their Watcher’s the only one knows who and what they are. Don’t usually have a little groupie like Red backing ‘em up.” He saw Xander’s lips tighten at the mention of the little redhead. Spike knew something had happened between them but Xander had been reticent about the details, apparently out of a misplaced concern for Spike’s feelings. Spike didn’t give a piss about what the amateur witch thought of him. He despised her for re-cursing Angelus and hadn’t sought her out to wreak vengeance for his Sire only because he knew it would hurt Xander. Regardless of how far they’d drifted apart, he knew Xander still cared about her. Spike
could relate - he had similar lingering feelings for Angelus. Whether born or chosen family, you never could truly shake those ties.

“Giles’ books say that potential Slayers used to be turned over to Watchers when they were really young, so they could be trained in case they were ever called.”

“Makes sense. All the strength in the world doesn’t do you much good if you don’t know what to do with it.” Spike made a mental note to start Xander’s self-defense classes again. Between both of them being injured and Xander’s finals at school, Spike had put it off but there was no longer any reason not to continue training his boy how to fight properly.

“So, their families would have to know about vampires and stuff, if they know their daughter is a Slayer.”

“’s only in the last century or so people stopped believing in demons. Lots of places in the world where people still do.”

Xander looked over at him, his head cocked to one side curiously. “Is it easier for vampires to hunt now that no-one believes in them?”

“Not really. Modern world has lots of advantages over the last century in calling for help. ’s not like people don’t know they’re being attacked, they just put it down to a mugger with a biting fetish or whatnot. Police still come.” Like any predator, Spike adapted to the behavioral changes in his prey. He was just better at it than a tiger was. “What’s this about, luv?”

Xander shrugged one shoulder. “I’ve been thinking about trying to talk to Buffy’s mother about what happened with Angel.”

Spike’s eyebrows rose. “You want to tell the Slayer’s mum that her daughter was dating a vampire?” He began to sit up, a wicked sparkle in his eyes as he thought about the Slayer’s reaction when she returned to town and learned that her secrets had been spilled. “No time like the present.”

Xander tightened his arm, holding Spike in place, his free hand coming up to bop Spike on the head. Grinning, Spike blocked the scolding blow before it landed. “Not to mess with Buffy, because I’m worried about her mother.” He sighed, “you’re right though, it’s guaranteed to piss Buffy off if I do it.”

“Why’re you thinking about it then?” Spike asked, more seriously. Xander had obviously been thinking about this for awhile already.

“Giles won’t do it. He says it will just make things worse. So he just keeps stalling her, telling her Buffy will be home soon.” His troubled eyes sought Spike’s. “If she shows up tomorrow, he’s right - why stir up a hornet’s nest. But what if she doesn’t come back for weeks, or even months? We can’t just leave her hanging.”

“Thinking about your friend’s mum, aren’t you?” Xander had mentioned in passing how his friend’s mother had moved away. Despite the off-hand manner, Spike had heard the sorrow in his voice.

“Yeah,” Xander admitted quietly. “Not telling her worked out real well, didn’t it?”

Spike could sense Xander’s guilt and shame and sat up straight, pulling Xander into his arms. It was like Xander to blame himself for the choices other people made. “You do what you think best, luv. Not what anyone else tells you. You know better than any of them what’s right.”

Xander clung to him tightly for a moment, his face buried in Spike’s chest as he fought with his
emotions. Pushing back, he turned back to face the tv. After a moment, he said resolutely: “If someone doesn’t shoot this guy soon, I’m reporting these clowns to the NRA as a reason for having mandatory target practicing laws.”

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Oh yeah, setting up a Court and moving Xander into the same building, that had been a brilliant plan. He’d forgotten how he met Xander in the first place - spying on the Anointed One’s Court. They’d barely moved in and Xander was already down on the main floor, chatting up the help.

The minions didn’t know what to make of it. Baffled and uneasy, they were busy trying to figure out if this was some sort of obscure plan Spike had set in motion to test their loyalty and self control. To see if they could be trusted alone with his pet.

Not a bad idea, actually. Standing silently in the shadows, watching the minions talk to Xander, was giving him insight into the way they behaved when they thought he wasn’t around. As Spike would have guessed, Jose was his normal self-contained self. Rare for a vampire, Jose didn’t seem to feel the need to impress other demons. He was answering when Xander spoke to him directly, but not volunteering anything. Of all of them, he was the only one who appeared at ease. Even Xander wasn’t nearly as relaxed as he was pretending. Spike could see the tension in his shoulders even as he leaned with fake casualness against one of the support pillars.

The second minion was going on about the 60’s again. Spike suspected he spent so much time talking about the past to emphasize the fact that he was oldest of the three minions. There couldn’t be any other reason for bragging about his days as a stoner following rock bands around the country - who hadn’t done that? He seemed to feel that being oldest automatically made him the leader, something Spike was going to disabuse him of soon enough. Ralph - Spike enjoyed the way the third minion tried with such spectacular lack of success to hide his anger at Spike’s name for him - was toady ing up to Xander, flattering him and laughing too readily at Xander’s joking remarks. Spike could tell that Xander wasn’t falling for it. He was leaning away from Ralph slightly and focusing most of his attention on the other two, to Ralph’s obvious frustration. Little piss-ant obviously thought the way to power was through Spike’s pet.

Spike would have found the whole thing funny if it hadn’t been so infuriating. The minions were clustered in a loose semi-circle around Xander, who had no weapons out and lacked the skill to deal with three at once, even if he’d been holding a stake out and ready. His status as Spike’s Claimed gave him a strong measure of protection but minions were minions and not to be trusted lightly, if at all. He needed to have a talk with Xander about the difference between a Master vampire and a minion. Spike and Angel had obviously given Xander the wrong impression about the ability of most vampires to control themselves.

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Spike waited until the timing was precisely right, then attacked. His target was expecting trouble and heard him at the last second, giving him just time to turn and meet the attack face to face before going down under Spike’s weight.

He did well, grabbing on to Spike’s shoulders and pulling one leg up defensively even as he went down, then kicking upwards with all his strength, using Spike’s own momentum against him to flip him over his head.

Spike landed on his feet like a gymnast and spun to face his victim, who rolled over on the mat to squint up at him. “Not bad, huh?”
Spike raised his scarred eyebrow, smirking. “Not good, either. Got to remember to hold on to me or I’m on my feet while you’re still on the ground taking a siesta.” More seriously, he added: “You’re thinking too big, luv, thinking you can send me flying 30 feet into the bushes. That’s Hollywood bollocks unless you’ve got vampire strength. When you flip me, I’m still going to be right there next to you. Need to keep your grip on me, which will throw me off balance so I don’t land on my feet. Plus, if I jump to my feet before you do, I’m gonna pull you up with me.” He smiled at Xander’s crestfallen look. “Don’t fret, luv. You’ve got a good understanding of leverage and you’re getting to be brilliant at using a person’s momentum against them.”

He reached down, extending a hand and hauled Xander to his feet. “Let’s try that again.”

They were working out in a make-shift dojo at Angelus’ mansion. Spike had thought long and hard about where to train Xander and had reluctantly decided to use the mansion. He’d grabbed Jose last night and the two of them had burgled several athletic supply stores and a martial arts dojo, loading up a stolen pick-up with their spoils. Spike really was testing the minion this time. If he heard one word about tonight’s activities, from anywhere, he’d know Jose couldn’t be trusted and that would be the end of that potential lieutenant. He’d only been willing to trust the minion so far, though, and had left him behind after picking up the last of the equipment Spike wanted.

Driving to the mansion, Spike had unloaded everything himself, shoving the furniture to one side and spreading training mats out on the floor of the living room. He’d set up an archery target in the long hallway and carried in boxes of throwing stars and knives. He’d make sure Xander continued to practice the crossbow with the Watcher - the Englishman’s crossbows were much better than anything Spike could find in town. Beautiful weapons that man had, he thought with a trace of envy.

After setting everything up, Spike had looked around with satisfaction. He’d finally just pushed the couches out into the courtyard, clearing the main room entirely except for the training mats. He hated using the place but it wouldn’t be safe to train Xander in the factory with the minions watching and there wasn’t room in the apartment. Training a human, even a Claimed human, to fight was not common and Spike didn’t want to give up the advantage Xander being trained gave his boy by letting everyone know Xander was being trained to fight by a Master vampire. The mansion was deserted, it wasn’t the kind of place another vampire would covet for a lair, and it was not likely that anyone, human or demon, would stumble over them accidentally while they were training.

Or ambush them.

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Xander smiled nervously at the woman who opened the door.

“Mrs. Summers? I’m Xander Harris. I’m… a friend of Buffy’s.” Ok, friend was way stretching it but it was the simplest way to introduce himself.

It was two days since he’d talked with Spike and the more he thought about Buffy’s mother waiting for word from her daughter, not knowing where Buffy was or why she had disappeared, the more he recognized how much he’d failed Mrs. McNally. He hadn’t done anything for Jesse’s mother - he’d let his own grief overwhelm him and had shut her out along with everyone else. It was too late to make up for what he hadn’t done for Mrs. McNally but maybe he could do something to help Mrs. Summers in her place.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember Buffy mentioning your name.” Mrs. Summers hesitated, “she’s not here right now.”

“I know. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you have a minute?”
Joyce Summers studied him thoughtfully as he stood nervously on the porch, his shoulders hunched, his eyes anxious. Making up her mind, she stepped outside and gestured towards the porch chairs.

“Did Buffy tell you about Angel?” Xander asked as he sat down on the flowery cushions, wondering how much Buffy had actually told her mother. Willow was probably the only one who knew and so not going there. Mrs. Summers didn’t know Buffy was the Slayer, that much Xander did know, but it was about all he knew about her.

“The college boy she was dating?” Mrs. Summers’ lips tightened. “She mentioned him. She said he began stalking her after she broke up with him.”

“Ummm, it’s a little more complicated than that,” he began hesitantly.

“It usually is,” she responded dryly.

Xander gave her a fleeting grin. She sounded exactly like he did when Spike was trying to explain vampire stuff. Warming to her, he continued with a little more confidence. “I guess Buffy still liked him a lot. She kept saying that it wasn’t his fault, that he was off his medication and that it wasn’t really him who was doing all the crazy stuff.”

“Angel had mental problems?” Joyce asked faintly.

“Big time.” Xander had struggled with what to tell her and thought he’d finally come up with something that was both plausible and kind of covered the situation. “I guess when he’s taking his medication, he’s pretty normal but he gets really dangerous when he’s not on them.”

Mrs. Summers was starting to look alarmed and Xander hurried on. “A… relative of Angel’s told me that Angel convinced Buffy to see him one more time. Apparently, he killed himself in front of Buffy.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Mr. Giles told me about the letter Buffy sent. I think she’s blaming herself for not being able to stop him in time.” Xander looked down at his tensely clasped hands. “Buffy thought it was her fault that Angel went off his meds to begin with.” He looked at Mrs. Summers earnestly. “I think she’s just holed up somewhere trying to deal with what happened.” He shrugged helplessly. “I don’t have any idea where she is but I wanted you to know what happened.”

“Thank you… Xander?” she confirmed and he nodded. “I really appreciate you telling me this. I’ve been going out of my mind these past two weeks.” She shook her head. “It’s so typical of Buffy to try and handle something like that herself.” She sighed and stared across the neglected lawn for a moment before saying: “Well, at least I know what made her run away. That helps a little.”

Relief swept over Xander. He hadn’t been sure he was doing the right thing but even though he’d lied to her, he’d told her something that was at least a version of the truth. Me and Obi Won, he thought wryly, big with the truth from a certain point of view.

“I should go, I just wanted to let you know what happened.” He stood up and Mrs. Summers rose with him. She put her hand on his arm, looking up at him for a long moment.

“Thank you, Xander.”
Chapter 5

“You told Joyce Summers that Angel was a madman who committed suicide?” Giles’ pained expression as he summarized what Xander had just told him seemed to be reflecting actual pain. He pressed the heel of one palm tiredly against his forehead, his still bandaged fingers not yet up to the task of rubbing his headache away. He had a bit more use of his hands now and had adapted to his limited finger dexterity as injured people do but was audibly looking forward to the day when the bandages would be gone.

Xander met his eyes squarely. “Yep.” It hadn’t been an impulse that sent him to the Summers’ house yesterday, he had thought about it for a long time. Regardless of what Giles’ opinion of his decision was, Xander knew it had been the right thing to do.

“I see.” Giles sat down with a sigh. Silence stretched between them and Xander simply waited, giving Giles time to process the information.

“I suppose it was rather clever of you to find an explanation that covered the situation without revealing Buffy’s role as the Slayer,” Giles said eventually, “but I don’t really understand why you felt it was necessary.”

“Giles, you know what happened and you’re freaking out - in a discrete, British way, of course,” he added hastily at Giles’ look. “Mrs. Summers has been completely in the dark and is probably blaming herself for Buffy running away. Having some idea of the reason why Buffy left has to help a little.”

If Xander had one main problem with Giles, it was that he was so intent on what Buffy needed that he frequently was oblivious to everyone else’s needs. He didn’t think Giles was intentionally cruel but sometimes, the things he did sure made him seem that way. It was like all his empathy was focused on Buffy and he didn’t have any to spare for anyone else. In Xander’s opinion, it skewed his thinking, like when he was willing to go along with the re-souling spell, or now, when he’d been willing to leave Mrs. Summers hanging with no information. Giles was so intent on protecting Buffy’s secret identity that he couldn’t see Mrs. Summers’ pain.

“Well, no harm done. And you may be right, it may help Mrs. Summers to have some idea of the trauma that Buffy went through that caused her to run away. It was certainly not Joyce Summers’ fault.”

Xander’s jaw tightened but he didn’t say anything. Giles kept making excuses for Buffy instead of holding her accountable for being a selfish bitch. After Spike’s wounds had healed and Xander’s own anger had abated somewhat, he’d had been surprised to find he was able to muster a bit of sympathy for Buffy - for a couple of days, anyway. After Jesse died, Xander had pretty much crawled into a hole to grieve, so he got the whole wounded-animal-suffering-alone thing. Sometimes you really had to just go to ground until the first raw pain eased a little.

His sympathy had died rapidly as the days went by and Buffy didn’t return. As far as he knew, Buffy hadn’t even bothered to find out if Giles was alive before she blew town and she sure didn’t seem to be thinking about what her mother was going through. Buffy was the one who kept going on about her great mythic destiny as the Slayer and apparently that no longer meant anything to her either. Granted, it was possible she was still fighting demons wherever she was now, but Xander wouldn’t have put any money on it.
Xander was the first to admit he had Buffy issues. So the fact that he thought she was just being a big drama queen over Angel’s death probably wasn’t a surprise. In his opinion, she was self-indulgently wallowing in melodramatic grief over her star-crossed love. After all, it wasn’t like she didn’t have her mother and Giles to help her deal. Plus, she’d had months to get used to the idea that she was going to have to kill Angel. It couldn’t have been a surprise when it finally happened - she’d gone into the battle with a lot of weapons for someone who didn’t seem to have understood that people die in fights to the death. Ok, the fact that Angel had a soul again when she killed him had to have hurt but, hey, who’s fault was that? The least she could do was check up on the wounded her boyfriend had left strewn in his wake.

Giles looked exhausted. He was still spending far too much time on the phone, calling the same numbers, and new ones he dug up, over and over again as he sought out information, tips, rumors, anything. Xander had offered to stop their demon study sessions until Buffy was found but Giles had insisted on continuing them, saying it helped to think about something else for awhile. Although Giles and he had a mutual agreement not to talk about it, Xander knew that Willow was coming over every morning to keep him company and to use the computer to widen the search. Fingers aside, Giles was still nearly computer illiterate but Willow had always been good on the internet. From what Oz said, Willow and Giles were also studying magic. Giles had given in to Willow’s desire to learn more magic and was teaching her the theoretical underpinnings of magic, insisting that Willow have a firm grasp of the fundamentals if she was intending to keep studying to be a witch.

Oz was worried about Willow. He wasn’t trying to push Xander, but he’d mentioned how lonely she was without Buffy to talk to and how obsessed with finding her she was - spending hours on the computer at home in addition to her time with Giles. Oz and Xander had found it was impossible to leave Willow out of their conversations - she was too much a part of Oz these days - and they didn’t try. Oz respected that Xander was angry with Willow and didn’t try to force the issue, and Xander simply acted as if she was someone he barely knew and had no issues with when her name came up. They were guys, it worked.

Leaving Giles’ apartment, Xander found himself heading towards Revello Drive. He knew Mrs. Summers worked and wasn’t likely to be home. Stopping at the house, he surveyed the lawn and wondered if it was Buffy’s job to keep it mowed. It was way overdue and was going to be a real chore to mow if it wasn’t done soon. On impulse, he walked around the house looking for a garden shed. He wasn’t particularly worried about the neighbors, figuring that, if they had never noticed Buffy climbing out of her window most nights, they weren’t particularly snoopy people. Finding a small shed tucked away at the back of the property, he checked inside and saw a lawn mower.

An hour later, he surveyed his work. The lawn was tidy again and the house no longer stood out among the neatly trimmed yards of its neighbors. Satisfied, he put the mower back and headed home.

“You told her my Sire was an escaped lunatic?!” Spike was outraged and it showed.

“Well, he was, kind of.” Xander hadn’t thought that Spike would be upset about what he’d told Mrs. Summers.

Which was stupid, now that he thought about it. Can you say Sire issues? Not that he blamed Spike, he told himself hastily. Anyone with Angel/Angelus as a Sire was entitled to all the Sire issues they could handle. Jerry Springer would love to get that family on his show. Angel would fit right in with those people whose husband and father came home one day and announced they were getting a sex change operation. For Spike, the whole “Hi, honey, I’ve got a soul now” had obviously been the
vampire equivalent of a childhood trauma. Not that he was ever sharing that analogy with Spike. He wasn’t that dumb.

“I’m sorry, Spike. I didn’t mean to insult your family but you said yourself that Angelus was different this time around.”

Ok, maybe he should’ve just stuck with the apology part of that sentence. Spike was still glaring at him in yellow-eyed anger and Xander didn’t know what to say to get Spike to cool down.

After a minute, Spike’s glare softened and his eyes shifted back to blue. “Yeah, he was different. S’pose escaped loony does sort of cover it.” He shrugged, putting it behind him in that way he had of living entirely in the present. “How’d that work out?”

Xander perched on the arm of the couch next to him. “It went ok. I think maybe it helped a little bit.”

“Told ya you would know what to do.”

Jose approached Spike outside the bar he was just about to enter. “Master Spike, may I speak with you?”

“What’s on yer mind?” Spike had a feeling that trouble was in the wind, there had been tension among the three minions and he had warned Xander to stay away from them for the time being. He signaled for Jose to walk with him away from the bar and possible eavesdroppers. He was pleased when the minion fell in step with him and, without prompting, didn’t speak until they were well away from the bar.

“Rafael is being courted by an older vampire. He is young and foolish and equates a small Court with weakness. He does not understand the value of patience and building things slowly so they last.” At Spike’s raised eyebrow, Jose bowed with a curious, antique formality. “Forgive me, Master Spike, if I have spoken out of turn. It is apparent to me that you have chosen to build your Court slowly after your difficulties with the minions you inherited from the Anointed One.” For the first time since he’d met the vampire, Spike saw a hint of a smile on the usually impassive face. “I was not part of that Court by choice, having been familiar with a number of the vampires who made up the Court.”

It was the most Spike had heard the minion say since he’d joined the Court and it cemented his growing approval of Jose. It also fit with what Spike had been observing about the youngest member of his Court. “Yeah, bunch of useless gits the Annoying One had.” Turning to the subject at hand, he asked: “So, who’s recruiting Ralph? And what’s Michael’s position?” He studied Jose carefully as he answered, aware that, if Jose wasn’t playing this straight, he would be the one most likely to mount a serious challenge.

“A vampire who calls himself Ares, recently arrived in town.” Spike snorted in disgust at the name, vampires could be such poseurs. “He is in the bar now, along with an unusually large number of vampires. Michael… is on the fence. I apologize but I am not sure which way he will go when it comes down to it.”

“Fair enough, doubt he knows himself which way he’ll jump until the question is put to him.” Spike made up his mind quickly. “You armed?”

“Two stakes and a knife.”
Spike nodded, pleased with the swift, accurate listing. Opening his duster, he unfastened a small, one-handed crossbow that he’d worn hanging from a loop inside his duster since the day he’d moved into the factory. Handing it and a handful of bolts to Jose, he ordered: “Don’t use it on the wanker. I’ll take care of him. Use it to take out anyone who tries to interfere in the fight.”

“Yes, Master Spike.” Spike watched as Jose loaded the crossbow, his quick economical movements satisfying Spike about his competence.

“No time like the present.”

They both turned and headed back to the bar, Spike slightly in the lead, Jose keeping the crossbow down inconspicuously at his side.

Entering the room, Spike heading for the bar with seeming casualness, taking in the players with one sweeping glance. Ares had to be the tall black-haired git leaning back in his chair at the corner table. Every other vampire had their attention focused on him, a few openly, the rest surreptitiously. A handful of barely-turned fledges were listening to his booming voice admiringly, but most of the crowd looked like they were withholding judgment.

Spike leaned against the bar and ordered whiskey. The bartender poured it quickly and moved immediately down to the far end of the bar, as far from Spike as he could get. Picking up his glass, Spike swiveled casually around and sipped while he studied the room. Jose had stayed near the door, fading back into the shadows, but Spike could see he was poised and ready. Ralph was with the sycophants clustered around the corner table. Michael was standing with a couple of older vampires against the wall who’d stopped talking, along with almost everyone else, when Spike walked in. The front legs of Ares’ chair thunked back down onto the floor, the sound like a gunshot in the rapidly spreading silence. Spike ignored him, finishing his drink and setting the glass down on the bar. Still leaning casually against the bar, he lit a cigarette, puffing idly like a vampire without a care in the world. He kept his gaze on the far wall, even when he heard Ares’ chair scrape back and his booted feet crossing the room.

With studied contempt, Spike took a last drag and flicked the butt in the direction of the approaching vampire, turning his head to watch it bounce off the polished boot. “Sorry, mate. Didn’t see you there,” he said, his indifferent tone clearly conveying his opinion that the vampire was too unimportant to bother with. Behind Ares, he saw that his toadies had moved with him, forming a loose semi-circle behind Ares.

Spike gave them a disbelieving look. “Not much of an entourage for the god of war,” he commented sarcastically. “Recruiting babies, are you?”

“You should know, I believe some of them used to be yours.” Ares’ voice was smug.

Spike just shrugged at the implication he couldn’t hold the minions he recruited. “Gotta have someone to do the scut work. They’re so unimportant, it’s hard to keep track of ‘em. Always plenty more where they came from.” He looked pointedly at the group behind Ares, letting his gaze sweep over Ralph without a flicker of recognition. “You sure some of these were mine? Don’t recognize any of ‘em.”

Ralph stirred as if he was about to say something but a sharp gesture from Ares stilled him again.

“Well, you’re still young. You’ll find that memory improves as a vampire matures and comes in to their full power.”
“Be as old as Methuselah one day and I still won’t be wasting my time learning the names of useless minions.” Spike wasn’t worried by the other vampire’s implication that he was far older than Spike. Wasn’t a vampire turned who didn’t claim to be older than they actually were. He doubted that Ares was much older than Spike, if he was anything at all out of the ordinary, Spike would almost certainly have heard of him before now.

During the barbed exchange, many of the other vampires in the bar had drifted closer, including Michael who was being careful to stay in the area between Ares and Spike, clearly reluctant to choose either side yet.

Spike shot the minion a hard look. “Gonna have to decide which side you’re on,” he said flatly.

It was enough to get him off the fence and Michael crossed the room to Spike’s side. “With you, Spike,” he said. The watching vampires shifted restlessly but no one else seemed inclined to take a stand either way.

Once Michael had chosen a side, Spike ignored him, focusing on Ares again. “Well, enough of the boring small talk. Let me guess, you’ve just strolled into town and decided there needs to be a change in management.”

“Something like that. The Hellmouth needs a strong Court, not that miserable excuse for one that I hear you’ve set up.”

“And you think you’re the right vampire for the job.”

“I am.” Ares attacked as he answered, aiming a vicious blow at Spike’s head.

Spike was ready for it. He’d seen the tension in Ares’ body and was already moving when Ares’ arm swung, ducking below the arc of the swing and bouncing back up, untouched. Spike had decided to let Ares’ attack first for the same reason he hadn’t dusted Ralph yet: appearances. Dusting Ralph before the fight would have given him an importance he didn’t have. Attacking Ares first would have made Spike seem insecure. This way, Ares looked foolish for missing his first blow and Spike followed up his advantage quickly with a rapid flurry of blows, ending in a spin-kick combination to Ares’ chest that staggered the larger vamp, knocking him back into his cluster of followers.

He was up again in an instant and roaring in fury, charging Spike with murderous intent. Ares was a head taller and significantly outweighed Spike but he was slower and far too dependent on overwhelming his opponents with sheer mass. Spike stayed out of his reach, dancing quickly in and out of range, landing hard, sharp blows and retreating again before Ares could respond.

Although they were fairly evenly matched, Spike’s darting attacks made him look like he was completely dominating the fight, in fact just playing with Ares, the proverbial cat toying with a fairly inept mouse. Which was good because it kept the other vampires in check. None of them wanted to back the wrong side so, despite the numbers favoring Ares, for now they were staying out of it. He was peripherally aware of Michael guarding his flank against attack armed with what was probably the bartender’s club but all his attention was concentrated on Ares.

Spike needed to not only win the fight, he needed to make it look easy. For that reason, he couldn’t risk closing with the bigger vampire. He had no doubt he would win even a close quarters fight but if he got too battered taking the other vamp down, then others in the room would get ideas. Fortunately, this suited Spike’s fighting style.

Darting quickly from side to side, dodging Ares’ lunges and roundhouse blows with contemptuous
ease, Spike peppered the air with mocking commentary, criticizing Ares’ moves, his fashion sense, and anyone lame enough to follow him. Bouncing on his toes, circling, almost dancing around the larger vamp, Spike was constantly in motion, forcing Ares to lumber after him - like a big dog being tormented by a cat.

Ares’ increasing fury did nothing for his fighting skills. He continued trying to come to grips with Spike, intent on crushing him under his weight and seemed to be unable to alter his tactics despite the fact that they weren’t working. Ares was bleeding from the nose and mouth and a large cut over his eye where the skin had split under Spike’s fists was dripping blood into his eyes. Shaking his head to clear it, he shot blood droplets around the room, splattering the ring of watching vampires. It had not gone unnoticed in the crowd that Spike was still untouched.

Spike knew he’d been lucky that none of Ares’ punches had landed. A nearby table lay in splinters from the force of one of Ares’ missed blows and Spike was keenly aware of how much strength the bigger vamp had. It wouldn’t do for the image he was projecting to be sent flying across the room from a single punch. On the other hand, appearances had been satisfied and it was time to end this.

“Bored now,” he announced. “Really don’t fancy wasting more of my time on you.” Snatching the club out of Michael’s hands, he swung it like a ball player hitting a line drive. It smashed into Ares’ side, lifting him off his feet and dropping him onto a table which promptly broke under his weight, sending Ares to the floor in a shower of splinters. Ares had barely staggered upright when Spike swung again, this time bringing the club around in a low, vicious arc aimed at Ares’ knees. Ares screamed, crumpling to the ground as the bones in his left knee shattered. Spike hit him twice more with the club, hammering him into the floor and hearing bones crack as he did. Tossing the bat back to the surprised Michael, who still managed to snag it in mid-air Spike was pleased to see, he yanked a stake out of his pocket and pounced, slamming it home with both hands into Ares’ back. He snatched it back quickly even as dust exploded beneath him and whirled to face Ares’ entourage, which was significantly smaller now. A couple of times during the fight, he’d heard the twang of a crossbow bolt being fired and now he shot a quick look at Jose, still in his post by the door.

“One or two sought to interfere, Master Spike. They will not trouble you again.”

Spike was pleased to see that Ralph was gone - whether dusted or fled, he didn’t really care. The fledge was too insignificant to worry about either way.

Spike turned to Michael. The minion had acquitted himself fairly well, having had the sense to both stay out of it and to arm himself as he guarded Spike’s flank. In one swift move, Spike grabbed him by the throat and slammed him up against the wall, the stake pressed to his chest hard enough to draw blood. The light-haired vampire opened his mouth to say something then snapped it shut again at Spike’s snarl.

“If I ever have to ask you to choose a side again, you better pick the other guy and pray they win or I will stake you out over a groymin’s nest and leave you to be eaten alive.”

He held Michael’s eyes for a long moment, emphasizing his point. The minion dropped his eyes, bowing his head in submission and Spike pulled the stake back, satisfied that his point had been made. He relaxed his grip, letting the younger vampire’s feet touch the ground again, then drove the stake into Michael’s stomach with one brutally quick movement. The minion screamed in pain and Spike dropped him. He watched as Michael’s knees crumpled until he slid down the wall to the floor, cradling his stomach in both arms. Never hurt to underline a point with a spot of violence.

Spike turned and swept the room with a hard stare. “Anyone else have questions about who’s in charge here?”
Silence was his only response and Spike smirked as he looked around the room at the thoroughly cowed vampires. “It’s simple enough, even for you lot. This is my town. Anybody wants to do anything out of the ordinary, they clear it with me first. I don’t give a shite what most of you do most of the time. But anything that’s going to cause problems for anyone but yourself, you bloody well better make sure you bring it to me.

“This is the Hellmouth, most of the humans who live here are too stupid to know we’re around. Some demons need that, so let’s try to keep a low profile, shall we? If you feel the need to walk starkers down Main street, go to L.A. and get it out of your system. Anyone has a problem with any of that, you know where to find me.”

He looked over at Jose and nodded, acknowledging how well his new lieutenant had done. “Take Michael back to the factory and find him something to eat on the way home. Pick out one of the rooms on the second floor for yourself. You’re promoted. If you happen to know anyone worth keeping around, bring ‘em over for a look-see.”

He didn’t bother lowering his voice. Promoting Jose publicly was a mark of distinction that the other vampire had earned. Making him the gatekeeper for anyone who wanted to become part of Spike’s Court gave him status of his own. He’d called Michael by his name and allowed him to live. That was reward enough for him.

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Working for Mrs. Summers helped alleviate some of Xander’s guilt about Jesse’s mother. He still hadn’t written to Mrs. McNally and that sat uneasily on his conscience but every time he tried, he ended up sitting in front of a blank piece of paper, unable to write a single coherent sentence. He hadn’t been able to talk to her face-to-face, what could he possibly write down that would make sense or help her deal?

Mowing the Summers’ lawn was a self-imposed penance for not mowing Jesse’s lawn. Fixing the broken shutter, replacing the loose board on the porch step, washing the windows, all somehow lightened his guilt over not doing the same things for Jesse’s mom. It didn’t excuse his failure to sit and talk to Mrs. McNally last year, but talking with Mrs. Summers maybe balanced the scales a little.

The second time he’d gone to the house, she’d come home and found him weeding the flower bed in the back yard. He hadn’t heard her car drive up and nearly had a heart attack when she came around the corner of the house and spoke to him. He’d jumped to his feet and stammered apologies, worried that she’d be angry at his presumption. Instead she’d simply thanked him and asked him to wait there for a minute. He didn’t know what to expect but it wasn’t that she would change into jeans and a work shirt and join him. Working together, side by side, they began talking. At first, awkwardly about the garden and the weather, then gradually they branched out until they were talking easily about nothing in particular.

She was a really nice lady. Lonely and trying to hide her worry, she was genuinely grateful when Xander began stopping by a couple times a week, offering to do any chores that needed doing. He was a fairly good handy-man, having had lots of practice around his parents’ house, and he helped her with minor repairs and sometimes just kept her company. If she was home, she would sit and talk with him while he worked and always had a glass of lemonade and a plate of cookies for him when he was done. Except for the anxiety that never left her eyes, she was like a sitcom mom: warm and friendly and with a never-ending supply of snacks. Xander envied Buffy and wondered if she had any idea that she had the kind of mother that other people wished for. He couldn’t believe Buffy would do this to her mother. She’d been gone for nearly a month now and there had been no word save the postcard she’d mailed the first week she was gone.
Xander knew Mrs. Summers had figured out that he hadn’t been very close to Buffy. He didn’t know enough about her non-Slayer life to fake it and just ended up just telling Mrs. Summers that he was friends with Oz and so had only gotten to know Buffy recently.

Then one day, she asked if she could talk to his friend, Angel’s relative. Mrs. Summers was hoping he could tell her more, since he was the one who had supposedly told Xander about what happened the night Buffy ran away. Xander almost dropped the glass he was holding in his panic as he thought about what Spike might say or do in front of the Slayer’s mother. Spike didn’t talk about it much directly but it was obvious he was still furious with Buffy over the fiasco with Acathla and the re-souling spell.

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Xander caught Spike not long after he woke up, bringing him a cup of coffee and sitting cross-legged on the bed next to him as he drank it. “Would you mind doing me a favor?”

“Sure, pet. What’s on your mind?”

Spike had been relaxed and comfortable ever since his fight with Ares, which he had described to Xander in loving detail from start to finish. The tense wariness that had been present in Spike every moment since they’d moved in to the factory had vanished with the fight. Spike was firmly in control of the Hellmouth now and had a lieutenant he could trust to keep the minions in line. Several more vampires had moved in to the third floor of the building and Xander had talked with Jose a couple of times since the fight. He liked the polite, older vampire and Jose was beginning to loosen up a bit, smiling occasionally at one of Xander’s jokes.

Xander was beginning to recognize the difference between minions and Masters. Mostly it was control - minions simply couldn’t be trusted to control themselves without someone they feared keeping them in line. As vampires matured - over decades, not years - they gradually learned to control their instinct to hunt and kill and would often become interested in other things: sometimes hobbies they had pursued in their human years, or new technology as the world changed from the one they’d been born into, or whatever. A lot of vampires never did mature, enjoying slaughter and destruction too much to ever be interested in anything else. Jose had been a vampire for about 30 years, and Spike told Xander he was unusually mature for that age. Michael was roughly 10 years older and had far less control.

“You know how I’ve been talking to Mrs. Summers?” Xander knew he was stalling, but he had a feeling Spike wasn’t going to like the favor he was asking.

“Yeah,” Spike cocked his head and Xander suspected he smelled nervous.

“Would you mind coming over and meeting her?” he asked, the words tumbling out quickly.

“Don’t usually do the meet ‘n greet thing with humans, luv.”

Relieved that Spike hadn’t gotten angry, Xander explained: “She asked if she could meet you, she’s hoping you might have more information than I do, that Buffy may have said something to you.” Xander looked anxiously at him. “She’s really nice, Spike, and she’s worried sick about her daughter. She’s grasping at straws and she knows it, but she’d really like to talk to you.” He frowned at the wicked gleam that had appeared in Spike’s eye. “Not if you’re going to mess with her, Spike. You can’t get back at Buffy through her mom.”

“Would I do something like that?” Spike asked with injured innocence.
“Only every day of the week. But not tonight, ok?”

Mrs. Summers welcomed Spike with a warm smile, inviting him inside without batting an eye despite the fact that he was dressed for evil - black tee-shirt and jeans, red silk over-shirt, duster, Doc Martens. The two of them were chatting away in no time. It turned out that Mrs. Summers had spent some time in London during a Junior year abroad thing in college. Xander was the odd man out, not knowing any of the places they were talking about and nervous about the reason for their visit despite the fact that it was obvious that Spike was effortlessly charming Mrs. Summers, or Joyce, as she insisted Spike call her.

When the London talk died down, the anxiety returned to her eyes and she thanked Spike for coming. “I really appreciate you being willing to talk to me. I know this must be hard for you and I’m so sorry for your loss. You were related to Angel?”

Xander jumped in before Spike could respond. “They were cousins, I think. Right, Spike?” he prompted nervously.

“Bugger this. Joyce, your daughter’s the Vampire Slayer. Angelus was a vampire. They were the Hellmouth’s version of soddin’ Romeo and Juliet. She stuck him with a sword and sent him to hell. Then she did a bunk and ran off.”

Joyce gasped like a fish out of water and Xander groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Great, Spike. Why don’t you give it to her straight while you’re at it?”

“What? You’ve all been lying through your teeth about what happened. Lady deserves the truth.”

“What are you talking about?” Joyce looked liked she was torn between anger and laughter. “Buffy wouldn’t kill anyone…” she stopped abruptly, looking even paler and finished quietly, “not on purpose. And… vampires? That’s crazy.” Anger was obviously rapidly winning the battle.

Trapped, Xander briefly considered just grabbing Spike and dragging him out of there but he couldn’t just leave after she’d had that dumped on her. Hoping she wouldn’t hate him, he finally said, “it’s true. Angel was a vampire. Spike is one, too.”

“I think you two should leave now. This isn’t very funny.” Mrs. Summers was suddenly on her feet, her voice cold as she pointed to the door.

Standing there, Mrs. Summers radiated offended dignity. Or she did until Spike shook his head and morphed into his true face. Mrs. Summers gasped in shock, one hand going to her throat as she stepped back instinctively.

“It’s ok, Mrs. Summers,” Xander hurried to reassure her. “Spike is a…” he winced even as he said it, “a good vampire. Not evil,” he clarified, thinking that sounded a little less dumb and wishing Spike had stuck with the “relative of Angel, the off-his-meds-mental-patient” story.

Outraged, Spike opened his mouth to protest and Xander smacked him, hard. Shooting Spike a warning glare, he waited until Spike subsided, grumbling under his breath about being evil. Served him right to be insulted, springing the vampire thing on Mrs. Summers that way.

“Can we, maybe explain a little?” he asked.

Mrs. Summers sat down like her legs weren’t able to hold her anymore and nodded mutely, her eyes frozen on Spike’s gold eyes and demonic features.
It had gone surprisingly well. Spike remained in vampire-face for most of the rest of their stay and Mrs. Summers had actually learned to deal with it pretty quickly. Xander and Spike between them filled her in on Hellmouth reality and Spike had been amazingly non-confrontational about it, especially given how he felt about Buffy. He didn’t call her a bint or anything worse even once, nor express his dubious opinion of her intelligence. As Mrs. Summers’ shock faded, she began asking questions curiously: about vampires and demons, about the Slayer, about magic. Spike had seemed to enjoy answering her questions and even editing his answers. There were none of the truly awful blood and guts stories he loved to share with Xander and Xander couldn’t help wondering at how easily Mrs. Summers was accepting Spike. Xander himself had taken a lot longer before he could talk to Spike without a cross clutched in his hand and his heart pounding. She had welcomed Xander readily, of course, but then he hadn’t introduced himself by brutally shaking her world view. Was it just that Mrs. Summers was lonely or had she been like this before Buffy ran away?

The end results were mixed. Mrs. Summers was reassured about Buffy’s ability to take care of herself physically but had a whole new set of worries about Buffy fighting demons. To Xander’s relief, she wasn’t angry that he’d lied to her, just saying that she understood why he had not wanted to tell her the truth. She invited Spike and Xander to come over any time they wanted and Xander could tell that Spike was secretly pleased. There weren’t too many humans who would give a vampire an open invitation into their homes.

With a mother like that, how could Buffy have left? This was someone she could have gone to and cried and been comforted. Xander used to dream he had a parent who listened and cared like this and Buffy had just thrown it away.

Leaving the house and walking out into the quiet residential night, Xander suddenly found himself yanked off the front path and pressed up against the rough bark of the palm tree at the edge of the Summers’ front yard with a yellow-eyed demon seriously in his personal space.

“Think I’m good, d’you, luv?” Spike growled menacingly.

Xander kept his expression serious with an effort. “You are the sweetest person I know, Spike,” he said, with the earnest sincerity of a used car salesman assuring a customer that the car they were interested in had only been driven by a little old lady once a week to church.

Spike’s glare intensified, his eyes narrowing in outrage. His hands closed tightly in Xander’s hair, holding him still as his mouth claimed Xander’s hard, leaning his body against Xander’s and sliding one leg between Xander’s as his lips devoured Xander’s, his tongue darting in to taste and tease. His leg began rubbing between Xander’s and he kept it there against Xander’s burgeoning erection as he lifted his head.

“Sweet?” he asked, threateningly.

Xander nodded as well as he could, pinned as he still was. “Decent, fair-minded…” Spike’s lips cut him off again before he could utter more insults. Xander was trying to laugh and kiss at the same time and not doing well with either as he fought free of Spike’s mouth.

“Kind to kids and…ahhh…puppies!” he managed to say, his breath hitching as Spike’s thigh pressed hard against him.

“Right, that does it.” Spike let him go so abruptly that Xander staggered. He was both amused and
horrified to see Spike was theatrically unfastening his belt. “Gonna show you who’s evil,” he was muttering as he began to unbutton his fly.

“Spike!” Xander yelped, his hands flying up to block Spike’s. “Stop! We’re in the middle of her yard.”

Spike leered at him. “Gotta prove I’m evil, don’t I?”

As tempted as he was to call Spike’s bluff, Xander didn’t dare, he knew his vampire too well. Spike would just go right ahead and that was so not happening. “You win,” he said hastily. “You’re evil. There’s not a trace of good in your entire body.”

Spike grinned triumphantly. “Let’s go home and shag, pet.”

“Oh, yeah.” That was a plan Xander could get behind.

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Running up the stairs to their apartment, Xander was laughing at the yellow-eyed demon chasing him. Giddy with relief that things had gone so well with Mrs. Summers, Xander had given in completely to the rising tide of lust.

Spike had been evil personified on the way home, stopping multiple times to kiss and fondle Xander as they walked through the quiet streets. He seemed to particularly delight in rubbing teasingly against Xander in the floodlit areas under street lights where anyone could see them.

Xander had countered the sneak attacks by making up outrageous, over-the-top sappy nicknames. “Pookie” had been especially effective, Spike’s answer to that one had left Xander panting and barely able to walk. Thank god the Sunnydale cops were more well-known for their absence than their presence or the two of them would have been arrested for public indecency a dozen times over.

They barely made it inside the door before they were tearing at each other’s clothes as they headed, somewhat erratically, for the bedroom, leaving pieces of clothing strewn in their wake. By the time they landed on the mattress, they were both naked and fully erect.

Xander began frantically rubbing himself against Spike, desperate for release after being teased for so long. Spike stopped him and he groaned in frustration. “Please!”

“Not yet, luv.”

Xander swore. “You really are evil,” he groaned.

Spike laughed, pinning Xander down and hovering over him so their bodies didn’t touch above the knees. “Someone needs to learn to wait.”

Still holding Xander’s arms down, Spike began kissing across his chest, his tongue swirling around the already peaked nipples and teasing them into hard, aching nubs. Xander moaned, arcing his chest into the touch and losing himself in the pleasure Spike was giving him. Even when Spike released his arms to move further down his body, he stayed put and let Spike do what he wanted. The journey had become as pleasure-full as the destination.

Spike lifted Xander’s legs up, pushing his knees forward towards his chest and concentrated on the tight pucker exposed by the movement. Other than one long sweep of his tongue, he bypassed Xander’s weeping erection, letting his tongue swirl around and over, tasting Xander’s balls and sac, hearing his lover gasp and moan as his hips pressed up into the touch.
Another day, Spike would concentrate on Xander’s balls, bringing his boy to orgasm from his tongue and fingers teasing and playing with them, showing him how unbearably sensitive they could become. But for now…

Spike’s tongue darted out, teasing at Xander’s hole, his fingers spreading Xander’s cheeks as he inhaled deeply, gathering the smells into his lungs even as his tongue swept over the entrance, causing it to twitch in excitement. Xander was mewling now, incoherent pleas falling from his lips as his legs jerked in Spike’s grip. Chuckling, Spike thrust his tongue inside, swirling it around the passage and feeling the muscles clench and spasm as he thrust in and out.

Fumbling blindly for the lube in the drawer beside the bed, Spike kept tongue-fucking Xander as he spread lavish amounts of the slick over his own aching hard-on. Letting Xander’s legs go, Spike spread Xander’s knees and positioned himself between them. Leaning forward, he drank in the sight of Xander - flushed and eager, his eyes black with desire. Spike’s erection nudged at the opening and Xander tilted his hips wantonly. Spike forced himself to go slowly, not slamming in like he wanted. He hadn’t stretched Xander enough for that. He pushed himself inside his lover with rigid control, feeling Xander’s passage stretch grudgingly, the tight heat almost robbing Spike of that control as he thrust in with agonizing slowness until he was fully seated.

Reveling in the feeling of Xander’s passage gripping him, Spike kissed Xander long and hard. It was only when Xander’s hips began twitching upwards, seeking more, that Spike allowed himself to move. Slowly at first, then faster, his hips began the age-old rhythm of thrust and retreat, moving smoothly in and out of the tight channel, Xander’s hips moving in counterpoint to his own.

As his climax rapidly neared, Spike sank his teeth into his mark. Xander cried out and came immediately, orgasm pulled from him at the ecstasy of the double penetration. As his body bucked underneath Spike’s, Spike poured his own offering deep into his boy, until Xander’s body had milked the last drops from him and he let himself collapse on top of his boy.

Temporarily sated, Spike pulled out and let Xander drowsily tug him into his arms. Snuggling into the warmth of his boy, Spike had the last word.

“That’ll show you who’s evil,” he said smugly, feeling Xander’s lips curve against his cheek as he spoke.
Stirring drowsily, Xander tightened his arms around Spike and pressed a gentle kiss against his lover’s back before disengaging himself and rolling out of bed. He’d gotten used to the lack of a heartbeat and breathing in the body in bed with him but it still occasionally gave him a wiggins and, except when he was really tired, he didn’t generally linger in bed with the sleeping Spike.

Awake-Spike was another story altogether. Awake, it was impossible to think of Spike as a corpse. He was too alive: talking, fidgeting, pacing. Spike was almost constantly in motion. Even their quieter times, snuggling on the couch or falling asleep together, Spike would be stroking his hair, a quiet rumbling sounding deep in his chest that Xander was sure, despite Spike’s vehement denials, was the vampire equivalent of a cat purring. He’d stopped teasing Spike about it though, because mentioning it invariably led to it stopping and Xander loved to hear the soft contented sound that said all was well in Spike’s world.

Padding quietly into the bathroom, Xander smiled as he remembered the previous night. Too bad he and Spike couldn’t spend the next month or so in the apartment having sex without the rest of the world intruding. As he relieved himself, he thought resignedly that that would never happen unless they moved off the Hellmouth and that wasn’t likely to happen in the near future, even if he wanted to. As he’d once told Spike, it might suck sometimes, but Sunnydale was his home.

Washing his hands, he shook off his pessimistic thoughts and beamed proudly into the mirror at the sight of Spike’s renewed claim mark at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. He traced the mark with one finger, something that Spike did a lot and Xander often found himself doing in quiet moments when he was thinking about Spike. When Angelus had first bitten him there, Xander had gone out of his way to hide the mark, even from himself. Now that Spike had obliterated Angelus’ teeth marks, overlying them with his own, Xander wanted to flaunt the mark. He sometimes wished he had someone he could show it off to but there really wasn’t anyone. He was too worried about Giles’ reaction to let him see it. Granted, Giles knew that he and Spike were more than friends, but it had remained comfortably vague. Giles probably guessed they were doing more than holding hands but the older man seemed content not to discuss the situation, whether from innate British reserve or from not wanting to have his suspicions confirmed. He could show the mark to Oz, but that would involve a lot of explanations because Oz would just think it was Angel’s bite mark since Oz knew he’d been bitten by Angel there. Oz knew about his relationship with Spike but actually talking about it in detail seemed too girly. Mrs. Summers and Mr. Olsen were out. Mrs. Summers was too recently in the know and he still hadn’t fulfilled his promise to talk to Mr. Olsen about the Hellmouth. Starting off with “I’m dating a vampire and look, he bit me” was probably not the way to go. Squelching the wistful thought that he’d once had two friends he could share anything with, including this, Xander reminded himself that he was dating his best friend, and that was the only reason he didn’t have someone to share this with - because Spike already knew about it.

He had an odd assortment of friends these days, true, but they meant a lot to him. Which reminded him again that it was way past time he followed through on his promise to talk to Mr. Olsen. He’d go see Mr. Olsen before his regular visit with Giles. He hadn’t seen the old man since shortly before Acathla and he missed talking to him.

That decided, he stepped into the shower. As he washed the remnants of last night’s fun and games off, Xander sighed over the practical difficulties of life at the factory. There was no phone, for one. No one but Oz actually knew where he was living now and even Oz didn’t know the exact address. Given that sharing the address of Spike’s last home had gotten it burned to the ground, he wasn’t sure he wanted people to know the address. It wasn’t like it was a good idea to have people dropping
by, in any case. All of which meant that there was no way for anyone to contact him. It wasn’t a problem right now but, sooner or later, someone was going to need to get ahold of him.

And then there was the fact that Spike was supporting him. He was fine with not paying rent, because Spike would have found a new place to live, whether or not Xander was living with him. Spike had chosen this place in part because the apartment was human-friendly, which gave Xander a warm glow whenever he thought about it, but the factory was Spike’s home. Besides, it wasn’t like Spike was paying rent either. Not paying rent to a squatter didn’t set off Xander’s guilt-o-meter. What did set it off was that he wasn’t contributing anything towards the food, which was pretty much entirely for Xander. Sure, Spike shared food with him because he liked the taste but it didn’t nourish the vampire. Free-loading on your parents was one thing - they were supposed to take care of you. But not contributing anything to the household expenses in his lover’s house bothered him. Which meant he needed to find a way to earn money. Maybe Mr. Olsen would have an idea.

Shutting off the water with a sigh, Xander wished all the little stuff wasn’t such a constant worry. When he and Spike were awake and together, everything was great but doubts and problems crept in whenever they were apart, which was way too much of the time. As he towed himself off, he wondered why happily ever after was so complicated in real life. If his life was a movie, right after Acathla was defeated, there would have been a flourish of romantic music and a lingering kiss silhouetted against a brilliant sunrise before the closing credits rolled and every member of the audience would have gone home knowing Spike and Xander would live happily ever after. If they ever started making sequels where the happy couple had money troubles and their friends didn’t accept them, no one would watch them.

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As he knocked on the Olsens’ door, Xander felt only a trace of the nervousness he’d felt when he’d gone to talk to Mrs. Summers that first time, armed with his carefully polished story about Buffy and Angel. Maybe he was just getting used to having serious talks with people about awkward things or maybe it was just that he had a sneaking suspicion that what he’d come to say wasn’t going to be a complete surprise to Mr. Olsen.

It had been over a month since he’d seen Mr. Olsen but things had been kind of busy, what with moving in with Spike and saving the world and all. Now that everything had settled down, he was glad he’d thought of coming here today. He wanted to see how Mr. Olsen was doing and wasn’t leaving until he’d talked to him about Sunnydale, he wasn’t going to chicken out about it this time. Besides, it had gone so well with Mrs. Summers, he figured he was ready to tackle Mr. Olsen.

As the door swung open, he grinned. “Hey, Mr. Olsen. Long time.”

Twenty minutes later, they’d covered that Mrs. Olsen was out of town visiting her sister for two weeks and that Xander had moved out of his parents’ house and was now living with the friend he’d told Mr. Olsen about earlier that year. He didn’t say anything else, hoping that Mr. Olsen would just assume they were roommates. Xander figured that someone of Mr. Olsen’s generation wouldn’t like the idea of Spike and him being a couple and he was planning on covering enough wacky subjects for one conversation already, no need to get into “oh, by the way, I’m gay” as well. After they’d caught up with what each other had been doing - highly edited on Xander’s part, he said that he wanted to talk to Mr. Olsen about something.

“This is going to sound completely crazy, so I’m just going to blurt it out, ok?” On the way over, Xander had finally decided to just go with the Spike information method, rather than beating around the bush. It had seemed like a good idea at the time but now, faced with the lined face of the elderly man in front of him, he was having panicked thoughts about heart attacks, strokes, and aneurisms.
Mrs. Summers had looked like she was going to faint for a moment when Spike had just laid it out for her without warning and Mr. Olsen had to be a good 20 years older than her. Having serious second thoughts, Xander found he was dithering, not sure how to proceed. Maybe something more indirect would be better than springing it on him.

Mr. Olsen looked at him curiously and waited patiently as Xander found his promised blurring drying up.

“Umm…have you ever noticed…” his question died unfinished. Vampires? Demons? Spells affecting the entire population? Ok, maybe not that blunt. “Does… does it ever seem to you like Sunnydale is kind of a weird town?” Xander finally managed to ask. Yep, blurring was not happening here.

Mr. Olsen smiled. “Well, it’s to be expected. It is a Hellmouth,” he answered genially, like a jaded New Yorker talking about muggings - “it’s the Big Apple, comes with the territory.” Xander’s gaped at him, his Plan B gentle approach completely derailed.

“You know?” Ok, that sort of came out in a bleat, but at least his voice was working again.

“Third generation Sunnydaler, Xander.” He shrugged. “Even humans can only keep their eyes closed for so long.”

Xander closed his jaw with a snap and then found himself grinning with relief. “Well, at least I don’t have to worry about you thinking I’m crazy.” His smile faded as it occurred to him that there was something odd about what Mr. Olsen had just said. “Umm… ‘even humans’? You…you are human, aren’t you?”

Mr. Olsen twinkled at him. Literally. The whites of his eyes suddenly glowed green, the irises sparkling with gold. “Mostly. One of my grandfathers was a Lobarrrhyn demon,” he said, rolling the r.

Xander leapt to his feet, heart pounding and, for one second, blind panic filling him. Then he remembered Mr. Olsen opening his door for the terrified kids on Halloween last year, and when he’d come to this house freaking out over Spike being a vampire, how Mr. Olsen had listened to him with such grave attention. He remembered gardening with Mr. Olsen and his wife and the peace he’d found in their company when it had seemed like his life was falling apart, and his fear vanished. Demon or human, he would never believe Mr. Olsen was a threat to him.

Seeing the anxiety in Mr. Olsen’s tense posture, he said the first thing that came to mind. “Cool.” He stared openly at Mr. Olsen’s changed eyes, entranced by the swirling gold flecks and hoped he wasn’t being really rude. Fortunately, Mr. Olsen didn’t seem to mind, just smiling as Xander sat back down slowly.

“Sunnydale has a fair number of demon-human hybrids, Xander. Don’t get me wrong, it also has a lot of blind, ignorant folks who don’t want to believe what they see with their own eyes.” Mr. Olsen’s eyes shifted back to their normal faded blue as he continued. “It’s a good town for peaceful demons to settle in. No-one notices if their neighbor has an odd purple flush to their skin, or if they always seem to wear hats.” He laughed as he caught Xander surreptitiously examining his skin. “Just an example, son. Most of my differences don’t show.”

“Most of them?” Xander wondered when exactly he’d become someone who was more intrigued than freaked when someone he knew told him - and showed him - that they were part demon. Sometime after Spike and Oz, he figured.
They talked for a long time: about Lobarrhyn demons and other demons and part-demons living on the Hellmouth. Mr. Olsen didn’t mention names but he talked about people he knew who lived quietly in Sunnydale and elsewhere, some passing as fully human, some just keeping a low profile. Xander was fascinated to learn that there were demon-friendly businesses in town, either run by demons or by non-prejudiced humans in the know. He told Mr. Olsen about his demon study course and Mr. Olsen offered to lend him some of his own books which dealt with the peaceful, inconspicuous demons who were often not mentioned in the more common demon texts.

“After all,” he said with his slow smile, “it’s much more interesting to write about a 9-foot tall, horned shinzik demon who kills everything in its path than about small, timid creatures like the k’thyssn who live in caves and are deathly afraid of humans.”

Mr. Olsen had not been surprised to learn that Spike was a vampire. When Xander had hesitantly broken the news, the old man just laughed. “You must admit, Xander,” he said with an impish smile, “your story last year about your friend the bank robber was rather thin.” Xander looked sheepish, then laughed himself as Mr. Olsen went on. “How did you put it? That he robbed banks ‘because that’s just who he is?’” He shook his head disbelievingly.

“Hey, I worked hard on that story,” Xander protested, still laughing.

“And that’s the most frightening thing you’ve ever said to me.” A mock sigh and another disappointed shake of his head. “Storytelling is a lost art in this country.”

Xander asked Mr. Olsen’s opinion about finding a summer job and Mr. Olsen offered to give him a list of people who could use a little help around the house: gardening, minor repairs, furniture moving, and so on. Some were getting too old to keep up their houses, some, he warned, were demons who couldn’t do their own yard work and outside repairs because their differences showed. He promised to have the list ready in a day or two and Xander promised to find some way to get a phone by then and that he would give Mr. Olsen the number as soon as he had one.

Xander left the Olsens’ house excited by the prospect of unskilled but not boring work and by his new understanding of Sunnydale’s hidden side. Learning that there was a large demon population in town more concerned with living quietly and raising their families than with murdering and pillaging was amazing. In Mr. Olsen’s world, demons were no more likely to be vicious killers bent on world domination than humans were. You took sensible precautions and got on with your life.

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“Come in, Xander.”

Giles’ voice was without its usual welcome and Xander hesitated in the doorway. It was his regular time to visit and, as always, he’d knocked to signal his arrival then immediately stuck his head inside before Giles had to fumble with the knob. Wondering if it was a bad time for some reason, he stepped the rest of the way in and saw that the dining room table that he and Giles studied at was empty of the usual pile of books for the day’s lesson. “What’s up?”

“I understand that you took it upon yourself to inform Joyce Summers that Buffy was the Slayer.” It was a flat accusation and Xander phrased his answer carefully. He didn’t want to admit that Spike was the one who’d spilled the beans. Giles was still being remarkably accepting of Spike and he didn’t want to risk messing that up.

“I didn’t plan on telling her, but I’m not sorry it happened.” Xander felt like an idiot for not foreseeing that Mrs. Summers would have already told Giles about their talk but he’d gotten a bit distracted after leaving her house. And he was so not thinking about last night here at Giles’ house.
“You had no right to share that information without Buffy’s knowledge or consent. It was her decision whether or not to tell her mother, not yours.” Despite the mildness of the actual words, the reprimand was blistering and his anger was obvious.

“Giles, ordinarily, I’d agree with you but Buffy created this situation, not me.” Xander crossed his arms stubbornly, not willing to back down even in the face of Giles’ anger. He’d been biting his tongue on this subject for a long time but, now that it was on the table, he was going to say what he thought. “Buffy’s the one who ran off and left us to clean up the mess and the biggest part of that mess is her mother.” Frankly, Xander thought that Buffy should have shown some concern for Giles as well - it wasn’t like she didn’t know he’d been tortured by Angel, but Giles had never demonstrated even the slightest resentment over her running away, so he let that part lie, knowing the librarian wouldn’t appreciate an attack on Buffy on his behalf.

“Buffy is a 17-year old girl who had just killed the man she loved to save the world. However unwise that love may have been, you must acknowledge that it was genuine. I think she is entitled to a little difficulty in coping with that.” Giles wasn’t backing down either.

“Buffy’s a 17-year old who has been making life and death decisions for a long time,” Xander shot back. “And she didn’t kill a man, she killed a vampire, something she’s been doing for years. Leaving her mother hanging for a month with no word is way more slack than she deserves.”

“You have scarcely taken that kind of position about vampires in the past.”

“I didn’t say it was my position but it’s sure as hell has been hers.” Xander stopped himself before he went any further into why he thought Buffy’s “all vampires but Angel” viewpoint was so hypocritical. That really wasn’t the issue and it wasn’t like Giles didn’t know his opinion on that subject.

Holding both hands up in a surrender gesture, he continued less heatedly. “All I meant was that she’s had a lot more experience with death than your average teenager and frankly, a month is a bit long of a vanishing act to pull, especially when she’d been planning to kill Angel for a long time. It wasn’t exactly a surprise when it happened.”

“She was prepared to kill Angelus, not Angel. If Angelus had been the one to die, I have no doubt that Buffy would have been able to accept it and wouldn’t have left.”

“Well, whose fault was that? If she and Willow hadn’t done the spell behind our backs, that wouldn’t have happened.” Not to mention that he didn’t think Buffy would have handled Angelus’ death any better than Angel’s, not after the way she’d delayed confronting him for so long.

“That is hardly justification for you going behind her back to reveal Buffy’s secrets to her mother.”

“That’s not why it happened.” Xander knew that Spike hadn’t told Mrs. Summers the truth to get back at Buffy. Not that Spike wouldn’t have loved messing with Buffy that way, but that hadn’t been why he’d done it. “Giles, I’m sorry, but I think reassuring Mrs. Summers is a little more important right now than protecting Buffy’s secret identity.”

“Do you honestly think that revealing Buffy’s role as the Slayer will reassure Joyce?”

Xander’s answer came from bitter experience. “I think that leaving her in complete ignorance of what happened to her daughter is the worst thing we could do to her.”

Giles sighed and sat down heavily in one of the chairs at the table, looking immeasurably weary. After the heated exchange, the silence was deafening. He stirred after a long moment and said
quietly: “Given that the cat is well and truly out of the bag, I suppose we will just have to live with the situation as best we can.”

Xander sat down too. “She actually seemed to handle it pretty well,” he offered.

Giles shot him a dubious look. “We can only hope that Buffy copes with the news favorably upon her return.”

“Yeah, there is that.” Personally, Xander thought the chances were slim to none that Buffy would graciously accept his interference in her personal life. It would be fun to be a fly on the wall for that conversation between Buffy and her mother. There was a core of steel in Joyce Summers that he’d never seen in Buffy. In a confrontation between the two, he’d back Mrs. Summers over Buffy any day. In fact, there was no comparison. Even frantic and nearly out of her mind with worry, Mrs. Summers had a warmth and friendliness that Buffy was sadly lacking.

“Ummm, so, are we ok?” Xander asked eventually, hoping that Giles wasn’t going to throw him out. He wanted to adopt Mrs. Summers as his mother and he’d come to feel something similar for Giles. Somewhere between father and mentor, Giles had become very important to him in the last month as he’d gotten to know the man inside the Watcher.

“Of course, Xander.” Giles looked almost surprised. “Being angry with someone over something they’ve done doesn’t mean it has to be the end of the relationship.”

Xander eyed him suspiciously. That had sounded very much like commentary about himself and Willow, but Giles was gazing innocently at him as if double meanings were the province of another person entirely. “Shall we continue with your studies?” Giles asked and Xander gratefully agreed.

Giles asked him to retrieve several books from the shelves in the living room. As he returned with his arms full and began setting the books down on the table, Giles spoke, a little too casually. “Xander, one more question about your talk with Mrs. Summers.”

Already flipping through the pages to the section they were working on, Xander answered absently, “What’s that?”

“Why exactly was Spike there?”

“Why exactly was Spike there?”

Oh, boy.

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Spike woke as usual as his internal clock told him the afternoon was waning. The windows in the bedroom were covered with both blinds and heavy blackout curtains. The one drawback to the factory was that there wasn’t a suitable below-ground or windowless room for his apartments. Except for Xander, Spike would have boarded up the windows, eliminating the danger of sunlight entirely. But humans suffered from the heat of summer more than vampires did and he wanted the windows to be able to be opened for ventilation for Xander’s sake.

As always, Xander was not there when he awoke, a fact that Spike disliked intensely. He thoroughly enjoyed waking with his boy still in the bed, sleep mussed and adorable as he gradually woke up, brown eyes slowly clearing until they were smiling warmly at him, love in their depths. It was hard to let Xander wander around unsupervised during the day and Spike struggled against his need to forbid it, to require that Xander stay with him always, like a proper Claimed human. Most Claimed humans were Pets, kept as favored toys for their Master’s entertainment and discarded when they no longer amused. Few lasted as long as a decade before being turned or killed.
Xander was among those rare Claimed humans who had the potential to become a Consort and Spike wanted that. The physiological changes that came with elevation to Consort status would ensure that Xander stayed by his side for far longer than an ordinary human lifespan. After losing Dru, Spike didn’t think he could bear losing Xander - not to human death or for any other reason. But Xander wasn’t ready for that step and Spike knew it.

Xander had come a long way in the time Spike had known him but he was still young, even by human standards, and still developing both physically and mentally. Emotionally, he wasn’t ready to be asked to commit to Spike for a lifetime and Spike knew he’d lose Xander if he asked too soon. Xander would let his life-long insecurities overwhelm him and refuse, thinking he wasn’t worthy of the honor. But Xander’s self-confidence was growing and Spike could wait. He could be patient when the goal was worth it, and there was no question in his mind that Xander was worth it.

In the meantime, Spike simply had to grit his teeth and give his boy his freedom, despite the cost to himself. Xander stayed with Spike willingly but try and control him and that willingness would vanish like smoke and so would Xander.

Having thought he’d gotten safely through the conversation without that particular factoid coming to light, Xander was caught completely off guard.

“Uh…Mrs. Summers asked if she could talk to him. Well, not him, really, but ‘Angel’s relative’. I mean, when I told her the Angel-committed-suicide story, I told her I’d heard it from a relative of Angel’s, and she asked to talk to that person, which was Spike.” Xander winced at his own nervously convoluted explanation but Giles had stopped looking so grim and now looked almost amused, so maybe his incoherence had been a good thing.

“Spike agreed to act the part of ‘Angel’s relative' for Mrs. Summers?”

“Well, he is kind of a relative of Angel’s, in a demon-y way.”

“Xander, why is it that when I telephoned your parents’ house, your mother informed me that you no longer lived there?”

“Because I don’t?” He smiled nervously, knowing it hadn’t been as much of a non-sequitur as it sounded. He wasn’t ashamed of living with Spike, just worried about Giles going ballistic over it, so he hadn’t gotten around to mentioning it yet. Which wasn’t the same as lying, he reassured himself. He just hadn’t volunteered the information and hadn’t thought it would come up. Since he was seeing Giles everyday, it hadn’t occurred to him that Giles would call his parents’ house looking for him. Apparently, he’d been upset enough after talking to Mrs. Summers that he’d wanted to talk to Xander immediately.

“Are you living with Spike?”

“Are you going to go nuts if I say yes?”

Giles shook his head. “No, but I am worried about you. That is a large step, especially for someone your age, even if Spike were human - which he most decidedly is not. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Well, know what I’m doing is probably a bit strong…” Xander admitted. “But I’m happier than I ever was living at my parents’ house.”

Giles looked unhappy at the reminder that all was not copasetic in the Harris household but didn’t
say anything about it. “Spike is a vampire, Xander. While they are certainly capable of emotions, they are not human emotions.”

“I know. But there’s a lot of similarities. Spike won’t hurt me.” Although he suspected that Giles had guessed that he and Spike were lovers, Xander didn’t want to come right out and say it, because if he was wrong, he so didn’t need to add his sexuality into the exciting mix of emotional bombshells this conversation was already covering.

“You may be right about that in the short term, Xander, but vampires don’t think of relationships as something short term - something that lasts a few months or even a few years. They think in terms of decades and centuries, nor do they see the need to accept the normal human aging. To keep you with him, Spike will want to turn you, make you into a vampire so that he can keep you by his side. Are you prepared for that?”

Giles’ voice was concerned and Xander hadn’t been so shaken since Angelus’ had tried to play his mind games with Xander about Spike’s intentions. This was worse, because it was obvious that Giles was genuinely worried, not being spiteful or melodramatic.

“No,” he said frankly, “I’m not. But it’s not something that’s an issue right now, Giles, and I don’t think it will be for a long time. And, hey - Sunnydale, my chances of making it to graduation alive aren’t real great, according to the statistics. The memorial pages in the yearbook always outnumber the activity pages.”

Giles still looked troubled. “Xander, I don’t want to pry but if you have moved in with Spike because of your family situation, there are other options.”

Surprised that Giles had jumped to that conclusion, Xander’s brows shot up. “What? No. Honestly, that’s not the reason I moved in with Spike. My dad can be a real jerk but I’m not living with Spike to get away from him. That’s just a perk.” He tried a lopsided smile on the librarian but Giles didn’t respond in kind.

“I just wanted you to be aware that there are other options, if you need them,” Giles said seriously. “If you ever wish to stop living with Spike, you are welcome to stay here if you are uncomfortable staying with your parents.”

Xander was touched. “Thanks, Giles. I don’t think I’ll ever need to take you up on that, but it’s really nice of you to offer.”

Unbelievably, Giles let the subject drop and Xander settled down, a little shakily, to the familiar demon texts. Next time he decided to have a serious conversation with both his surrogate father and his adopted grandfather, he was scheduling them on different days.
Chapter 7

There was a sharp crack overhead as wood met wood in a neat parry and Spike immediately reversed his motion, spinning as he swung his quarterstaff around and down, only to be blocked again as Xander shifted his grip on his own quarterstaff and managed to get the wooden pole between his body and Spike’s blow. Xander was panting, his sweat-soaked shirt clinging distractingly to his chest, his face intent as he worked grimly to prevent Spike’s weapon from landing.

Usually his boy was laughing and playful during their training sessions. Although Xander took the lessons seriously and was progressing well, he generally filled their sessions with joking comments on his own errors, mock taunts whenever he managed to knock Spike off balance and triumphant cheers when he had mastered a new move. Today, he was unusually silent and had picked up the quarterstaff at the start of their session without a single joke about Robin Hood and Friar Tuck, humor that had peppered their last two training sessions after Spike’s introduction of the weapon.

His boy smelled nervous and Spike decided to call a halt to the session. After a hot shower, maybe Xander would relax enough to let him know what was on his mind.

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“Spike, would you mind loaning me the money to buy a cell phone?”

Totting up his assets had brought home to Xander the depressing reality that he had none. He had a total of $8.37 in cash, one small box of personal stuff - comics and photos and other odds and ends - and that was it. Nothing he owned was worth selling, except maybe the clothes Spike had bought for him and that would be just… wrong. After a long internal struggle, he’d decided he would have to ask Spike for a loan.

He had to have a phone for potential customers to be able to contact him. He couldn’t even post an ad at the supermarket without a phone number for people to respond to and he would much rather use Mr. Olsen’s referrals than solicit work from random strangers. A referral was far less likely to stiff him for the money after the job was done and way less likely to eat him. Despite his new knowledge of the lighter side of demons on the Hellmouth, Xander wasn’t about to stop being cautious.

No, a cell phone was the only answer. He couldn’t exactly call the phone company and have a regular phone installed. Even Spike, with his love of comfortable furniture and weird television shows, was snobby about it. Xander couldn’t count the number of times Spike had made sneering remarks about Angel’s mansion and about vampires so young they still acted like they were humans. It amused Xander that Spike blithely ignored the fact of their own, very human apartment. Talk about pot and kettle, he thought, with an inward grin. Of course, to be fair, Xander was sure that they were only living where they were because Spike had wanted a place that was Xander-friendly. Which was so incredible that little inconveniences like no phone were pretty darn minor.

There were other things he’d noticed, too, like that Spike never seemed to smoke around him anymore. It wasn’t that the vampire had quit - Xander tasted smoke in his mouth every time they kissed after having been apart for awhile. He gotten used to the taste - it was so essentially a part of Spike, like the whiskey and leather that also made up his unique scent - but it gave him a thrill when he realized that Spike must have quit for him. After all, as the vampire had once pointed out, it
wasn’t like smoking was going to kill Spike.

None of which thoughts were solving his customer contact problems. Not that he had any customers yet but this wasn’t a chicken-or-egg kind of problem. The phone really did have to come first. Which brought him back to the fact that he needed one now in order to get the customers who would, hopefully, give him the money to pay for a phone. Ok, maybe there was a chicken or egg issue there. Which he could solve easily, if not without embarrassment, by borrowing the money. He’d considered asking Giles to loan him money but he knew that Spike would feel betrayed if he learned Xander had asked Giles and Giles might react weirdly - thinking that Xander was afraid to ask Spike, or that Spike was controlling him or something. He couldn’t ask Mr. Olsen - he was doing enough for Xander already. No, Spike was his only option. It wasn’t that he thought that Spike wouldn’t give him the money, but it was embarrassing to have to start your life as a grownup by asking your boyfriend for money.

He’d met Spike at Angel’s mansion as he did at least four days a week for training. Sometimes, he’d return to the factory in the late afternoon and he and Spike would walk to the mansion together as soon as the sun set. Other days, like today when he was running late, he’d meet Spike at the mansion shortly after dusk. They were working on the quarterstaff this week. Spike seemed determined to familiarize Xander with a wide variety of weapons as part of his self-defense training - which generally he had no problem with but he wasn’t sure about the quarterstaff’s usefulness in real life. Sure, they looked cool in Robin Hood movies but he was dubious about their usefulness in an actual fight. They weren’t exactly inconspicuous or something you could hide under a coat as you walked home at night, so Xander didn’t think he’d be using one all that often. Spike insisted that you could use quarterstaff moves with almost anything long and slender you found lying around and had ignored Xander’s grumbling that there were hardly ever any five foot sticks lying around handy when you were in a life and death struggle.

Privately, Xander suspected that Spike was emphasizing weapons training so much because he didn’t want Xander to have to rely on hand-to-hand in a real fight. Too many of the demons he might find himself in a fight with had superhuman strength and Spike thought it only made sense to be armed with something more than “a pointy bit of wood against something that can rip your head off while you’re still finding out that the middle of its chest isn’t a vulnerable spot.”

Spike had a point. The rules of sportsmanship didn’t really seem to apply when the other guy entered the ring with all sorts of enhanced strength, speed and reflexes. Using weapons against unarmed humans would be wrong on so many levels, but demons didn’t really come unarmed for the most part. If it wasn’t razor sharp, six-inch claws, it was blinding speed or paralyzing mucus or something equally fun and exciting. Humans who weren’t gifted with Slayer strength had to depend on weapons to close the armament gap. Plus, Spike was spending a lot of time teaching Xander how to avoid weapons, which was very much of the good in Xander’s book. He had far too much experience already in being shoved up against walls and trees and whatnot. Surprisingly, learning to anticipate an opponent’s moves and avoid them was as hard as learning how to wield weapons properly but Spike was a good teacher and remarkably patient. He seemed to accept that Xander had to practice a move for awhile before he would be able to execute it flawlessly. And, since a lot of their lessons ended up with them rolling around on the mats in a different kind of heated exchange - well, bonus.

Even without the sexy perks, Xander enjoyed the training sessions. It wasn’t just that he was pretty sure he would live longer with the skills Spike was teaching him. He felt different - more confident and like he wasn’t just a clumsy dork anymore. For the first time in his life, he felt like his body would do what he asked it to and he liked that feeling. It was like the clothes Spike had bought for him. At first, he’d been uncomfortable wearing them: they were too tight and too flashy and he’d felt
stupid wearing them. But, as he got used to them, they stopped feeling like they were someone else’s clothes and began to feel almost as comfortable as his old stuff. For most of his life, he’d been uneasy when people focused on him - too often that had meant bad things: teachers ticked off because he hadn’t read the homework or, more frequently, his parents blaming him for something. So, it was a surprise when he realized that it no longer bothered him when people looked at him with more than a passing glance; he was beginning to think it was because he looked good.

And again, his thoughts were wandering everywhere but the issue at hand. His brain was obviously doing its best to distract him from his nervousness over how to broach the subject of a loan with Spike. Money talks never went well, in his experience. His allowance had come to an abrupt end when he was ten after a blistering lecture from his father about what a useless drain on the family he was. He’d been too young then to realize that fifty cents a week wouldn’t actually have made a difference in the family finances and even though, now, he knew that his father was just being his usual jerky self when he’d pulled that stunt, it had been years before Xander had been able to think back on that incident with anger instead of humiliation and guilt. Yeah, he knew Spike wasn’t going to be that way about a loan but that didn’t make him feel any less weird about asking for money. On top of that, he knew Spike wasn’t going to like his plans for the rest of the summer. Spike had never said anything but Xander knew that Spike didn’t like it when he went out and about in the daytime where Spike couldn’t keep an eye on him, and a job would add to the hours that Xander was gone, exacerbating their nocturnal/diurnal issues.

It was a good thing Xander found that attitude of Spike’s kind of sweet - not that he’d ever tell Spike that - because Spike wasn’t nearly as good at hiding his possessiveness as he thought he was. Knowing that Spike worried about him and wanted to protect him was so different from Xander’s usual experience - his parents in particular rarely seemed to notice when he was gone and had sure seemed to write him off easily now with no more explanation than that he was moving in with a friend. Jesse and Willow had often gone off for a month at a time during the summers on vacations with their parents and, while they had missed him, they hadn’t ever really worried about him while they were gone. Of course, back then they hadn’t known they were living on a Hellmouth. Still, it was kind of nice to have someone in his life who worried about him and took things almost too seriously. Spike seemed to know when to back off and not push too hard, which was great because it left his possessiveness in the cute category, not the obsessive/stalking category.

To Xander’s relief, Spike had cut the lesson a bit short today, sending him off to the shower to get cleaned up. He needed it, with his stomach churning nervously and his mind racing, practice had seemed much harder than usual. Toweling himself off after a decadently long shower, Xander decided to just come right out and ask Spike. Beating around the bush would just make things worse.

Xander’s quickly stammered question surprised Spike.

“Why d’you want one of them for? Annoying things. Just lead to people being able to reach you when you don’t want ‘em to.” Spike was sprawled comfortably on the couch he’d shoved out into the courtyard when he’d first set up the mansion as a training site. The courtyard was a quiet oasis in the warm evenings and he and Xander often spent an hour or so after training talking and snogging on the couch before Spike walked Xander home and went off on vampire business. One of the more recent minions to join the Court knew about electrical systems and had arranged for the power to stay on in the mansion - which meant cold beer for Xander, a place to keep an emergency blood supply for Spike, and hot showers for both of them after a hard work out session.

Jose had proved his worth ten times over, taking over many of the boring administrative details of the Court. He screened the vampires who wanted to join the Court, weeding out the useless ones, and
kept track of which minions had useful skills. When Spike had asked him to find someone disposable who could get the power running in a building so the authorities didn’t know, Jose had produced a large, recently turned, minion who had done a lot of construction work as a human. Spike had brought him to the mansion and he’d had the power up and running in a few hours. Spike had complimented him on his work before staking him. Not even Jose knew about the mansion and Spike intended to keep it that way. It was too convenient to give up and too potentially valuable as a bolt hole for Xander if one was ever needed.

“I’m working on a way to earn some money this summer, but I need a phone so customers can get a hold of me.”

“You don’t need to work, pet. How much money do you need?” Spike was mildly offended that Xander hadn’t come to him immediately if he felt he needed money but it was so apparent that Xander was embarrassed that Spike could only blame himself - he obviously should have explained to Xander before now that he just needed to ask and Spike would get him anything he wanted.

“Spike, I can’t let you keep supporting me without contributing anything.”

“Why not?” Spike was baffled. Why would Xander think Spike wouldn’t take care of him?

“Because I’m not a complete mooch.” Xander paused for a second. “Ok, right now I am but I don’t want to be.”

“You’re mine, pet, I take care of my own.”

“I know you do, Spike.” Xander gave him a quick, grateful smile. “But taking care of me doesn’t mean being financially responsible for my every need. Or at least it shouldn’t, not when I’m perfectly capable of earning money.”

Spike cocked his head to one side. “’Course it does. You’re my Claimed. That means it’s my responsibility to pay for your kit and anythin’ else you need.” That should settle it, he thought comfortably, glad they had solved the problem so easily.

“Spike…” Xander seemed at a loss for words at Spike’s generosity and he smiled at his boy. He had to remember that Xander didn’t always understand things that went without saying in the demon world. “Spike, that’s… It’s incredibly nice of you to offer, but I can’t accept that.”

“Nothin’ to accept or reject, luv. ‘S just the way it is.” Spike frowned, not sure why Xander was having a problem with the idea of Spike taking care of him. “Xander,” he said seriously, “I’ve Claimed you and you accepted my Claim. By Claiming you, I took you under my protection. You accepted my mark, which lets other demons know that you belong to me.” He fought back the growl that threatened to sound at the idea that Xander didn’t want his Claim any more. A Claim was permanent!

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“Ok, how about we back up and try this again, because somewhere this conversation took a left turn off reality street.” Xander scrubbed his hands through the still-damp waves of his hair in frustration, not really sure how they had gotten to yellow-eyes and growling on the part of his lover. “I am totally down with being Claimed, so you can stop with the growling.” Trying to think how he could explain it to his touchy partner, he said hesitantly: “Spike, you’re teaching me self-defense. Why?”

Spike looked puzzled at the switch in topic. “Don’t want you to get hurt, luv. Thought we were agreed on that.”
“Hey, I’m big with the Xander-not-hurting, but why doesn’t your mark automatically protect me from getting hurt?”

“Some demons are too stupid, or too arrogant, to honor a Claim mark,” Spike began stiffly and Xander sighed. He hadn’t meant to insult Spike but apparently he had. “Don’t want a repeat of what happened with Angelus,” Spike finished, looking angry at his Sire all over again.

“So, self defense is good because things can happen even with the mark,” Xander summed up.
“Your training me to protect myself even though it’s something most vampires don’t do for their Claimed humans, right?” At Spike’s puzzled nod, Xander finished triumphantly, “Well, me earning spending money is good too.”

Spike shook his head. “That doesn’t follow, pet. A Claimed human working to earn money is saying you think I won’t, or can’t, provide for you.”

“No,” Xander said emphatically. “It says that your Claimed wants to be a full partner and contribute to the relationship. I want to take care of you, Spike, the way you take care of me.” He looked earnestly at Spike, willing him to understand.

With the brown eyes of his Claimed holding his own, Spike couldn’t immediately reject the outrageous concept. The notion that his boy wanted to take care of him was unheard of, ridiculous... and bizarrely touching. It wasn’t a matter of trust. He could, and had, trusted Xander with his unlife. Still, the idea that Xander would feel the need to be an independent being outside the Claim was so unusual that Spike couldn’t think of a single example of a Claimed human with a life separate from their vampire.

He smiled, noticing that Xander visibly relaxed as he did. This was clearly important to his boy and Spike had never been one to follow anyone’s rules but his own. No harm in letting the boy stretch his wings a bit and it would be good for Xander’s still tentative self-confidence to think he was making his own way in the world, even if it was just a summer job. No harm in giving it a try.

“So, pet,” he said teasingly. “Where are you taking me after you get your first paycheck?”

Xander’s brilliant smile was reward enough for his flexibility.

Typically, Spike had simply gone out that night and gotten a top-end phone which he tossed casually to Xander. “Right, pet. First thing, learn to set it so it won’t always be blasting our ears when it goes off.”

“Thanks, Spike,” Xander stared at the phone dubiously. He’d wanted the telephone equivalent of a point-and-shoot camera, this one looked complicated. “Do you know how to work it?” he asked hopefully.

Spike gave him a look. “When I want to call someone, I steal a phone from some git who’s already talking on one. Makes working it pretty simple. Don’t keep ‘em afterwards.” Xander smiled to himself and waited for it. “Not like my bleedin’ sire, am I? Angelus is the only vampire I’ve ever known who had a phone installed in his lair. Bloody embarrassing it was.” Spike made a disgusted noise. “Any self respecting demon just steals one when they need to make a call - dinner and a phone call in one.”

“Thanks for sharing that lovely image,” Xander said wryly. “I’ll be careful where I use it. Just
another of the Hellmouth’s little perks, I guess.”

“Just don’t use the bloody thing outside at night.” Spike gestured towards the table, “There’s some kinda instruction book, you’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks, Spike.” Xander didn’t ask how much it had cost, he knew Spike would just say it was a gift. Since it was a moot point right now anyway, given his lack of actual money, he had plenty of time to figure out both how to work the thing and how much it cost. Setting it down, he crossed to the couch where Spike was sitting, watching one of his weird tv shows and straddled Spike’s lap, reaching for the remote as he did and shutting off the tv. “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“Not recently, now that you mention it,” Spike answered, his arms sliding around Xander’s waist. “Might be time to refresh my memory on the subject.”

Xander opened his mouth but Spike beat him to it. Growling slightly, he said dangerously: “If you say one word about detailing my soddin’ car, pet, you’ll regret it.”

“So, Spike, what did you get me?”

“An invitation to the most intimate details of your life, pet.”

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“Spike,” Xander tried to look hurt, like the very idea had never even crossed his mind. “Would I do something like that?”

He ignored the “too bloody right”, letting his arms drift from Spike’s shoulders to his back and leaned away from Spike, letting his head fall back slowly, his shaggy hair brushing his shoulder blades as he deliberately exposed the long length of his neck to his vampire. He could almost feel Spike’s stare fastening hungrily on the exposed veins in his throat and his Claim mark. He grinned to himself before sitting back upright and looking innocently into the now golden eyes.

“I can’t offer to have sex with you,” he said with mock regret, “because that would be wrong. I don’t…” he broke off, laughing, as Spike snarled and, in one agile twist, flipped them both so that Xander was on his back on the couch with Spike lying on top of him, his hands buried in Xander’s hair, reminding him again of why he kept putting off cutting it.

Settling himself comfortably, Spike leered down at him. “Getting bloody evil yourself, luv, offering me your neck then saying I can’t touch you.” He shifted his grip until he had both of Xander’s wrists in his hands.

“Helpless?” Xander bucked up hard, trying to throw Spike off, but between the depth of the cushions and Spike’s grip on his wrists, he didn’t stand a chance. The vampire rode his struggles out easily, grinding down onto his groin until Xander forgot about trying to escape and just pushed his hips up to meet Spike.

“Like you helpless, luv,” Spike purred. “Helpless, spread out for my pleasure, all flushed and panting…” He broke off, disconcerted, as Xander sputtered, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

“Oh, please, you sound like a villain in a Harlequin romance.” His laughter escaped and the sound filled the courtyard. Spike glared at him indignantly, which just set Xander off again.

“Oi! You talk pretty big for someone who knows what a Harlequin is.” Spike realized, too late, that
he’d just admitted knowing what they were too. Wasn’t his fault that Drusilla used to read them to her dolls in some of her more insane, little girl moments, he thought grumpily, his grip on Xander’s wrists loosening as the thought of the sappy romance novels took the edge off his lust.

“Before you get any ideas, Willow used to torture Jesse and me by reading them to us. I think it’s why I hated reading for a long time.” Xander hadn’t stopped grinning at him and, as Spike released his wrists and began to sit up, his grin suddenly turned wicked and his legs lifted, wrapping around Spike’s lean hips. His hands moved quickly, seizing Spike’s upper arms and rolling them both to the floor where he perched, triumphantly on top of the surprised vampire.

Spike’s frown faded into a delighted smile. “Not bad, pet.”

“A little less talk from my helpless victim,” Xander echoed mockingly, leaning down to kiss Spike, his hands busy unfastening Spike’s pants. Warm, strong hands, calloused from weapons, freed Spike’s penis and Spike groaned into Xander’s mouth as his boy began to touch him with light, teasing touches, tracing along the length of his shaft. He was already hard and aching, Xander’s arousal and his own perfuming the night air as Xander began moving down his body, mouthing at his nipples through the fabric of his shirt, before sliding further down.

The warm fingers released him, only to be replaced by an even warmer tongue licking along his shaft before closing around the head, the agile tongue swirling around the end and toying with the slit. Spike fought to keep his hips from slamming up, Xander was still learning to deep throat and had the annoying human need to breathe. He inhaled himself, a long ragged breath as Xander took more of his length inside then deliberately opened his mouth, sending hot breath along the length of his penis. God, the heat of his boy was incredible. “Yes!” Spike hissed, his hips bucking up involuntarily, grateful for Xander’s strong hands holding him back.

Xander chuckled, the vibrations teasing Spike, and slid his mouth a little further down, beginning to suck hard. On edge already, Spike exploded into orgasm, his seed pulsing out, filling that warm cavity that continued to pull his release from him.

Spent, his hips collapsed back onto the floor, feeling Xander moving to lie beside him, wrapping one arm over his chest, one leg pressed between Spike’s. The scent of Xander’s own release was in the air and Spike turned to face Xander’s smug eyes.

Smirking back at his lover, Spike wrapped an arm around Xander’s shoulders and pulled him closer. “You’re welcome, pet.”

He loved the sound of Xander’s laugh.

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Spike glared at the assembled Court, pacing back and forth in front of them. “Thought we were clear,” he snarled. “Thought the rules were simple enough that even the stupidest among you could understand them.” His tone was scathing and the minions shifted uneasily, clearly unsure of what he was angry about.

“Let’s review, for those so thick they didn’t get it the first time. One, you bring anything big enough to affect anyone besides yourself to me. Two, you keep a low profile in town. And three, you don’t do anything that would even MAYBE break the first two rules without my express permission.”

Stalking back and forth in the open area in front of the group, his duster flaring out with every turn, Spike paused for a second to light a cigarette before resuming his pacing. He let the tension build, smoking and pretending to ignore the minions, even while studying them out of the corners of his
There were nearly 30 minions attached to his Court now and two Lieutenants. He’d promoted a second minion two weeks ago, and now Anthony had joined Jose on the second floor. Michael had been given unofficial recognition as chief minion - one of the few that Spike admitted to knowing his name. The minion seemed to have learned from his mistake during Ares’ challenge to Spike’s rule, he was keeping his head down and seemed intent on proving himself. He would undoubtedly be Spike’s third Lieutenant, but Spike was waiting before he promoted him.

Most of the rest of the minions were just that - extras in a de Mille epic, canon fodder, there to do Spike’s bidding. They were happy enough to shelter under the protection and companionship of a Court and most of them were too young to have a lot of ambition. Vampires on the Hellmouth tended to be either very young or fairly mature ones who had made a conscious decision to come to the Hellmouth to see what they could do with the ambient power that permeated the town. Most of the older vampires in town hadn’t joined Spike’s Court, which was fine, it wasn’t a requirement and Spike kept an eye of them, either personally or through his Lieutenants and, occasionally, Michael.

He ran an informal Court. No more ritual than absolutely couldn’t be avoided, formal Court held only once a week and problems bloody well better wait until the next Court. Very few of the minions actually brought problems to Spike before the full formal Court - they were too scared of him, which was how he wanted it. He hadn’t actually dusted any of the minions at random, but his disapproval tended to be fatal for the minion that caused it. Michael was one of the few who had survived disappointing Spike and he had been amused when he realized that Michael now seemed to consider the stomach wound Spike had given him to be a badge of honor.

Flicking his cigarette away, he wheeled once more and faced the crowd. “You. The git in the striped shirt. Get up here.”

The minion he’d pointed at actually looked down to check his shirt before hesitantly making his way forward. The other minions stepped away from him immediately, distancing themselves from him and rapidly clearing a path to the front. Where he stood before Spike like an errant schoolboy. Spike mostly ignored the “throne” the minions had set up for him, he was far more impressive in motion than sitting still, and thrones were for pretentious twits who needed them. Angelus had been big on having a throne.

“So, which rule did you break?” he asked the minion with deadly calm.

The minion made what was obviously a Herculean effort at thought, his brow furrowing anxiously, knowing he needed to get the answer right. Idiot. Didn’t even recognize that any answer he gave would be wrong.

“I’m sorry, Master Spike. I’m not sure what I’ve done wrong,” he finally said.

Spike scowled. “So you’re sayin’ you’re too stupid to even know when you’ve broken the rules, is that it?” He signaled and Jose and Anthony, who’d quietly slipped to the back of the room, stepped forward and with near perfect simultaneous moves, both pulled stakes out and dusted two vampires in the crowd.

The minion growled and Spike reached out and snapped his neck before the minion could even begin to fight back. Dropping him contemptuously to the floor, he stood over him. “This gifted idiot managed to break all three rules at once. Feeding’s one thing, vampires been munching on the population of this town for centuries and no one sees a thing. But turning your dinner leads to problems that affect us all. Just turned fledges tend to be noticed, tend to go home to visit the family, none of which is exactly low
profile. If you lot feel you need to create minions, you get my permission first. Most of you got no business creating fledges for another few decades. You got a reason you think you’re an exception, you bring it to me.”

His speech had been punctuated by moans from the crippled minion at his feet and now he pulled out a knife and slit the minion’s throat. Blood spurted and Spike stepped back swiftly, avoiding the spray of blood. He wiped the knife clean on the minion’s clothing and re-sheathed it at his belt. Dispassionately, he watched as the minion bled out, until he faded into ash as the last of his blood left his veins. It was the slowest way to kill a vampire and, looking around the Court, Spike saw that the lesson had not been lost on the minions. “I trust we won’t be needing to have this little refresher course on the rules again,” he said and hid his smirk at the eager agreement that filled the room as the minions hastened to assure him that they understood.

“Good. Class dismissed,” Spike said sarcastically and was pleased at the rapid scattering of the Court. Jose and Anthony stayed long enough to check if he needed anything and he signaled that they were free to leave as well. Bowing, they left slowly in deliberate contrast to the minions. Anthony had picked up Jose’s formality and Spike kind of liked it in his Lieutenants. Minions were just annoying when they bowed and scraped but Jose in particular invested the gesture with an antique courtesy that seemed natural to him and Anthony was following suit.

When he was alone in the large room, Spike considered the meeting with satisfaction. The number of vampires on the Hellmouth was down and the quality was up. Fewer mindless fledges wandering around, snacking on the population and drawing official notice. The harmless demons were grateful to him and occasionally sent a delegation to his Court to talk about potential issues, which kept him in the know about things vampires usually didn’t have a line of information in to. Some of the minions were even beginning to appreciate the subtleties of the hunt, seducing rather than overpowering their prey, and learning the pleasure to be had in hunting without killing. All of which meant that, for the first time in a century, Sunnydale was starting to be known as a well-run territory.

Before he became Master of a territory, Spike himself had acted more like a fledge than a Master at times. Mindless violence had its moments and he and Dru had enjoyed more than their share of them. Now, that he was settled in one area and responsible for it, he appreciated for the first time that leaving bodies where the local police would trip over them was just plain stupid. He could have all the violence his unbeating heart desired without attacking humans. Slayers aside, most humans weren’t any kind of a match for a vampire. Fighting the larger, aggressive demons was a hobby he’d come to appreciate. They caused problems in his town and killing them was fun. He still hunted - he wasn’t bagging it like his poof of a Sire, but he was keeping his promise to Xander and limiting himself to feeding without killing.

Some of the change in his outlook was Xander’s influence, Spike knew. Xander enjoyed hearing his stories of fights against demons and made a practice of “checking” Spike for injuries that was a reward in itself. His boy wouldn’t react that way to tales of slaughter of human sheep.

He was still the Big Bad, just in a slightly different way.

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Leaving Giles’ apartment, Xander was still grinning. Giles’ last physical therapy appointment had been late this morning and he was done with doctors and hospitals and “bloody, know-it-all nurses”, as Giles had put it. Giles’ hands would never be the same, the fingers were scarred from the surgeries and a couple weren’t quite straight, but he had the full use of his hands now and had cheerfully told Xander that he expected the scars would fade with time. He’d been celebrating with a glass of whiskey when Xander arrived and had surprised Xander by bringing out a soft drink and a plate of
cookies from a bakery.

Giles had been at his most human, his Librarian side firmly in hiding as he joked about how he had been worried about never being able to play the guitar again. Xander laughed at the idea of the staid Brit playing a guitar and told Giles he was sure the Dingos would be glad to add him to their act. Giles had actually laughed and said he’d think about it. Xander was amazed at the transformation. Usually Giles’ humor was quiet and dry, very proper and British for the most part. For once, he seemed to be letting go of the worry and responsibility that was so much a part of him. He’d been cleared to drive a couple weeks ago but now, chewing thoughtfully on a cookie, Giles admitted he’d felt tied down and resentful of the physical therapy he’d had to attend four times a week.

Giles had gradually been seeming more like his old self as the physical restrictions the doctors had placed on him had been lifted, one by one. Without the daily, physical reminders of what Angelus had done to him, it seemed like he’d been able to put it behind him but this was the first time Xander had seen him truly lighthearted. Granted, Giles had never been a real party animal even before Angelus but it was good, if a little disconcerting, to see.

They hadn’t even opened the books as Giles had proclaimed a holiday from studying. He announced that he was going to leave town for a week and Xander had the week off with no homework. At which point, Xander told Giles he wanted to check his bedroom for pods. Despite the fact that it was clear the Englishman didn’t get the reference, he’d still laughed, shooing Xander out the door and telling him to go have fun and forget about stuffy librarians and their demonology texts.

Shaking his head, still bemused from his encounter with the lighter side of Giles, Xander headed for home. Spike would be waking up about now and maybe they could plan something for Xander’s free afternoons. Running up the stairs out of Giles’ apartment building, Xander almost smacked head on into a person just starting down the steps. He put out an automatic hand to steady them and stopped, surprised.

It was Willow.

Xander knew that Willow was still visiting Giles in the mornings. He always went to the apartment after noon. Giles hadn’t tried to get them back together again, but he talked about Willow periodically - talking about how her training was going or mentioning her assistance in searching for Buffy through on-line resources that Giles didn’t know how to access. Xander assumed Giles was keeping Willow posted about him in the same way but he hadn’t asked. When the subject came up, he followed the same pattern he did with Oz and responded to the comments as if Willow was someone he barely knew.

From both Oz and Giles, he knew that Willow was spending a lot of time researching, and even practicing, witchcraft. Oz had talked to Xander about it several times. In his quiet way, Oz was worried about what he saw as Willow’s growing obsession with magic. Apparently, she spent hours reading books on witchcraft and was tinkering with actual spells. She told Oz that she just wanted to master the new subject, but he worried that it was more than that. She’d admitted to Oz that she was trying to find a way to re-open the portal and bring Angel back but swore she would clear any spell she found with Giles before attempting it. Apparently, she was also trying to find a spell that would locate Buffy. Oz reported that Giles was dubious about the possibility of locating Buffy by magic. Apparently, Slayers were somewhat immune to a number of types of magic, that being one of them. Xander supposed it made sense - it wouldn’t do for any demon that wanted to hunt a Slayer to be able to track them by magic.

He hadn’t talked to Giles about Oz’s concerns, although he’d seriously considered it, because Oz had talked to him in confidence, but he was worried. He hadn’t forgotten what Oz had said about the
re-souling spell’s effect on Willow and he still vividly remembered that flash of… darkness he’d seen in Willow’s eyes.

He hadn’t seen Willow in over a month. He’d known that, when school started, they were going to see each other on a daily basis and they were going to have to work something out. It wasn’t like he wanted Willow to apologize and invite Spike and him over for dinner, he wasn’t that much of a dreamer. What he wanted was some sense that she wouldn’t put Spike in danger again, that she accepted him as a person it was wrong to kill. Until she could see Spike as something other than “just” a vampire, a thing, not a person, Xander wasn’t going to forgive her.

Seeing her without any warning was a shock and it was obvious she was waiting for him. Unable to think of anything to say, he simply waited for her to speak.

“Just what did you think you were doing, telling Mrs. Summers about Buffy?” she demanded, her eyes narrowed in anger.

He really should have expected this.

“It’s not fair to take out your anger on her behind her back like that.”

“Is that what you think?” Did Willow really think he was that spiteful?

“Why else would you have done it?”

“Because Mrs. Summers deserved to know the truth. And, hey, Buffy should have told her a long time ago. Mrs. Summers didn’t even know not to invite vampires into the house. Buffy’s lucky she still has a mother, Angel isn’t the only vampire that might like a shot at the Slayer’s mother.” It made Xander furious every time he thought about the fact that Buffy hadn’t told her mother anything about how dangerous Angel really was, had just told her that her ex- was stalking her. Knowing Mrs. Summers, it was surprising she hadn’t invited Angel in to have a heart to heart chat about getting over it and finding a new girlfriend.

Willow didn’t look any less angry. “That’s just an excuse, Angel isn’t a danger any more and you know it. You’re just trying to make things harder for Buffy when she comes back.”

“Please, I’ve got better things to do than dream up ways to mess up Buffy’s life, if and when she ever decides to come home.” Xander left out the fact that Spike would like nothing better than to mess up Buffy’s life, even though that wasn’t really the reason he’d spilled the beans to Mrs. Summers.

“Like what? Hanging out with Buffy’s Watcher and my boyfriend?” Willow’s voice was scornful but her eyes were filled with resentment and… jealousy?

“Is that what you think?” Xander asked again, incredulously. “You think I’m hanging out with Giles and Oz because of you and Buffy?”

“Aren’t you?”

Xander laughed. It was so ridiculous, he couldn’t help himself. “Willow, Oz is a friend. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Why Oz and not me?” she burst out.

“Oz never tried to kill my boyfriend,” he answered pointedly and Willow’s jaw tightened.
“You know that wasn’t on purpose,” she said angrily, “I never knew you were someone who would hold grudges like this.”

“I guess we’ve both found out things we don’t like about each other. I resent it when people think of my boyfriend as expendable and you think I should be able to get over things and move on. Tell me, why doesn’t that apply to Buffy?”

“What?” Xander was bitterly amused to realize he’d thrown Willow completely. She really didn’t get what he was talking about.

“You’re big with people dealing with things and moving on. Why don’t you expect Buffy to do that?” he repeated.

Willow’s jaw set stubbornly but Xander saw the flicker of embarrassment in her eyes before she looked away. Oh, yeah. She had her own issues with Buffy running away, she just wasn’t going to admit it to him.

“Buffy just needs a little time to deal with losing Angel. Sure, running away wasn’t the best way to handle it, but it’s understandable under the circumstances. Giving her a little space isn’t too much to ask,” she said finally, but she sounded tired and a little defensive now, not angry.

Willow’s attitude about Buffy running away fueled Xander’s resentment and he couldn’t help thinking that he’d been expected to just get over his grief after Jesse’s death and move on. Why she didn’t hold Buffy to the same standard was a mystery to Xander. Did Willow really believe that the loss of a boyfriend Buffy had dated for a few months was so much worse than the loss of a life-long friend that Buffy was entitled to wallow in her grief and Xander hadn’t been?

Admittedly, he wasn’t being fair because he didn’t really believe Buffy and Angel’s love had been the stuff of star-crossed legend like Buffy and Willow seemed to think, but he knew there wasn’t any point in re-opening those wounds by trying to talk about it with Willow.

“Just like I thought, Buffy’s always the exception. Are we through?”

He hadn’t really expected anything different, it was just the same argument they’d been having since Buffy first came to town. Buffy could date a vampire, Buffy got time to grieve, Buffy got to keep her boyfriend even though he was evil. It was always “different” when it came to Buffy.

“I don’t understand you at all anymore, Xander. You hurt people deliberately, you don’t care about anyone’s feelings but your own. You’re not the boy I grew up with.” Willow had tears in her eyes, whether from anger or hurt, Xander couldn’t tell.

Xander was surprised to find that Willow’s judgment of him hurt. He shook his head, after everything that had happened, you’d think he wouldn’t care what Willow thought any more.

“Just because I refuse to put Buffy on a pedestal doesn’t mean I don’t care about people,” he said finally, without heat. “But you’re right, I’m not the same boy you grew up with. Newsflash, Willow: you’re not the same either.”

There didn’t seem to be much else to say. The two of them stared at each other for a long moment and Xander thought there was regret on both sides. Willow stepped back and Xander walked away. Regret for what had once been, yes, but he liked who he was now. Even if he could, he wouldn’t go back, not even to recapture the friendship they had once had.
Chapter 8

Xander sat back on his heels and looked at his work with satisfaction. The rotten porch boards had all been replaced with new ones and the rest had been securely nailed down. All he had left to do was paint and the job was done. Mrs. Hall had been using her side door all year because she was afraid of the front porch giving way beneath her.

Most of his jobs had been things like this, involving nothing more than basic carpentry skills and easy finishing work. He’d found that he really enjoyed the work. It was gratifying to be able to make something as good as new with just a few hours of work, especially since most of his jobs were simple repair work but stuff that really needed to be done - like Mrs. Hall’s porch. She’d talked to him while he worked and told him how worried she’d been that someone would ignore the sign and the tape across the porch steps and hurt themselves. Plus, it was obvious that she was embarrassed by the way it made her house look. Apparently, she’d gotten estimates from some regular contractors who had quoted her figures too high for her to afford. She’d been delighted when Mr. Olsen had mentioned Xander.

He had a regularly hourly fee now and the customer paid for the materials. He only charged for the time he actually worked, because he was learning, and sometimes he had to spend a fair bit of time at a job site figuring out how to do the work. He’d found that if he just studied a problem for awhile, he could usually figure out how to fix things. He wasn’t tackling plumbing or wiring problems and Mr. Olsen had obviously passed that on to the referrals he was still sending Xander’s way so he hadn’t had to turn down any jobs because they involved things he couldn’t do.

When Xander had tried to express his gratitude, Mr. Olsen had just laughed and said that he was considered a public benefactor among his circle of friends for finding such a reliable handyman. Xander even had two regular customers now, both demons, who had asked if he could come over once a week, whenever it fit into his schedule and help them maintain their yards and the outside of their houses. Both families had visible differences and yard work was both difficult and conspicuous when done at night. Both families had also admitted that an unkempt yard was something that called attention to them, which they couldn’t afford, so finding a way to get it done was an annual struggle.

About half of Mr. Olsen’s referrals were demons, the rest were elderly humans who couldn’t physically do the maintenance work that needed to be done to keep their houses in good shape. Xander had particularly enjoyed meeting the demon families. They were often very shy when they first met him and it was obvious they would never have contacted a human if it weren’t for Mr. Olsen’s recommendation. When they found Xander to be curious but not judgmental, they had warmed to him and he had gotten to know them a little.

He’d taken to asking Mr. Olsen what species the demons were and then eagerly looking them up in the books Mr. Olsen leant him. Giles’ books were overwhelmingly about the dangerous demons, the kind that Slayers fought. Which made sense, after all, that was what the Watchers Council had focused on for like a thousand years. Only Giles’ most basic, introductory texts covered the harmless types of demons and even those gave them pretty cursory treatment. The entire Skree’tnkk’hr tribe (and that had taken him a week just to learn how to spell it) had been covered in a single paragraph in one of Giles’ books, despite there being 372 sub-tribes, of which Sunnydale had eight families from seven different sub-tribes. The Dosh’tua’bii family had an entire 3-volume set on the languages and customs of the different sub-tribes. Xander had turned down their offer to loan the books to him - he was curious, not insane.

As the August days and weeks slipped past, Xander thought he might have found what he wanted to
do for a living. He sometimes thought back in disgust to the Career Day the school had put on. The questionnaire had asked all sorts of questions about computers and math and even shrubs, for whatever bizarre reason, but not one single question about whether you liked working with your hands, or whether you found satisfaction in shaping wood to fit together so neatly the joint barely showed. He’d even tried his hand at simple carving and wood turning while fixing a broken banister, and was already planning on taking wood shop next year. He’d never realized how much he liked construction work and carpentry, but he’d learned that this summer.

Of course, Spike gave him shit about it, telling him it wasn’t proper for a Master vampire to have a Claimed Human who wanted to learn to carve stakes better. He knew Spike was mostly joking but he also could tell there was a hint of genuine uneasiness in the vampire about Xander’s enthusiasm for the work he was doing. Like he was afraid Xander wanted to leave him or something. Xander had hoped he’d settled that question for Spike permanently when he’d taken Spike out to thank him for getting him the cell phone.

Despite Spike’s protests, Xander had insisted on repaying Spike for the phone. He’d simply checked how much the phone cost and handed the money to Spike when he had it saved up. Ok, he’d tucked the money into Spike’s pocket while distracting him by kissing him and rubbing his thigh between Spike’s legs, but it got the job done. By the time Spike figured out what he’d done, he was too sated and happy to protest. Xander grinned at the memory, as he gathered up his tools. He was not only getting to be a responsible adult, he was getting pretty good at being sneaky.

He’d thought long and hard over what to do for Spike as a special treat. He’d considered taking him to the same restaurant that Spike had taken him to once - he’d really enjoyed that night - but had decided against it. Although he’d love to go back there some day, he wanted to do something different as a surprise for Spike. Plus, although Spike enjoyed eating, he didn’t need to and mostly ate with Xander, so restaurants were mostly about Xander and he wanted to do something for Spike.

He’d consulted with Mr. Olsen, asking him for recommendations on where to take Spike but he hadn’t had any good suggestions. One thing Xander had learned after finding out about the peaceful demons living in Sunnydale was that most of them were wary of vampires and other violent demons and tended to avoid them when they could.

He’d finally settled for a weekend away from Sunnydale. He’d found a nice, but not extravagant hotel he could afford and treated Spike to a weekend in Los Angeles. Just the two of them and an entirely nocturnal weekend. Unlike Sunnydale, Los Angeles didn’t shut down at night, there were clubs and bars that stayed open till dawn. Spike knew Los Angeles way better than he did and took Xander to some of his favorite clubs and for 48 hours, they spent every minute together; sleeping during the day and club hopping all night.

It had been an eye opening experience for Xander. Spike had taken him to punk clubs and demon clubs and gay clubs. The vampire was equally at home in all of them, not really blending in with the different crowds - Spike pretty much defined conspicuous, no matter where he was - more like letting different parts of his personality out, depending on the venue. Xander had had a great time, dancing to ear-splitting music, drinking and eating things he couldn’t even pronounce, walking hand-in-hand with his vampire late at night through parts of the city he would have been afraid to set foot in at noon without Spike, and sleeping through the days, curled up in the enormous bed with Spike’s strong arms around him and the vampire’s contented purring rumbling under his cheek as he fell asleep.

It had been a break from reality, a glimpse into Spike’s world before Sunnydale: exhilarating and terrifying and fun. Xander couldn’t imagine living that way for weeks and months at a time, he didn’t have the stamina, but it was fun for a weekend. Most importantly, Spike enjoyed it and they were
Xander made an exasperated noise and set the guitar down. “It’s hopeless, I’ll never get it right.”

Oz looked at him in amusement. “It does seem like music isn’t your strong suit.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Oz had been trying to teach him to play some easy chords, but Xander’s fingers didn’t seem to want to get with the program. “Maybe I should just stick to listening.”

“Probably a good plan.”

They were in Oz’s practice room, as usual. Willow did the groupie thing at the Dingo’s gigs but didn’t spend a lot of time listening to Oz practice. Oz slept late most days and, when the band wasn’t playing anywhere, spent an hour or so every afternoon practicing in his studio. Sometimes Devon joined him but mostly it was just Oz and his guitar. Oz wrote a lot of the music the Dingoes played but it was a slow process and he never seemed to mind Xander dropping by to talk.

“Oz, does Willow know you’re not going to summer school?” Xander asked hesitantly, not wanting to overstep his boundaries but plunging in anyway. He’d figured out awhile ago that Oz wasn’t going to the classes he needed to make up his incompletes and get his degree.

Oz just shrugged, his sideways look confirming of Xander’s fears.

“Ummm, you might want to tell her about your plans before just showing up for the first day of school.” He spread his hands helplessly. “Not my business, I know, but Willow doesn’t handle change real well, not unless she’s planned for it. Good surprises, yes. But she’s going to need to some time to adjust to her boyfriend the not-graduated. Once she’s adjusted, she’ll find some weird way to be proud of it, and you, but until then, she’s not going to like you springing it on her.”

Oz listened in silence until Xander’s words ran out. “You think I should tell her,” he summarized.

“In Oz-speak - yes.”

Oz looked thoughtful, which he often did, but on the other hand, he usually was thinking when he looked that way, so it was fair. “I didn’t want to tell her why I want to stay at Sunnydale High another year,” he said finally. He shot Xander a quick glance, a small worry line etched between his brows. “If Buffy doesn’t come back, she’ll need me there at school.” There was no blame in his eyes as they held Xander’s, just an acceptance of the situation - that Willow would be lost if Buffy didn’t return and she had to face senior year alone, that Xander wouldn’t be there for her.

“I’m worried about her,” Oz continued, looking down at his guitar and fingering the strings with seeming idleness. “Since Giles told her she won’t be able to find Buffy magically, she’s been trying to find a way to re-open the portal and rescue Angel so he’ll be here when Buffy gets back. Instead of dealing, she’s obsessed with finding a way to fix things.”

Xander’s jaw tightened. Same old Willow. She’d always done guilt really well but he didn’t like the idea of her thinking magic was the cure-all for things that had gone wrong. “There’s this Voyager episode where this crazy alien has spent like 200 years trying to fix something that went wrong by changing history,” he commented indirectly. Oz actually knew what he was talking about most of the time when Xander mentioned Star Trek. Which Xander figured meant that, at heart, Oz was a sci-fi geek too, he was just too cool to ever talk about it. “He never gets it right, just keeps screwing up the present in a different way each time. Fixing things by magic seems like it would be the same problem - I doubt it ever works the way you want it to.”
“Hmm.” Oz appeared to be thinking that one over. Eventually, he said: “If it was easy to fix things with magic, I suspect there would be a lot more people trying it. Bringing back dead people, fixing the lottery, that kind of thing.”

“Maybe there are. Maybe we just don’t know about it because we’re changed magically too.”

Oz shook his head. “You’re thinking time-loops. Spells wouldn’t necessarily affect everything around them that way.”

“A good spell would,” Xander countered. “I mean, if you brought someone back from the dead by magic, it would be a lot more efficient to erase everyone’s memories that they’d ever been dead, or else they’d spend their first few resurrected months getting a new driver’s license and explaining to distant relatives that it was all a misunderstanding and that they didn’t really die.”

They continued debating the relative merits of time travel versus magic and Xander thoroughly enjoyed the bizarre, mock-serious conversation. He and Jesse used to talk about things like that by the hour and it was nice not to have lost that part of his life completely.

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He was still studying with Giles but they had cut back to three hours a week since Giles was traveling to LA most weeks, looking for Buffy. He’d return from the trips tired and depressed as whatever will-o-the-wisp rumor he’d followed this time had again proved to be nothing. The end of the summer was rapidly approaching, Labor Day and school were only a little over a week away, and there had still been no word from Buffy. Xander knew that Giles was pinning his hopes on Buffy returning before school started.

Xander wasn’t sure how he felt about Buffy coming back. His resentment of her leaving had grown as time passed and there was no word from her. Mrs. Summers and Giles didn’t deserve what she was putting them through and Xander’s opinion of Buffy as selfish and self-absorbed had been thoroughly confirmed. On the other hand, Giles and Mrs. Summers really needed her to come back so they could go back to their normal lives.

Xander wasn’t looking forward to school starting. He’d miss his customers, although he was planning on trying to fit some work in on the weekends, and he wasn’t looking forward to having to deal with classes and all the petty garbage that came with school. Oh, yeah, and seeing Willow every day was going to be fun. It would be awkward with Oz, too. He didn’t know what was going to happen with his friendship with Oz once Willow was unavoidably in the picture. Would Oz be willing to talk to him at school or would he feel like he had to stay away from Xander for Willow’s sake? Willow knew that they were friends and had been hanging out together over the summer, but that was different from seeing it for herself.

He sighed. Just have to cross that bridge when he came to it, he figured.

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Xander had continued to stop by the Summers’ house to help out a couple times a week even after he’d become a professional handyman. He’d hesitated at first to tell Joyce Summers about the work he was doing, afraid she would think he wanted her to pay him for helping her out. She’d seemed to understand though that the work he did at her house was different.

Maybe because she was the first person in a long time that he’d talked to about Jesse.

After Spike had spilled the beans that first time, she’d talked to Xander and Spike about vampires on
several occasions, asking questions about their strengths and weaknesses and the role of Slayers and vampires. It wasn’t like it was the only topic of conversation, she was an easy person to talk to and she was lonely. She’d laughingly told Xander that he had saved her sanity this summer: confessing that she’d been so lonely that she’d been on the verge of accepting an invitation to join a book club, just for the sake of having someone to talk to, even knowing that the members read depressing novels and then spent hours dissecting them. Xander was secretly amused that she and Spike had become friends, since on the surface they had nothing in common. Spike had taken to dropping by the house at least once a week, sometimes on his own and sometimes with Xander. He and Mrs. Summers would argue amicably about everything under the sun, they seemed to hold different opinions about everything: music, art, movies, you name it. Xander couldn’t join in the conversations about art and theater, but he put in his two cents about music, enjoying the way the other two would immediately join forces to belittle his country music favorites. Not even the great Patsy Cline was safe from their mockery.

When the talk turned to vampires and demons, Xander could see that Mrs. Summers was re-evaluating everything she thought she knew about her daughter and Sunnydale, holding it up to the litmus test of her new knowledge about what had really been going on, placing some of Buffy’s “troubled child” history in context with her new information about Buffy’s role as the Slayer.

He hadn’t planned it, but one day, Xander found himself telling her about Jesse, about their friendship and about his death. Mrs. Summers had listened quietly as the words spilled out of him, her eyes clouded with sympathy. As he finished telling her about Mrs. McNally, they fell silent, Xander feeling like the flood of words had been a catharsis, Mrs. Summers obviously not sure what to say.

Xander looked at her searchingly. “Would you be happier if we hadn’t told you about Buffy being the Slayer?”

Mrs. Summers didn’t answer immediately. “Yes,” she said finally, looking off into the distance. “I wouldn’t be worried about Buffy fighting for her life every night like I am now.” Xander’s heart sank. He shouldn’t have told her, he’d been wrong.

She looked back at him then and continued: “But I’m glad you told me.” She smiled at his confused expression. “Xander, the best way I can explain it is…” her brow furrowed for a moment before clearing. “It’s like a doctor telling me that Buffy has a terminal disease. I would be happier not knowing that my daughter might die soon, but because I know what we’re facing, I know to cherish every day we have, because there’s a very real possibility it may be the last time I see my daughter.”

She put her arm around him as they sat together on the porch steps and hugged him. “Thank you for telling me.”

They sat for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts, until Mrs. Summers stirred and looked at him. “You’re wondering if you should tell Jesse’s mother the truth,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Xander nodded. “I told her that I was afraid he might be dead because he would never run away like that.” He grimaced apologetically after the words were out, he hadn’t meant to comment on Buffy, even indirectly. “She’s obviously still thinking he might be alive, or at least hasn’t accepted that he must be dead. What do you tell someone when you can’t produce a body or any official explanation? I can’t exactly drag Spike to Ohio for vampire show and tell.”

“Sometimes there isn’t an answer, Xander. You did the best you could to tell her that Jesse was gone. By now, she knows it’s unlikely he’s ever going to come back. It’s not fair, but life isn’t always fair. Good people get hurt and you can’t always fix things.”
“So I should just leave things be?”

She patted him on the knee. “Why don’t you send her a letter telling her that you miss her and that you will never forget Jesse. The kind of note you would send after hearing that someone you loved died. That will let her know that you’ve accepted that Jesse is dead.”

That made sense. “Mrs. Summers, can I buy you an ice cream cone?”

She smiled. “That sounds good.”

They hadn’t talked about it again and Xander had written the letter. He used Giles’ address, with his permission, for a return address, since the post office didn’t deliver to the factory. Mrs. McNally hadn’t responded, but Xander felt better after writing the letter, the guilt he’d been carrying ever since he saw Jesse’s empty house easing a little.

Mrs. Summers had long since given him a key and told him to simply come in whenever he stopped by, whether or not she was home. In the last week of August, Xander began working on painting the trim on her house. The old paint was beginning to peel and Mrs. Summers had bought the supplies he needed for the job when he offered to paint it for her. Seeing her car in the driveway, Xander tapped on the door and called out a greeting as he entered. He could hear voices coming from the kitchen and headed towards the rear of the house.

“Hey, Mrs. Summers, sorry to interrupt,” he began as he walked into the kitchen. Mrs. Summers’ broke off what she was saying and looked at him over the top of her guest’s head. “I’m just going to grab the ladder and start working on the back,” he said, when the visitor swung around to face him.

It was Buffy.
“Hello, Xander.” There was a slight tremble in Mrs. Summers’ voice and her eyes were bright with tears but it was obvious they were tears of joy.

“What are you doing here?”

Buffy sounded more surprised than anything and, for Mrs. Summers’ sake, Xander just said quietly: “Welcome back, Buffy.” His gaze swept over the two women then back towards the front door where a small duffle bag was sitting. It was obvious Buffy had only arrived a short time ago. “Look, this is a bad time. I’ll just go.”

He stepped back as he spoke, intent on getting out of there as quickly as possible. He and Buffy were always a volatile mix and he didn’t want to ruin the homecoming for her mother.

“Why are you here?”

“Xander’s been helping me out around the house while you were gone, Buffy. He and Spike have been a godsend.”

Xander winced, wondering if there was any way he could get out of there before the explosion.

“Spike?” Yep, there was the furious glare that had punctuated so many of his exchanges with the Slayer. “You introduced Spike to my mother.”

He opened his mouth to say…something but Mrs. Summers beat him to it. “I asked to meet him, Buffy.”

Buffy stared at her mother in disbelief. “Are you telling me that you invited him into the house?”

“Of course…”

Buffy’s hand shot out, grabbing Xander’s arm in an iron grip, stopping him in his retreat towards the front door. “You brought Spike into my home? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Buffy, that’s enough. Spike is welcome here. He and Xander have been a real help this summer.”

“Mom, you don’t understand. Spike isn’t someone you want to invite into your home. He’s dangerous and Xander should never have introduced you to him.”

“Because he’s a vampire?” Mrs. Summers’ gaze was level and Buffy gasped in shock before turning an accusing glare on Xander.

“You told her? How dare you…” she began heatedly, shaking him by the arm she still held in an implacable grip, when her mother interrupted her again.

“Buffy, let him go. Now,” she ordered, when Buffy didn’t immediately release him.

Xander couldn’t help a sigh of relief when she finally let go. He was going to have some serious bruises from her grip, he thought ruefully, rubbing his arm.

“Xander, I apologize. You were right, maybe it would be best if you were to leave.” She smiled thinly. “Buffy and I need to talk. Why don’t you and Spike come over for dinner on Saturday, if you don’t have any other plans.”
Xander shot a glance at Buffy, who looked too shocked to protest the invitation. “Ummm, I’m not sure…”

“I’m sure. I’ll expect you two at 8:30, all right?”

Xander knew an irresistible force when it was inviting him to dinner. “We’ll be here.” He lifted a hand in a half-hearted wave and retreated rapidly, closing the door behind him and jumping down the stairs.

He wasn’t quite fast enough. Behind him, he heard faintly an outraged “Mom!” as he sprinted through the yard and out of earshot.

Dinner on Saturday. Maybe he could schedule an emergency root canal to get him out of it.

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Spike’s eyes snapped open immediately as Xander entered their apartment. He was always aware of Xander’s movements around the apartment, especially when he came and went, but it was generally a peripheral thing, not something that jerked him out of a sound sleep.

Even sleeping, Spike was aware of his surroundings. It was an ability vampires developed as they gained experience or they didn’t survive long enough to become a Master. Spike had learned decades ago how to monitor his surroundings, maintaining a light thread of awareness no matter how deeply he slept. His senses extended throughout the apartment, and to a lesser extent to the entire building, like a shallow pool, alert to the slightest ripple troubling the surface. Xander was a familiar disturbance in the dormant net of his senses and Spike had long since ceased to react to Xander’s normal movements, tracking them easily in his sleep, without alarm or waking.

Today, though, he shot awake at Xander’s entrance, rolling to his feet and heading immediately for the kitchen where Xander was. Although not frightened, Xander was strongly agitated, tension rolling off him in a nearly visible cloud even as he stood, outwardly calm, staring out the kitchen window.

“What’s wrong?”

“Spike!” Xander yelped, startled, his head whipping around to stare at Spike as he stood in the doorway to the room, well back from the broad expanse of sunlight flooding in through the window. With a quiet oath, he immediately moved to the window and hastily pulled the heavy blind down and closed the curtain, darkening the kitchen and allowing Spike entry.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I didn’t think you’d be up yet.”

“No worries, pet. What’s wrong?”

Xander’s troubled eyes met his. “Buffy’s back.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “Graced us with her presence again, has she?”

His thoughts raced as he considered the implications for his Territory and he repressed the automatic growl as he remembered the last time he had seen the Slayer - weeping great crocodile tears beside the closed vortex. Mourning the loss of her lover, Spike’s Sire, whom she had exiled, wounded, to a hell dimension with the bloody soul reinstated by her actions. Too stupid to even realize that she hadn’t killed him. Killing Angelus would have been far kinder than what she had done.

“Yeah, I know.” Spike looked at Xander in surprise and belatedly realized that the growl had
escaped. Xander smiled wryly. “We managed to go almost 10 seconds before I pissed her off,” he said with a little huff of laughter, his right hand going up unconsciously to rub at his left bicep.

Spike glared at the arm suspiciously, his hand reaching out to gently push Xander’s aside, running sensitive fingers lightly over the area. He could feel a slight swelling and the added heat of extra blood in the area, signaling developing bruises. “She hurt you!” he hissed furiously.

“It’s no big deal, Spike,” Xander told him hastily. “She grabbed my arm to stop me from leaving. Hey, no need for that,” he exclaimed, looking askance at Spike’s demon features. “She was upset. She’d just found out that we told her mother about vampires and Slayers and she freaked. I left and we’re invited for dinner on Saturday,” he finished in a rush.

“The Slayer invited us to dinner?” Spike wondered if it was himself or the Slayer who’d lost their mind.

“No, doofus, her mom invited us to dinner.” Xander looked exasperated and Spike felt foolish. He’d obviously missed one of the turns in Xander’s rapid description of what happened. The Slayer wouldn’t invite them to dinner, not unless she found a way to slip poison into the food.

“She felt bad because, well, she wasn’t asking me to leave but she was agreeing that I needed to. And I think she wanted to make clear to both me and Buffy that she wasn’t going to stop seeing us, just because Buffy doesn’t like it,” Xander explained.

That pleased Spike. Joyce was a classy lady. Five minutes after getting their runaway kid back, most humans would be too scared to cross the kid in any way, in case they left again. Joyce had let them know they were still welcome, not quietly or behind her daughter’s back, but in-your-face-Buffy with an invitation to dinner. He could see Xander relax slightly as he slid back into human guise and he smiled at his boy.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, luv.” And he wouldn’t. Although he doubted that Buffy would be there, it would drive her crazy knowing that Spike had an open invitation to her home and was welcome to break bread with her mum. This could be fun.

Making a mental note to bring Joyce a bouquet of flowers, Spike’s eyes gleamed as he anticipated the evening, loftily ignoring Xander’s aggrieved sigh, until he realized that Xander was still tense and unhappy. Dropping his teasing façade, Spike looked searchingly at his boy.

“Something else wrong?”

Xander shook his head uncertainly. “Not really. It’s just…” He paused and Spike waited patiently for him to find the words to express what was worrying him. “I feel like a complete jerk, because I’m not happy she’s back.” Spike repressed a smile and his automatic reaction to compliment Xander for taking the evil point of view. Xander wouldn’t appreciate it, not right now.

Troubled brown eyes lifted from their study of the linoleum. “I should be happy for Mrs. Summers and Giles, even if I don’t care myself. And jeez - teenage runaway - that’s not exactly a safe job description. You’d think I’d be happy for her sake that she’s back home regardless of how I feel about her, but all I can do is worry about is whether her being back is going to screw up our lives.”

“Only natural, luv. Slayer’s hardly been a friend to you. No reason you should be throwing a party for her, now she’s back.” He cocked his head, still studying Xander. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

Xander was staring at the linoleum again, avoiding Spike’s gaze, his hands stuffed into his pockets,
shoulders hunched, and Spike’s lips tightened. Pretty much only one person still had this effect on Xander.

His boy had really come into his own over the summer and Spike often congratulated himself on letting Xander stretch his wings. Between the work his boy was doing on his own, demon study with the Watcher, and the training sessions with Spike, Xander had learned he was good at a number of things and his growing self-confidence was reflected in his posture. No longer did Xander hunch down, trying to make himself inconspicuous, hoping no-one would notice and criticize him. His boy met the world with his head up and his eyes steady, having learned this summer that a lot of people valued him and accepted him for who he was. More importantly, Xander was comfortable with who he was now and no longer sought for approval outside himself. Not that Spike didn’t give it to him. His boy had had far too few people in his life that cared about him, much less told him they were proud of him.

“What’s she done now?” he growled.

“Buffy?” Xander asked, surprised.

“The witch.”

Xander shook his head. “It’s not anything she’s done - recently,” he amended. “It’s more that seeing Buffy again made me realize something: that I’m more angry with Willow than I am with Buffy.” He gestured vaguely. “At first, I was really mad at both of them for almost getting you killed. And it’s not like I’ve forgiven Buffy or anything but when I saw her it was just ‘oh, no, she’s back, is she going to screw up our lives?’ It was only when I left that I realized I wasn’t angry, I was worried. I don’t know if it’s because Willow and I have talked about it and I know she’d do it again or what. I’m angry at what Buffy did to Giles and her mother by leaving town, but that’s it.” He looked at Spike and Spike could see the confusion and guilt in his eyes. “I don’t understand why I’m blaming Willow and not Buffy for what happened. I didn’t even realize I was mostly blaming her until now.”

“It’s because she betrayed you and because you used to be friends. Always hurts more when it’s a friend that screws you. With the Slayer, you’ve been seein’ the effect of her actions on people you care about, so that’s fresher in your mind. But every time you see the witch, you remember the spell and how she betrayed you.”

“That makes sense,” Xander said slowly.

“Course it does. Haven’t lived over a century for nothing, pet.”

That got him a fleeting grin. “When it comes down to it, I don’t really care if Buffy puts her own interests ahead of mine. I kind of expect her to. We’re not friends and we never were, so why should she care about the things that are important to me. I was pissed at the time because you don’t hide things from your allies that way and it lead to you getting hurt, but I’m not sure I ever really expected anything else from Buffy. Willow….”

“You expected more from her,” Spike prompted when Xander’s voice trailed off.

“Yeah. Even after everything that’s happened between us, we’ve known each other since kindergarten and she was one of my two best friends for all those years. I never thought she would care so little about my feelings and people who are important to me. The last time we talked, it was obvious she’d do it again. She’ll always choose Buffy over me and she’d be happy if you were dead. It’s like she thinks that, if you’re gone, I’ll go back to being what she wants me to be.”

“Not going to happen, luv.”
“Of course it’s not going to happen.” Xander’s head jerked up and he glared at Spike.

“Not what I meant. I meant that, even if I was gone, you’re not going back to who you were. You’ve changed too much and learned too much about who you really are.”

“You’d think that someone who claims she loves me could accept that, wouldn’t you?” Xander asked bitterly.

“No-one better at disappointing and hurting us than the ones who love us, pet.” He was certainly an expert on that. Angelus and Drusilla had both kicked the crap out of him emotionally on more than one occasion. Angelus had done it physically too.

“I should hate her for your sake, Spike. This shouldn’t all be about me. You could have died because she was holding back in that fight.”

“Didn’t die, though,” Spike said comfortably, with a shrug. “Slayer doesn’t matter enough to be worth holding a grudge against. ‘Sides, Slayers’ve got a short shelf life. They don’t usually last long enough to get a good vendetta going.”

As he hoped, Xander laughed and smacked him. “That’s a terrible way to look at it, Spike.” It was Xander’s turn to look at Spike searchingly. “Does it bother you that I kind of want to not make an issue about it with Buffy for her mom’s sake?”

“No. I like Joyce. So long as the Slayer doesn’t come after me, I can put up with her for her mum’s sake.”

“Umm, so, do you think maybe you guys can agree to continue the truce between you?” The worry hadn’t faded from Xander’s eyes. “I know it was supposed to only be temporary but maybe you can agree to make it permanent.”

Not a surprise, that. Spike had always assumed that Xander would want the truce to continue if the Slayer came back. He’d thought about it several times before now, considering the effect of a truce with the Slayer on both the Court and demons who weren’t members of the Court. It would cause some trouble, no question, but nothing he couldn’t handle. Challengers would use it as an excuse for saying Spike wasn’t in control, wasn’t tough enough, but they’d find another excuse if that one didn’t exist.

What tipped the scales for him was Joyce. Just didn’t seem right to kill her daughter when she’d been so kind to him.

Spike put his arms around Xander, pleased when Xander slipped his own arms around Spike’s waist, resting his forehead on Spike’s shoulder. “If the Slayer’s willing, I can live with a truce,” he said, deliberately echoing the words he’d spoken last year on the same subject. Xander tightened his arms around Spike and relaxed for the first time since he’d gotten home.

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Xander knocked hesitantly on Giles’ door, hating the fact that he was already changing his behavior because of Buffy. Instead of walking in like always, he waited for the Watcher to open the door, just in case Buffy was inside. He’d listened at the door for nearly a minute and only knocked when he hadn’t heard voices inside. He figured Buffy would have gone to see Giles yesterday, on her first day home, but he couldn’t be sure. She could have called and promised to stop by today. Or be planning on seeing him daily. Or…

He was making himself crazy with the second guessing. He’d decided that he wasn’t going to stop
visiting Giles and studying with him and he was sticking to that decision until Giles told him otherwise. Nothing had changed.

Like he believed that for a second.

The door swung open and Giles stood there, looking mildly surprised to see him. “Hello, Xander. Come in.”

“Hey, Giles.”

He didn’t need to ask if Giles knew. The aura of worry and stress that had clung to librarian all summer had dropped away like it had never been. Giles looked lighter, no longer weighted down by an intolerable burden. There was an irrepressible hint of a smile in his eyes and Xander was genuinely happy for him. “So, the prodigal has returned, I hear.”

Giles’ smiled broadly. “Yes. Yes, she has. It’s wonderful news.” He moved back from the doorway and Xander followed him inside.

The table they studied at was clear of books and Xander’s heart sank. “Would you rather….” he began, thinking that Giles might not have time for him anymore, now that his Slayer had returned.

“Ohmmm?” Giles’ gaze followed his to the empty table and he looked back at Xander. “Certainly not. You had an assignment, as I recall.” He moved briskly to the bookcase and pulled out the book they were currently working with, bringing it back to the table and smiling at Xander, who just stood there, grinning like an idiot.

Sitting down, Giles opened the book. “What are the four primary traits by which Klantosh demons can be recognized?” he asked, as if it were an ordinary day, tactfully ignoring the relief that still colored Xander’s expression.

Pulling out a chair and settling down himself, Xander wondered what Giles would do if Xander suddenly hugged him. Probably sputter and get all British, he thought with a fond smile. “Horns at the back of their skull that curve down, a strip of fur, usually black or dark brown, running along their shoulders and down their arms…” he began.

British reserve had its place. Sometimes, you really didn’t need to say the words out loud.

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“This is so going to be a disaster,” Xander said gloomily.

From the depths of the closet, Spike called back to him, “Oi, not going to disappoint a lady, are you? Thought you were supposed to be one of the good guys.”

“I’d rather disappoint her than have to apologize for killing her daughter.”

“’m not going to be killing her daughter over dinner. Already told you, I can live with a truce if she can.” Spike emerged from the closet triumphantly. “Wear this one.” He tossed a dark blue silk shirt to Xander who snagged it in mid-air and slid into it with automatic motions, his mind clearly still on the potential for disaster inherent in a suburban dinner party featuring a Slayer and a Master Vampire.

Spike shook his head, moving to help straighten the collar. “It’ll be fine, pet. We’ll all be civilized for Joyce’s sake. ‘Sides, Slayer probably won’t even be there. Not like she was pining for our company while she was off contemplatin’ her navel.”
“Right,” Xander’s tone was beyond skeptical. “Buffy is going to let her mother eat dinner with William the Bloody while she skips off to the Bronze for the night. Please, we’ll be lucky if she isn’t trying to stake you before the hors d’oeuvres are served.”

Spike just smiled. Xander had been fussing about the dinner since Joyce invited them. Spike was looking forward to the evening - a spot of Slayer baiting and an evening with Joyce. Should be fun.

“Ready, pet? Don’t want to be late.” Spike went to the kitchen to grab the bouquet of flowers he’d nicked from a florist’s last night, ignoring Xander’s muttering that there was something wrong with evil vampires being worried about punctuality. Xander trailed him into the kitchen, tucking his shirt in, and looking worried.

“This is so going to be a disaster.”

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“They’re beautiful, Spike. Thank you.” Mrs. Summers admired the enormous bouquet, turning it in her hands to see it from all sides before giving in to temptation and burying her nose in the middle of it to inhale the fragrance of the mixed flowers.

“Not half as lovely as you, Joyce,” Spike said gallantly. Xander shot him a disbelieving look but kept his mouth shut. Buffy rolled her eyes in disgust and Spike smirked at her.

“I’ll just put these in water,” Joyce said, heading towards the kitchen. “Have a seat in the living room, dinner will be a little while yet.”

Spike and Buffy eyed each other like duelists sizing up their opponent, which was pretty much what they were. Xander thought resignedly. He tugged on Spike’s arm, pulling him into the living room, trying to stay between Spike and Buffy. He wasn’t really worried that Buffy would stake Spike the second his back was turned but it never hurt to be cautious.

Spike sprawled with careless grace on the couch, making it clear by his actions that he was at home there and familiar with the room. Buffy gritted her teeth, much like she had when Spike had entered the house without an invitation. Spike was having far too much fun rubbing it in that he was a welcome guest in her home.

Joyce returned with the flowers in a vase which she placed on the table, giving them another admiring look. “Would you boys like something to drink?”

“The usual, Joyce, if it’s not too much trouble,” Spike answered.

“Of course. Xander?”

“Nothing, thanks.” Xander wondered if he should ask for a bucket of ice water for when Buffy’s head exploded. He began to relax slightly. Spike had given him his word that he wasn’t going to attack Buffy except in self defense and it was beginning to look like Buffy wasn’t planning on staking Spike during dinner either. So long as Spike’s heckling didn’t trigger homicidal impulses, it might even be fun to watch the two of them spar verbally.

“So, all settled back in?” he asked Buffy. He could do civilized.

Not surprisingly, Joyce answered. “School was the biggest problem and we’ve got that all settled, thank heaven.”

Spike turned a look of mock concern on Buffy. “Going to be tough, having to repeat a grade. Or will
you be changing schools?” Xander wasn’t sure how the vampire did it but somehow Spike managed to convey the implication that Buffy would be going to a “special” school - something for delinquents or retarded kids, maybe both.

“I’ll be graduating on schedule at Sunnydale.” Buffy wasn’t nearly as good with innuendo, her tone just conveyed a prosaic ‘drop dead’.

“That horrible little rodent of a man was actually going to try and make her repeat a grade.” Mrs. Summers shook her head. “I had to threaten him with the school board and the Mayor to get him to see reason.”

“You threatened Principal Snyder?” Xander asked in disbelief. “That’s great!”

“Good on you, Joyce.”

“That man is unbelievable. All Buffy needs is a couple of make-up tests and he wasn’t going to let her take them. So, I just pointed out that if they didn’t allow her to take make-up tests, they would be stuck with her for two more years, instead of one. Principal Snyder seemed to feel that was a selling point.”

“Gee, thanks, mom.”

Xander almost choked, trying not to laugh. He would have killed to have seen Mrs. Summers in action as she confronted Snyder. He could just see the expression on Snyder’s face as Mrs. Summers sweetly pointed out that one of the worst troublemakers in the school could be there for one year, or two, take your pick.

“Well, Buffy, he made it so obvious he thought you were a problem that he left himself wide open.”

“That’s right, Slayer. You should always go for the vulnerable bits when you’re trying to stab someone in the heart.”

Spike’s smile held pure malice and Buffy gasped, white faced at the low blow. Xander froze, thinking Spike had gone too far and Buffy was going to erupt.

“Spike, that’s enough.” Joyce didn’t raise her voice but her stare pinned Spike and, astoundingly, Spike looked abashed.

“Sorry, Joyce.”

“I don’t expect you and Buffy to be friends but there’s no need to be deliberately cruel.”

“He’s a vampire, it’s what he does,” Buffy said acidly.

“Nonsense. Spike is no more ‘just’ a vampire than you are ‘just’ a Slayer. The two of you worked together last year, I don’t see why that can’t continue.” She stood, as if that settled everything. “Let’s eat.”

Xander wanted to give her a round of applause. Not only had she beaten Snyder on his own turf, she had both Buffy and Spike cowed. Xander was so going to take lessons from her.

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The dinner never got exactly comfortable, there were too many prickly topics and sly digs, but it wasn’t anywhere near the violence-laced fiasco that Xander had been afraid it would be. Joyce
talked about the new exhibit she was working on at the gallery and Xander and she discussed the painting he still needed to finish at the house. Buffy mostly just toyed with her food and didn’t say much, still clearly resenting them being there at all. Xander thought regretfully of the many visits to the house over the summer where conversation had flowed easily and the laughter wasn’t edged with malice. Although Spike and Buffy were mostly behaving, they weren’t bothering to hide their dislike for each other.

Buffy followed them out onto the porch as they left. “We are going to talk,” she said with quiet intensity.


It was the closest thing he could think of to neutral territory. It was almost deserted at night, even with school starting in a few days, and the Hellmouth was quiet.

“I’ll be there.” Buffy headed back inside, the door carefully not slamming behind her.

“See? Told you it would be all right.”

Xander looked at him in disbelief. “Your definition of all right needs serious work, Spike.”
Chapter 10

Buffy was sitting on the steps in front of the school when they arrived. She was playing with a stake, flipping it up so it spun around then catching it, and Spike snorted at the posturing. Hearing them coming, Buffy jumped to her feet and stood braced and alert, the stake now clenched in one hand, down at her side but ready to use.

“Thought we were here to talk, Slayer,” Spike drawled. “Since when do you come to a sit-down with weapons drawn?”

“I told you last year I didn’t trust you, Spike. Nothing’s changed.”

“Spike isn’t the one who went into that last fight withholding information. I’d say he’s proved more trustworthy than you have.”

“Of course you’d say that. Willow tells me you two are dating now?” There was both scorn and disbelief in her voice which, considering her dating history, was a bit much.

“Anyone here who’s not had sex with a vampire, raise your hand.” Xander looked around facetiously. “Oh, look. No one’s hand is up. Guess we’re all equals.”

“If you think for one minute that Spike and Angel are the same…” she began angrily when Xander interrupted.

“They’re not the same. Spike isn’t the one who went on a killing spree,” he said heatedly, then forced himself to stop. “Sorry.” He held up both hands. “Just… sorry. Let’s not go there.” He shot Spike a look. “And you can stop grinning.”

“Havin’ fun, luv.” Spike said, unrepentantly. “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Yeah, well, let’s move on to the useful part of the evening. Assuming there’s going to be one.”

“You asked for the meeting, Slayer.”

“I just thought we should get a few things straight while you aren’t hiding behind my mother.”

“What?!”

“Oi!”

Their exclamations sounded in tandem.

“What else would you call it? Ingratiating yourself with my mother the second my back is turned.”

“Your back was a little more than turned. Your back was in Splitsville, USA. Did you even think about what your mother was going through while you were gone?” Xander abandoned any thought of diplomacy at the unfair accusation.

“That’s none of your business.”

“The hell it isn’t our business. Unlike you, your mum’s a classy lady. Xander here kept her from going crazy worryin’ over you.”

“And your idea of the best way to reassure her was to tell her that every nightmare she’s ever had is
true? That her daughter’s destiny is to fight for her life every night?”

“Your idea of the best way to keep her alive on a Hellmouth is to leave her in complete ignorance of even the most basic precautions?” Xander shot back.

“Not much of a Slayer if every fledge causes you to fight for your life,” Spike added with a malicious smirk.

Buffy glared, her fist tightening on the stake which she half raised. “All I’m saying is stay the hell away from my mother. Both of you.”

“An’ I’m saying: piss off, Slayer. Visit your mum any time I like.”

“Not if you’re dust you won’t.”

Xander stepped between them before Spike could stop him and Buffy checked her movement as her target was suddenly shielded. “Both of you knock it off.” He waited until the tense readiness in both vampire and Slayer had eased off a fraction, grateful that neither wanted to kill him so he could stop them both from going too far. Directing his glare at Buffy, he said, with forced calm: “Buffy, you don’t have the right to decide for your mother. If she doesn’t want us around, she’s perfectly capable of telling us so.”

Buffy’s jaw set stubbornly but she looked away, tacitly ceding the point. Xander suspected that she had already had this argument with her mother and lost. He felt a pang of guilt that they were the cause of so much friction in Buffy’s homecoming. Of course, that pang was more than matched by the smug feeling that Mrs. Summers liked them enough to face down her daughter over the issue. “Is that the only thing you wanted to talk about?”

“No.” Buffy didn’t say anything for a long moment and Spike got impatient.

“Time’s wastin’, Slayer. I got things to do, even if you don’t.”

Her eyes snapped back to the vampire. “Things like killing people?”

Spike opened his mouth but stopped when Xander clamped a hand on his arm. “Spike hasn’t killed a human in nearly a year.”

Spike shot him a disgruntled look, not happy that his promise had just become public knowledge. “Always willin’ to make an exception for a Slayer,” he snarked.

“We’d be sweeping up your dust right now if I hadn’t promised my mother I wouldn’t stake you,” Buffy snapped back.

“Big talk from someone who couldn’t even kill her boyfriend.”

“Stop! Both of you. Jeez, you’re like a couple of five year olds.”

“That’s rich, coming from someone who’s trying to get back at me by sucking up to my mother and Giles.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, not that again. I’m friends with Giles and your mother because I like them. It has nothing to do with you. I like them in spite of you. Get over yourself already, you’re not that important to me.”

He sighed, struggling to get his anger under control. Why had he ever had the crazy notion that they
could have a civilized conversation, hopefully with the end result being a mutual agreement to continue the truce? He should have brought Mrs. Summers and Giles to mediate at this meeting.

“Look, you guys had a truce last year. It wasn’t perfect, but you’re both still here and alive. Can we just agree that the truce should continue and then go home? ’Cause I gotta say, this is not my definition of a good time.”

Spike and Buffy eyed each other mistrustfully.

“Fine.” Buffy was the first to agree. “You stay out of my way and I’ll let you live.”

“You don’t attack me and I won’t pull your arms off and beat you to death with them.”

“Great,” Xander said hastily. “We’re all agreed. Nobody attacks the other and we all live happily ever after. We’re done now. Bye.”

He tugged Spike away before either he or Buffy could say anything else. Separately, the two were both prickly by nature. Together, they were like a pair of wild dogs, snarling and snapping at each other with the ever present danger of a real fight developing.

“Not sure this truce is worth giving up my third Slayer,” Spike grumbled as they walked away.

“Hey, you said yourself that she wasn’t worth fighting. Maybe the next one will be more worthy of you,” Xander said reassuringly.

Maybe Senior year wouldn’t be so bad, Xander thought, as he checked the slip of paper with the locker combination for his newly assigned locker. Shifting the books he was carrying to one arm, he spun the lock to clear it and began dialing the combination. Seniors had a lot more freedom to choose which classes they took and since he wasn’t on a college-prep track, he didn’t have to take any more math classes. Plus, Seniors were allowed to have a study period with any faculty member willing to work with them and he’d set it up with Giles for an official study period they would use to continue his demon studies. It made Xander laugh when he thought about the rigidly proper Librarian he’d first met, who’d thought that the solution to Xander’s curiosity was to tell him to mind his own business. Was it Giles who’d changed so much or himself? Probably both, he thought, smiling again as his locker opened on the second try.

He’d signed up for wood shop as he’d planned, even though the class was generally considered to be a joke; a haven for jocks too dumb to pass regular courses. The shop had decent sets of both hand and power tools so, even if the rest of the class coasted along satisfied with creating one simple picture frame over the course of a semester in order to get their passing grades, Xander figured he could actually work there, practicing using the tools and seeing what he could do with them. He had a hodge-podge of other classes to fill out his schedule: English and the required California History class and a couple other subjects.

He’d just finished stowing his new books, including the demonology text he and Giles were working with this week, when a slender hand ran teasingly down his arm and a familiar voice said: “A man who can wear silk well in this haven of badly dressed fashion-victims. You must be new here. Well, it’s your lucky day. I have a free period and I can show you around.”

Actually, it was amazing he recognized the voice. The bright charm had never been aimed in his direction before. Xander bit back the laugh that was threatening to erupt and deepened his voice, trying to disguise it. He kept his face averted, pretending to be searching for something inside the
locker as he answered.

“I don’t really need a guide. The layout seems pretty straightforward.”

“But you’ll miss some of the more interesting places without a knowledgeable guide. And that’s me.”

Xander couldn’t hold back his laugh any longer, not to mention that his attempt at portraying a sexy mystery man would be blown if he didn’t get his face out of the locker soon. Turning, he grinned at Cordelia. “Honestly, Cordy. It’s nice of you to offer but I’ve been getting around just fine for two years without your help.

“Xander?” He honestly didn’t think he rated that level of shock in her voice.

Cordelia stepped back but, to his surprise, didn’t immediately leave. She stood there, hands on her hips, deliberately checking him out. She had to be messing with him but it sure wasn’t her usual way of messing with him.

Crossing her arms under her breasts, Cordy gave him a front seat view of why so many of the boys at school were willing to put up with her. She smiled triumphantly as she saw him scoping out two of her best assets. “Play your cards right and maybe I’ll let you buy me coffee,” she said, tossing her hair back and smiling the smile he’d thought she reserved exclusively for jocks.

“That’s really nice of you to offer - again - but I’m taken.”

“All this and dating too. Who’d have thought it?”

She sauntered away and Xander shook his head. Cordelia Chase had just flirted with him. Damn, Spike was right. He must look good in these clothes. Either that or Cordelia had been possessed over the summer. Naw, not possible. Anyone trying to possess Cordelia would have been sliced to pieces verbally and would have long since abandoned her body for easier prey. He was sticking with his alternate dimension theory. Could there possibly be an alternate dimension where Cordelia was tolerant of the poor and unattractive? He shook his head, hastily abandoning that thought before his brain seized up trying to fathom the incomprehensible idea.

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“Giles! What is that?” Xander was barely inside the library and he was already practically gagging on the smell. It was Friday and he was so skipping their study session and leaving early unless there was a really good explanation for the smell. And a face mask.

“That is what I am trying to ascertain, Xander.” Giles looked like distaste had long since won out over interest. It had to suck being a Watcher at times.

“That is what I am trying to ascertain, Xander.” Giles looked like distaste had long since won out over interest. It had to suck being a Watcher at times.

“Can’t you ascertain without exhibit A? It smells like it died a week ago.”

“It probably did.”

“Huh?”

Giles gestured towards a small cage set up on the central table. From what Xander could see, there
was a really grubby cat inside but he sure wasn’t going closer to check it out.

“It appears to be a dead cat that has been reanimated.”

“Yeuch.”

“That does seem to be the general consensus,” Giles sighed. Xander got the distinct impression he was not the first to comment negatively on the disgusting thing. “I assure you that as soon as I know what caused this phenomenon, I will dispose of the creature.”

“Need help?”

“I would be grateful. Neither Buffy, Willow, or Oz were available, due to the dinner at Buffy’s house to celebrate her return.”

Xander nodded, Oz had mentioned the welcome home dinner party Mrs. Summers had planned for tonight. “If you promise to get rid of that thing first, I’m willing.” They both turned to regard the cat which glared balefully back at them, beginning to make a moaning kind of a growl that was half pathetic, half scary.

“Maybe we can put it in the basement,” Xander suggested.

After stashing the cat in the basement, Giles and Xander returned to the library. Giles turned down Xander’s offer to research alone so that Giles could go to Buffy’s welcome home dinner, saying that he expected it wouldn’t take long. He’d seen something at Buffy’s house when he’d gone there to pick up the cat that had looked vaguely familiar. Some kind of mask Mrs. Summers brought home from the gallery and he thought it might hold the key to whatever had caused the cat to be resurrected.

Xander made a quick call to Spike, smiling as he always did at the reminder that Spike was willing to carry a cell phone so that he and Xander could get a hold of each other. Xander had broached the idea hesitantly the weekend before school, knowing how Spike felt about telephones. He’d been touched that Spike had actually been enthusiastic about the idea, although he’d tried to hide it behind false reluctance. It would help them keep in touch when they were apart. Given how fast problems could arise on the Hellmouth, it had seemed like a good idea.

He quickly briefed Spike on the situation and let him know he’d be at the library for awhile. Spike said he would meet Xander there shortly after dark. Disconnecting, Xander smiled again. Spike liked to walk him home after dark, especially when anything at all unusual was going on in town.

It only took a little over an hour for Giles to find what they were looking for. His low exclamation of triumph caused Xander to look up from the book he was reading, trying to find anything useful about how to destroy an already dead thing that wasn’t a vampire.

“What'cha got?”

Giles looked worried. “It would appear that the mask in Joyce’s room holds the power of a zombie demon, called Ovu Mobani-- the Evil Eye.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it’s not. As we have seen, the mask has the power to raise the dead.”
“And since dead cats are in such demand, I take it that it’s power isn’t limited to animals?”

“No. I suspect the proximity of the dead cat, which Buffy said they found in their basement, awakened the mask.”

That made sense, otherwise they would have been knee deep in resurrected dead things already, given the number of cemeteries in town. “What is Mrs. Summers doing with something like that?”

“She thought it was interesting.” Giles’ sounded exasperated and Xander looked at him in surprise. “Apparently, she brought it home from the gallery to decorate the house. So unbelievably careless.”

“Well, it’s not like she knew what it was,” Xander said reasonably.

“Art dealers should know enough to research the provenance of the artifacts they import. Joyce seems to know nothing about it beyond the fact that it’s from Nigeria. But that is beside the point. We need to destroy the mask immediately. Now that it is active, it will be calling zombies to it. If one of the zombies puts the mask on, they become the demon incarnate.”

“Perfect.” Spike’s voice at the top of the stairs made them turn. “Zombies, eh? Disgusting things and bloody hard to kill.”

“And I’m afraid we may be facing rather a large number of them in fairly short order. According to the book, the mask has a formidable range.”

“Wonderful. So, anythin’ that’s freshly dead enough to still be in one piece is going to be converging on Joyce’s house?” It was obvious Spike had been listening for long enough to grasp the gist of the problem.

“That about sums it up, I’m afraid.”

“Never have liked zombies. Nasty, putrid things. They aren’t natural.”

Giles stared. “And vampires are?”

“Course we are,” Spike answered, sounded affronted. “Don’t see vampires wandering around dropping rotting bits of themselves off where people can trip over them, do you? Vampires are stronger, faster and better healers than humans. Zombies are only stronger. They don’t heal when you injure them and they can’t think their way out of…well, out of the grave, now can they? Without the zombie demon controlling them, they’d just lay there in their coffins ‘til they rotted. Not like vampires. We get up and out on our own.”

“Thrilling as this little compare and contrast session is, maybe we should call the house and warn them.”

“Quite right.” Giles looked mildly embarrassed at having gotten caught up in Spike’s opinion of zombies versus vampires. He hurriedly crossed the room to his office and picked up the phone. Xander slid the book Giles had shown him over to Spike, who quickly scanned the short entry.

“Dammit!” They both looked up as Giles slammed the phone down. “There’s no answer.”

Xander rose to his feet in alarm. “They should be there.”

“I quite agree.”

Giles strode to the book cage and opened it quickly. Stepping inside, he continued. “The zombies
will be irresistibly drawn to the mask which, unfortunately, is hanging on the wall in Joyce’s
deckroom.” He emerged from the cage, holding several axes. “Are you two willing to help? If one of
the zombies gets their hands on the mask, all hell will break loose.”

“Yeah, mate. Toss me an axe.” Giles did and Spike effortlessly fielded it, giving it a quick spin to test
the balance. Giles handed a second axe to Xander who took it hesitantly, not liking the idea of using
an axe on people, even already dead ones. Spike saw his queasiness.

“Xander, you can’t be delicate with zombies. Only way to stop them is to chop them to pieces so
they can’t come after you. Can’t kill them because they’re already dead. Chopping their heads off
just means you have a headless body stumbling around getting in your way. So aim for the legs and
the arms.”

Xander felt sick but nodded his understanding. Mrs. Summers, Willow and Oz were all at the house.
If zombies arrived en mass, they would overwhelm Buffy. The other three would try to help but
Willow and Oz were only skilled with crossbows and those wouldn’t do them any good against
zombies, from what Spike had just said.

“Right. Let’s go.”

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They burst through the door - or they would have if someone hadn’t beaten them to it. Instead they
burst through the splintered pieces of the jamb where the door should have been, throwing
themselves into the melee. Xander set grimly to work with the ax, concentrating on trying to
immobilize the zombies nearest to him. Giles had explained on the drive over as he weaved his small
car through an obstacle course of staggering dead things all heading in the same direction that, once
the mask was destroyed, the zombies would return to being nothing more than corpses.

It was ugly, disgusting work, almost like chopping moving, struggling logs. These things weren’t
vampires or humans, they were grotesque parodies of both: rotting flesh summoned unwillingly from
the grave. Xander had no further qualms about stopping them, there was no way anyone would ever
want to be one of these things. If they had any awareness of themselves at all, he couldn’t imagine
they wouldn’t be grateful for being sent back to the peace of the grave. They were clearly almost
mindless; just dead flesh controlled by the zombie demon. Which meant they weren’t exactly skilled
fighters, relying on numbers and sheer mass to pull people down.

Swinging his ax, Xander gritted his teeth and forced himself to ignore the smells and the gore and the
revulsion he felt as the blade cleaved through flesh and severed limbs. Spike and Giles were right
there, their own blades leaving body parts strewn in their wake as they pushed through the mass of
zombies trying to reach the stairs. Giles had said the mask was upstairs and the zombies appeared to
be headed in that direction, possessing barely enough sense of self-preservation to turn to face the
people attacking them from behind with sharp objects.

Spike wasn’t showing any of his usual glee for battle. His face was… businesslike, as his blade rose
again and again with the nearly tireless strength of a vampire. Giles was transformed, his ruthless
streak apparent as he fought his way savagely through the massed bodies, determined to reach his
Slayer.

They made it to the staircase and Spike fell back a step to guard their rear from the zombies trying to
climb up behind them. Xander and Giles took point, clearing the stairs ahead of them through the
simple expedient of pushing the things over the railing. Hands clawed at their legs through the
railings as they struggled their way upwards and Xander was terrified of losing his balance and
falling in the midst of the dead flesh all around them.
Finally, reaching the top of the staircase, they could see that the bedroom door had been broken open and hear the sound of fighting from inside the room. The few zombies in the hall ignored them, intent on pushing their way into the bedroom. Giles threw himself recklessly after them, yelling for Buffy. “Buffy, destroy the mask! It controls them. You must destroy the mask!”

Somehow, he forced his way through the packed bodies, disappearing through the bedroom door, a half stride ahead of Xander, who grimly followed him through the small gap that Giles had wedged open. Using his axe to clear the way, Xander followed him inside and found himself in bedlam. The room was a seething mass of bodies, struggling and fighting with each other indiscriminately. Xander tried to use his axe, but there were too many bodies, the quarters too tight to use it effectively. Shifting his grip, he used it as a battering ram, trying to shove the bodies away from himself. Hands clawed at him and the smell of rotting flesh almost overwhelmed him. He found he was yelling wordlessly, a defiant scream in the face of horror as he struggled to remain upright and to continue fighting.

Above the yammering of the dead people surrounding him, Xander heard Giles’ voice, shouting triumphantly even as he heard the crash of an axe burying itself in wood and plaster. There was a blinding flash of light and the zombies he’d been pushing against stopped grabbing and clawing at him and Xander stumbled forward to his knees at the unexpected lack of resistance.

Ears ringing in the sudden, deafening silence, Xander blinked rapidly until his vision cleared, hearing only a harsh panting that he gradually became aware was his own ragged breath. The room was empty except for Giles leaning tiredly against the wall and Buffy in the corner with a baseball bat, her back against another door.

Numb, Xander looked around, seeing Willow and Oz beginning to crawl out from under the bed, and Spike appearing in the doorway.

“What the bloody hell?” Spike didn’t sound like himself, his voice filled with bewildered shock.

“Apparently, the zombies fought with each other for the privilege of putting on the mask, so none of them had been able to put it on yet.” Giles gestured towards his axe, buried deeply in the wall, fragments of a dark, polished wood on the floor beneath it. “I was able to destroy the mask, which ended the demon’s hold over the zombies.”

Looking around in dazed surprise, Xander couldn’t help but be relieved that the bodies had inexplicably disappeared with the destruction of the mask. Even his axe blade was clean, showing no trace of the gore that had coated it a moment ago. He had not been looking forward to trying to figure out where the bodies belonged and getting them back there. Even Sunnydale’s cops would have to have noticed a pile of corpses 30 deep on the front lawn.

The house was trashed. Windows broken, furniture smashed, gashes gouged in the wall from misplaced blows - it was going to take a while to get things back in order. Tiredly, he wondered if Mrs. Summers’ insurance covered zombie attacks.

There was a sudden pounding, which broke Buffy out of her frozen immobility. “Mom!” Stepping away from the door she’d been leaning against, she yanked it open, revealing a closet with Mrs. Summers inside.

Stepping shakily into the room, Mrs. Summers stared at them, her eyes wide with terror. Buffy flung her arms around her and the two of them clung together for a long moment.

“Is everyone all right?”
Thank god, Giles was taking things in hand. Xander didn’t think he could speak to save his life.

“There were so many of them.” Willow sounded dazed. “They just kept coming and we couldn’t stop them.”

Oz pulled her down to sit on the bed when it looked like her legs might collapse under her.

Xander heard a quiet voice in his ear. “You all right, luv?”

He nodded speechlessly, and submitted as Spike pulled him to his feet and checked him out. “Looks like just a few scratches, luv. We’ll get them cleaned up when we get home.”

Somehow, that snapped Xander out of his daze and he quickly began to check Spike for injuries. “I’m fine, luv. Buggers couldn’t fight worth spit.”

Xander leaned gratefully into Spike’s strength, vaguely aware of Giles explaining the situation to the others.

“My mask caused this?” Mrs. Summers’ voice was shaky but at least she was talking. Which was more than Xander had managed yet.

“I’m afraid so.” Giles’ voice seemed very far away as he explained again about the zombie demon.

“See, mom. I told you the mask was angry.” Typically, Buffy was recovering first. “Thanks for the assist guys, things were getting a little tight there.”

Buffy didn’t look at them when she said it, but her words included them all. Frankly, it was more than he’d expected and he was too tired to care one way or the other.

“Let’s go home, Spike,” he murmured quietly, for Spike’s ears only.

He felt Spike take the axe he was still mindlessly clinging to from his hands then lead him gently out of the room. Tomorrow would be soon enough to return and help clean up. Right now, it was too much to ask.

He was sickened to the bottom of his soul at the violence that had rampaged all around them, that he had participated in. It didn’t matter that it had been the right thing to do, he hadn’t seen violence on that scale before, much less been part of it. He stumbled after Spike, clinging desperately to his hand, fighting the nausea that threatened, afraid that if he started puking, he wouldn’t stop until his insides were as shredded as his emotions. He was shaking with reaction and so tired he could barely stand. And unbelievably grateful to Spike for his silent support as they walked slowly back to the factory.

“Love you, Spike.”

“I know, Xan. Love you, too.” Cool, firm lips on his forehead seemed to chase away the nightmares that threatened and strong arms held him as he slept.
Chapter 11

Spike lay awake through the night as Xander slept restlessly, holding his boy and soothing away the nightmares each time they began. Eyes watchful in the darkness of their bedroom, Spike worried about whether he’d done the right thing, letting Xander go into battle like that.

His boy had acquitted himself well in the fight, as Spike had known he would. What he hadn’t anticipated was Xander’s reaction in the aftermath. Humans took things so seriously, fretting over decisions made and actions taken in a way that vampires simply… didn’t. For Spike, the battle was over and done - they’d survived, they’d suffered only minor injuries and what was on for tonight. You wouldn’t ever find a vampire worrying today over last night’s victim.

He grimaced. Except Angel, of course. But he wasn’t even an exception to the rule, he had been an aberration and couldn’t really be counted as a vampire, not since he got the bloody soul.

Humans, though. Spike sighed silently. Humans worried themselves sick second guessing their own actions. Rehashing their justification over and over again, debating whether they were right to have killed the thing that had been doing its level best to kill them at the time. He didn’t know how to comfort Xander, how to reassure him that kill or be killed really was as simple as it sounded.

Spike dimly remembered his human existence, remembered being so overwhelmed by ordinary things that he could barely function; worrying if people liked him, if he was going to be thought foolish, what to wear, what to say, how to act. Even for a human, he recognized, he’d been a fairly extreme example of a life wasted on petty worries.

Maybe that’s all he was doing now. After all, Xander hadn’t actually said anything and his boy had been extremely tired. He would see how Xander was when he woke up before borrowing trouble.

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Xander put down his tools and went to sit on the porch steps, too tired even to finish the job properly by reattaching the baseboard. Two days hard work had gotten all of the major damage to the Summers’ house fixed. There was still finishing work left: plaster and painting, but nothing that couldn’t wait. The broken door and shattered windows had all been replaced, the banister repaired, and the holes in the walls patched. It was enough for now.

He woken up Saturday morning, so stiff and sore he thought he’d never be able to crawl out of bed. Spike had gotten him up and into the bathroom, running a nearly scalding hot tub for him then sitting beside the tub as he soaked, gently massaging the muscles strained from the all-out effort of the fight. Xander had been in heaven by the time the water cooled, his soreness eased into nothingness by the strong fingers and hot water.

He wished he could have stayed there all morning, topping off the water to keep it hot and pulling Spike into the tub with him. They’d had sex in the bathtub before, and it had been slippery and sexy and fun: water splashing, Xander laughing and Spike cursing, his usual graceful balance deserting him under the fatal combination of slick porcelain, slippery skin and a deliberately wriggling partner. But guilt for just leaving the others like that last night, abandoning ship and leaving everyone else to clean up, got Xander reluctantly to his feet. He’d kissed Spike, trying to show just how grateful he was for the way Spike had taken care of him, then had made himself leave for the Summers’ house to see what he could do.

Arriving at the house, he’d found Buffy and her mother sweeping up broken glass. From the lack of
progress made, apparently everyone else had just gone to bed too, leaving the clean up for this morning. Finding another broom and pitching in, Xander found himself wondering if the lack of bodies really was a good thing.

There should be bodies to clean up after a major battle, should be visible, tangible reminders of the violence and death. It was too clean and easy otherwise, too easy to forget that the creature you had just killed had once been a human being. Maybe that’s why Buffy was able to kill vampires so easily, because they vanished into dust and left no trace, nothing to feel guilty over. Nothing to remind you that you’d killed a sentient being.

Xander forced himself to stop thinking about it, the zombies had not been sentient, that much had been all too painfully obvious. Dealing with dozens of grotesque, rotting, no longer animated corpses would have been a burden he wouldn’t wish on anyone. Just this once, he was simply going to be grateful that the evidence of what had happened had all vanished with the destruction of the mask.

Ok, not all of the evidence, he thought ruefully as he dumped yet another dustpan full of glass shards into the garbage can they’d brought into the living room for that purpose.

He wasn’t alone in working to clean up the house. The entire group who’d survived the zombies had spent much of the weekend at the house helping clean up the mess and put the house to order. Even Spike had come over last night and helped, shifting some of the heavier things back into place and helping Xander replace the windows. Buffy had been surprisingly quiet the entire weekend, rarely speaking to Xander and when she did, her voice had been carefully neutral. She’d deliberately avoided whatever room Spike was in at the moment, going out of her way not to be anywhere near him. As far as Xander knew, she hadn’t said a single hostile word to, or about, Spike all weekend. Which was a small miracle in itself.

When Spike wasn’t there, she’d helped Xander with the heavier jobs wordlessly, holding boards in place as he nailed them and lifting the new door for him as he slid it onto its hinges. In turn, he had limited his conversation to necessary talk about the repair they were currently working on. Amazingly, they had gone two whole days without exchanging one unpleasant sentence.

In similar fashion, he and Willow got through the weekend. He could see the hurt and jealousy in Willow’s eyes whenever she walked into a room and found him talking easily with Oz or Giles or Mrs. Summers but that was nothing new. Willow’s eyes had followed him silently all week at school, seeing how Xander was no longer a moody loner, how others were approaching him and how Xander had been willing to talk to anyone. Anyone but her.

He’d thought Willow was going to lose it when she’d seen him talking to Cordelia and her minions, as he’d taken to calling them, even to their faces - they reminded him of the minions at Spike’s Court in the way they fawned on Cordelia and did everything she said, the comparison was irresistible. It wasn’t like he wanted to be friends with Cordy, much less any of her hangers-on, but he was apparently a novelty to Sunnydale’s unofficial queen - someone who snarked right back at her and didn’t give a damn what she thought of him. Apparently, no one else challenged her the way he did, and they had had several highly entertaining sessions, walking through the halls exchanging barbed remarks about each other’s taste in dates, clothes, and friends. It was driving Cordelia crazy that she couldn’t figure out who he was dating. Xander was still trying to decide if he should introduce her to Spike. He hadn’t been able to make up his mind about whether Spike would be entertained or homicidal at meeting the cheerleader, so he was holding off for now.

He didn’t care what Willow thought about him talking with Cordelia, or Michael from his English class, or even - bizarrely - Larry, who had apparently seriously mellowed over the summer and decided he liked Xander, for reasons that totally escaped Xander. Larry was one of the jocks taking
wood shop but he not only hadn’t given Xander a hard time, he’d been asking Xander to show him how to work some of the power tools, saying he wanted to do more than just the minimum required to pass.

Xander had had enough of being a friendless loner to last him a lifetime. He would rather walk through the school halls with people, talking and joking about meaningless things, than walk alone with his head down avoiding everyone like he had last year. He’d learned who he was and what was important to him and, thanks to Spike, he was now dressing in ways that apparently said “confident and sexy” not “loser” and, once he got over his surprise, it amused him no end that people who had thought he was beneath them all their lives suddenly found him worth talking to. He wasn’t taking the new attention he was receiving seriously, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t enjoying being somewhat popular for the first time in his life.

What Willow couldn’t seem to grasp was that she was responsible for Xander’s unwillingness to forgive and forget. If he was ever convinced that she wouldn’t put Spike in harm’s way without a second thought, that she wouldn’t be happier if Spike was dead, he would be willing to see if they could salvage something of their one-time friendship. It would never be the same again between them, but he had long since mourned that fact and accepted it. The Willow he’d been friends with throughout his childhood was tucked safely away into a corner of his heart alongside Jesse; always cherished and remembered, but gone irretrievably. The person who wore Willow’s face was someone he would be willing to get to know, if she in turn was willing to accept Spike. Until he was convinced that she was doing more than mouthing the words she knew he wanted to hear, he wasn’t going to bend. It annoyed him that she still seemed to think he was friends with Oz and Giles and Mrs. Summers to get back at her and Buffy somehow but he wasn’t going to not be friends with them just because she was paranoid.

Mrs. Summers had been embarrassingly grateful to all of them, insisting on cooking dinner for everyone on Saturday night, to both thank them and to celebrate their survival. Amazingly, no-one had been seriously hurt in the battle although everyone had bruises and scratches from the zombies. Mrs. Summers herself hadn’t been injured at all. Apparently Buffy had shoved her into the closet as soon as everyone had made it upstairs. Buffy had taken up position in front of the door, even as Oz had pulled Willow under the bed, defending it with the baseball bat her mother kept by the bed for burglars. Knowing that Mrs. Summers was the type to have waded into the battle unarmed, trying to protect her daughter, Xander was deeply grateful that Buffy had kept her mother safe.

They were all tired from working to clean and repair the damage and the dinner was a subdued gathering. Thankfully, everyone had behaved themselves and their deliberate politeness seemed to have bled some of the simmering animosity out of the group. Even Spike had not been deliberately provoking towards anyone despite how he felt about Buffy and Willow. If seeing Spike sitting with his arm around Xander on the couch caused Willow’s lips to tighten, no one else reacted at all. It was only later that Xander realized they had just quietly come out to Mrs. Summers without any fuss. He’d suspected she’d already guessed but now he didn’t have to worry about telling her officially.

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“Xander, can I talk to you?”

Xander looked up at the sound of Buffy’s unusually tentative voice. He shrugged. “Sure.”

She led him to an empty classroom and leaned against the teacher’s desk, facing him. “I wanted to apologize.”

“Huh?” Whatever he’d been expecting, that hadn’t been it.
Buffy looked at him and repeated: “I’m sorry.”

“Ok, why?” He wasn’t being sarcastic, there was such a long history of issues between them, it could be for almost anything. And he probably owed her some apologies as well. Make that definitely.

“When I first got back into town, I really resented what you’d been doing over the summer.” She held up a hand to stop him and he obediently closed his mouth, letting her finish. “Pretty much everything you’d been doing. That you’d told my mother about me being the Slayer, that you’d introduced her to Spike, even that you were working at the house all summer.” She stopped, her eyes ashamed. “It felt like everything you’d done was criticizing me: I hadn’t told my mother about being the Slayer, I wasn’t there to help her do the yard work, I’d run away and left her all alone. Every time I turned around, my mother was telling me how great you and Spike were and it really pissed me off.”

She looked away and Xander waited, since it was obvious she wasn’t finished. Her voice was quiet and desolate sounding when she spoke again. “I thought when I came back, everything would be… simple again.” She glanced at him briefly, her eyes baffled and hurt, before looking away again. “But nothing went like I thought it would. It’s all… wrong, somehow.” She sighed and seemed to almost be talking to herself. “Willow wouldn’t admit that she was mad at me, she just kept saying we were fine, and we weren’t. Giles was happy I was back but so disappointed in me he couldn’t help showing it even though he tried not to. And Mom wasn’t sure how to behave around me, so she was either trying too hard to be normal or freaking out every time I was out of her sight. I didn’t know how to convince her that I wasn’t going to leave again.”

She sighed again and Xander couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. She’d run away from facing her problems and found they were all still here, plus twice as many new ones when she returned.

“And everywhere I turned, you were being shoved into my face as a shining example of just how badly I screwed up.” Her eyes met Xander’s steadily. “I know I screwed up. But it was easier to blame you than accept that. I’m sorry,” she repeated. “As much as I’d like to, it’s not right to blame you for problems I created. I wanted you to know that I appreciate what you did to help mom out.”

It was the most honest Buffy had ever been with him and Xander tried to reciprocate. “It wasn’t a criticism of you, Buffy. I mean, yeah, I didn’t understand how you could run away like that, but I wasn’t helping your mom out to show you up.” He really didn’t want to explain the guilt that had originally sent him to the Summers’ house. He barely understood it himself.

“I know. It just took me awhile to see that.” For the first time, a hint of a smile crossed Buffy’s face. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m still pissed off that you told her about me being the Slayer, but I can deal. And honestly, it’s kind of made things easier not having to sneak out all the time. Plus, mom washes the bloodstains out now, and that’s really of the good.”

Xander was shocked for a moment until he realized that she was joking. “I did wonder about that. Not the bloodstains but why you wouldn’t tell her just so you didn’t have to climb out the window every night.” He grinned to let her know he was joking too.

“I’ve gotten so used to it, it seems normal. Once, I even climbed in the window when she was out of town. I forgot I could just walk through the door.” A shadow crossed her face and her smile died.

Xander thought about telling her that he still resented her endangering Spike but decided to let it go. With Angel out of the picture permanently, it wasn’t like the situation would come up again with her. With every other demon, Buffy had always been more than willing to fight her hardest.
Buffy pulled herself out of her solitary thoughts first. Shaking her head, dispelling whatever memory had caused the momentary sadness, she said: “I’m still not sure about the thing you’ve got going with Spike but I guess it’s not really my business. So long as he honors the truce, we’re good.”

“He’ll honor it.” Xander had no doubts about that.

“I can’t honestly say that I like you, Xander, but you really helped out with the Invasion of the Dead People and over the summer. I know I can get kind of cranky with people I don’t like and I’ll try not to with you. But just so you know - that doesn’t go for Spike. I’m sorry, but he really gets on my nerves.”

“Spike can take care of himself. Hit back at him verbally all you want; he enjoys it. As long as you don’t try to hurt him, we’re good.”

“You guys come in handy, sometimes. Any time you want to join in research or whatever…”

Xander recognized a olive branch when he saw one. “Thanks. I don’t know about the daily stuff, but if you need us for anything major, just ask.”

Buffy nodded and hesitated. Finally, she just said, “see you,” and walked about of the classroom. Xander was glad he wasn’t the only one who didn’t know how to gracefully leave an awkward conversation.

He had to give Buffy points, though. Once she’d finally gotten her head out of her ass, she was as straightforward with an apology as she was about her antagonism.

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The weekly Court was winding down when Anthony indicated that there was a vampire who wished to present himself to the Master of the Territory. Both Jose and Anthony had become adept at sorting out which vampires wanting to present themselves to the Court were worth bringing to Spike’s attention and which ones they should deal with themselves. Not surprising, really, Spike’s criteria were pretty simple: if the vampire was less than a century old, they almost certainly weren’t worth wasting his time on.

The slender, black vampire who entered the Court was a surprise. Wearing a silk suit and sporting a thin mustache and earrings in both ears, the vampire was not so much elegant as slick. More to the point, he was familiar.

“Trick. Long time.”

“Spike.” Trick inclined his head with something less than genuine respect. “I hadn’t heard you’d set yourself up here in suburbia.”

“Thought you were still Kakistos’ lackey.” If Kakistos was in town, that would mean trouble.

“Past tense, my friend. Kakistos is old school. Which means boring to you and me. I decided it was time to leave him and move on. The modern vampire can live globally now, we don’t need to be tied down to a territory, to the old ways, any longer.”

“So you just happened to choose my town in your global unlife?” Spike didn’t believe that for a second.

Trick was an odd vampire in many ways. Turned shortly after the American Civil War, he was about the same age as Spike. Trick had been ruled for his first decades by human racial concerns that
should have stopped being an issue for him the moment he stopped being of the human race. If legend held true, Trick had systematically hunted down and killed every member of the family that had held his own family in slavery for three generations. Spike shook his head at the idea. Most vampires fed off their own families and friends in the first weeks and months after being turned - sometimes to kill off the reminders of their life as a human, sometimes getting revenge for real or imagined slights against themselves, sometimes just because they were the easiest prey available. Fledges didn’t generally go around avenging social injustices committed against their families. It was too abstract a concept for creatures still adjusting to a world where the taste of blood and the scent of fear were a drug to their newly hypersensitive senses. Spike had never been able to decide if that made Trick more or less dangerous than the average vampire, although he did know that Trick generally avoided violence these days, relying on his intellect rather than his muscles to solve problems. Part of his “modern vampire” shtick, no doubt.

“When I decided to head out on my own, I ran a nationwide statistical analysis and hello darkness. Your little town makes DC look like… Mayberry. And ain’t nobody saying boo about it.” Trick was studying the Court as he spoke, eyes darting around the room and cataloguing the vampires inside. “Thought I might fit in here, have some fun. I mean, admittedly, your quaint little burg is not a haven for the brothers, strictly the Caucasian persuasion you’ve got here in the Dale but you’ve just got to stand up and salute that body count.”

Spike had forgotten how Trick loved to hear himself talk and he hadn’t missed the little digs hidden in Trick’s seemingly aimless ramblings: referring to Spike’s territory as small and quaint and that he hadn’t heard that Spike was Master here. Not to mention the remark about modern vampires no longer holding territory. There spoke a vampire who had no hope of ever fighting for, and winning, a territory of their own.

“You askin’ to join the Court?”

Trick shook his head. “No, just introducing myself to the local Master, like a proper vampire. If I’d wanted to be a part of a Court, I’d have stayed with Kakistos.”

“Fair enough. Got plenty of minions as it is.” Spike smirked at the look on Trick’s face as Spike blithely lumped him with all the other useless minions falling all over themselves to join his Court. Ignoring Trick’s glare, he got to his feet. “The rules are simple in my territory. Don’t get involved in anything that will call attention to yourself or cause trouble for anyone but yourself. If you intend to tackle the Slayer, do it one-on-one, and don’t start a war. Clear?”

Trick nodded and Spike studied him narrowly. He’d have to keep an eye on Trick, make sure he didn’t bring trouble down on Spike. Maybe he’d put Michael on it. If the minion did well, it would show he was ready to become a Lieutenant. The Court had grown enough for a third Lieutenant. If he failed again, like he had with Ares, there wouldn’t be another second chance for him.
Chapter 12

Considering the town was situated smack on top of a Hellmouth, you’d think that Sunnydale would be featured a bit more prominently in California history, Xander thought grumpily as he flipped through the textbook, looking for any mention of Sunnydale. California history was proving to be by far his dullest class, primarily because Mr. Newman had clearly been drafted into teaching the class and had no interest whatsoever in the subject material. Which pretty much made him the dullest teacher on the planet, at least in that particular class; for all Xander knew, he might be a whiz in his regular botany classes. Not being interested in botany, Xander had never had Mr. Newman as a teacher before so he couldn’t say.

He closed the book and pushed it away from him, glancing hopefully across the table. “Are you sure we can’t fool around, just a little?”

Spike shot him an amused look. “Not unless you want wolf-boy over there to go absolutely nuts tryin’ to join in,” he said patiently. “Now, personally, I’m always up for a three-way, but I’m not sure you’re ready for that, luv.”

Xander looked over at wolf-Oz, who was prowling restlessly and occasionally throwing himself at the bars of the cage in what had to be frustration. “I know, I just didn’t think this would be so boring with you here.” For something to do, he strolled over to look into the book cage, then jumped as Oz threw himself at the bars again. He hastily stepped back from the cage, and returned to the table with a sigh, peering over Spike’s shoulder at the book he was reading, frowning at the oddly shaped letters. Whatever language it was, it sure wasn’t English so he couldn’t even annoy Spike by reading over his shoulder.

“I feel bad for him,” he commented idly. “I wish there was some way we could release him into the wild every month so he could chase rabbits and stuff.”

Spike didn’t look up from his book, not even when Xander put his arms around him and nuzzled into his neck teasingly. “Don’t fancy getting a call from Canada to come pick up your stray mutt.”

“No way. Utah, maybe, but there’s no way he’d make it to Canada.”

“There’s a thought. Point him in the direction of Las Vegas. Lots of useless humans to munch on there.”

“Please tell me you’re not speaking from personal experience.”

Spike gave him a wicked look and Xander put his hands over his ears. “Never mind, just pretend I didn’t ask,” he said hastily.

Everything had been going remarkably smoothly lately. There had been very little happening on the demonic side of things, other than a new vampire in town that Spike was a bit worried about but who hadn’t actually done anything yet. Spike was having the vampire watched but so far it looked like he was just setting up a place to live in a house in the nicer part of town. When he’d heard that, Spike had made some disgusted remarks about Trick going soft, living like a human. Given that, at the time, Spike had been ensconced on the couch with Xander watching tv, Xander still thought he was completely justified in finding the comments entertaining.

He smiled, remembering Spike’s reaction to Xander laughing at him and telling him that the vampire formerly known as William the Bloody was just a big old house-vamp now himself. The words were
barely out of his mouth before Spike had him pinned to the floor and was demonstrating just how evil he still was. When Xander could breathe again, he’d suggested they continue the discussion in the bed and Spike had refused, saying William the Bloody didn’t stop ravishing mouthy captives so they could be more comfortable.

The rug burn he’d gotten that night had been totally worth it.

School was settling into normal class routines and Xander had people to talk to in every one of his classes. Buffy and he weren’t exactly hanging out buddies but she was making an effort to be friendly, even asking him about where he’d learned to fight. Apparently she’d seen him do something while fighting the zombies that had impressed her, although Xander wasn’t sure exactly what it was. He really wasn’t interested in analyzing fighting styles, or the name and origin of any particular move, he just wanted to know enough to stay alive. He told her that Spike was training him and Buffy actually asked questions and seemed interested. It was the longest pleasant conversation they’d had since… well, pretty much ever. Not really surprising she was interested in fighting. Occupational hazard, he supposed.

Willow and he… they were still tiptoeing through the minefield of their former friendship. Things had improved a little between them but it was more like a cease-fire than any kind of reconciliation. Willow no longer stared at him resentfully when he was talking to other people and in general, they both pretty much tried to act like they were just casual acquaintances who had no history whenever they were thrown together by class, or research at the library, or whatever. They both still avoided each other when they could but Xander was genuinely pleased to see her walking through the halls and talking to people other than Oz and Buffy. For a long time, they had seemed to be her only friends. And ok, that was really a pot criticizing the kettle and all that, considering his own loner status last year, but he’d been worried about the way she’d been clinging to Buffy as her only friend. This year, in addition to Buffy, Willow was spending a lot of time with Amy Madison.

Seeing Willow and Amy walking through the halls, heads together, whispering and giggling, Xander had even wondered fleetingly if they were flirting with each other. He’d abandoned the ridiculous idea almost immediately - just because he was in a gay relationship didn’t mean everyone he knew was suddenly gay. Next thing, he’d been assuming that Larry was flirting with him, or that Giles and Snyder were doing it. The thought of Snyder with an eager Giles responding to a come-hither look was so off-putting - ok, let’s face it, so downright stomach turning - that Xander had vowed he was never going to speculate on anyone’s love life ever again. Snyder, yeesh! If his brain kept throwing images like that at him, he’d never have sex again.

He had been volunteered for Oz-watch tonight when Willow and Buffy had both told Giles they were busy and couldn’t do it. When he’d asked Oz about it, Oz told him that he preferred to have someone on watch on wolf nights to make sure nothing went wrong. Oz said that he didn’t ever want to wake up in the woods again, wondering what he’d done while he was wolfed out, and Xander could understand and sympathize. Oz had adjusted really well to his wolf side but he still worried about things going wrong. Spending a night sitting up in the library keeping watch seemed a small thing to do to reassure Oz.

Spike, on the other hand, had strongly disapproved, not liking the idea of Xander sitting alone in the school library with only a flimsy cage door between himself and a werewolf that Spike knew Xander wouldn’t want to kill. He grumbled about the Watcher being responsible for keeping an eye on wolf-boy, not a bunch of teenagers. Xander had just pointed out that Giles always took one of the three nights, but wasn’t up to staying up three nights in a row, especially when the full moon came during the middle of the week, like this one.

Spike had insisted on sitting Oz watch with Xander, which had sounded like a lot more fun when the
vampire had proposed the idea than it had turned out to be. Not that Spike had given Xander a choice about it; he’d just announced that, if Xander was going to be sitting with the wolf, he was staying with Xander, end of debate. Unfortunately, Spike had inspected the cage suspiciously and immediately afterwards told Xander firmly, and in so many words, that rutting around on the tables in front of the werewolf was a very bad idea. Apparently, Spike thought the cage wasn’t strong enough to hold Oz if he ever got really angry or excited. Xander had tried to convince Spike that they could make out safely in front of Oz, but Spike had pointed out that werewolves were easily capable of smelling pheromones and very drawn to sexual energy and he knew that Xander would claim it had killed the mood if Spike had to stop fooling around in order to kill Oz. That had pretty much ended the discussion.

So here he was, reduced to reading boring history homework, stuck sitting with a vampire who refused to even play footsie with him in front of the werewolf. Spike’s reputation for being evil was hitting a serious low, in Xander’s opinion.

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“Hey, luv. Wake up.”

Xander stirred drowsily then settled down again as he felt Spike running his hand through Xander’s hair. “Mmmm, don’t stop,” he mumbled.

“Gotta wake up, pet.”

Lifting his head blearily from Spike’s thigh, Xander blinked as he looked around the dark room. “What time is it?”

“Almost 6.”

Xander groaned and dropped his head down again. Spike chuckled. “Need you to wake up, luv. Time for me to head out of here before the sun’s up.”

“Right, I’m up.”

“Looks a lot like you’re still asleep. Can stay, if you want me to.”

“No, I’m good. You should get home so you can sleep.” Xander reluctantly pushed himself upright, groaning as stiff muscles protested a night spent on the library table. “Next time, we bring an air mattress. Give me two minutes in the bathroom and I’ll be awake.” Peering through the darkness at the cage, he asked: “Is Oz ok?”

“Mutt fell asleep ‘bout an hour ago. Not too impressive as weres go.”

Xander yawned, beginning to shuffle sleepily out of the library towards the bathroom. “He’s young, I’m sure he’ll be up to your standards when he’s older.”

Splashing cold water on his face helped a little, but Xander wished he could take a shower. Heading back to the library, he considered skipping school that day, but he wanted to finish the project he was working on in shop. He was making a picture frame for Buffy as a peace offering. He’d thought about carving a batch of stakes for her but his imagination had immediately pictured her staking Spike with a stake he’d carved and he’d abandoned that idea with a shudder. He had enough nightmares without adding that one to the mix. Since half the jocks in wood shop were working on picture frames, it had amused him to start one of his own. If the inlaying he was trying to do came out well, he was going to make several of them and give them out as gifts at Christmas.
“I’m awake now, Spike.”

“Want me to stay with you until the Watcher gets his arse here?”

“No, it’s ok. Thanks for doing this with me.”

Spike slid into his duster. “Tell the Watcher you’re not doin’ this again unless he reinforces the door on the bloody cage.”

“I will.” Spike was over-protective, not paranoid. If he thought the cage wasn’t strong enough to hold, it probably wasn’t. Giving Spike a quick kiss, he asked: “See you after school?”

“Turnin’ into bloody Ozzie & Harriet.”

“Who?”

Spike groaned. “Ignorant wanker.”

Xander grinned at him. “Wouldn’t need to be a wanker if you weren’t scared of a little bitty werewolf.”

“Oi!”

“You’re the one who ruined all my plans for last night,” Xander reminded him. “Gonna have to make it up to me tonight.”

“Make it up to you right now,” Spike threatened and Xander retreated around the table, laughing. “Git.”

“Love you, too, Spike.”

Spike left, still muttering threats about what he planned to do to Xander that evening and Xander hoped that the vampire intended to follow through on his threats. He peeked in on Oz but the wolf was still curled up asleep. Oz generally slept through the morning transition back to human. Was the wolf aware of the pending change the way Oz was? Wondering if it would be rude to ask, Xander moved away from the cage, walking restlessly around the library looking for something to do as he resisted the temptation to settle back down and fall asleep again.

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“Good morning, Xander. How did everything go last night?”

“All quiet on the wolf front,” Xander reported, looking up from the demonology text he was leafing through for no better reason than it had cool pictures. Giles was entering the library, newspaper tucked under one arm and a cup of tea in his hand. Willow followed him in carrying a pink box.

“I brought donuts,” Willow said brightly, showing off the box. “Is Oz awake yet?”

“Present and awake,” Oz answered for himself from behind Xander. He was just finishing buttoning up his shirt as he walked over to stand beside Willow.

“Hey, Oz! I brought donuts to make up for leaving you alone last night.”

“Not a problem.” Oz kissed her lightly. “But donuts are good.”

Xander wondered if Willow had been drinking coffee that morning. She was almost bouncing with
excitement, her eyes sparkling and she couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Oz noticed it to. “Good night, I take it?”

“Great night. I got all of my errands done and it’s like this big load off my mind. Not that I didn’t miss you…” her fingers twined with Oz’s and he smiled at her indulgently, reaching a black-nailed hand up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

Feeling like an intruder, Xander cleared his throat. “Can anyone have a donut or are they all for Oz?”

“Oh,” Willow jumped. “Of course, donuts for all.” She set the box down and they all reached for a donut. “Where did Giles go? I got a jelly-filled one for him.” Willow looked around and saw that Giles had already retreated to his office. “I guess we were a little too couple-y for him.”

“Not at all,” Giles said. “Certainly not enough to make me forgo a jelly donut. Have you seen Buffy this morning?”

“Nope, but I’m sure she’s fine, just running a little bit late. I’ll take notes for her if she’s late for first period.”

“Willow, is everything all right?”

Xander was beginning to wonder that himself. This was more than just over-caffeinated Willow, if he didn’t know better, he’d almost swear she was high on something. Which was impossible. Willow was totally anti-drug, she rarely even took aspirin.

“Everything’s fine. Peachy, in fact. A fruit-filled morning.”

Giles shook his head. “I think I would suggest a bit less caffeine when you’ve been up late.”

“I like you giddy,” Oz contributed.

“You all should probably head for your classes,” Giles nodded at the clock. “Willow, if you don’t mind, ask Buffy to stop by during a free period to discuss tonight’s patrol.”

“Will do.”

They left Giles to go to class, Xander snagging another donut on the way out. “See you guys later,” he said, “thanks for the donuts, Willow.”

They parted, heading for different classes and Xander yawned, thinking that if he was going to do Oz watch again, he would need to take up coffee drinking himself.

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As the day wore on, Xander was sure something was going on. Buffy and Willow were in full-on girl mode, heads together, whispering as they walked between classes. Willow still had that glow of happiness about her and it was beginning to seriously freak Xander out. She looked like the stereotype of someone who’d had sex last night. He really hated the idea that she might be cheating on Oz but he knew for a fact that she and Oz hadn’t done anything last night. Not together anyway. Oz didn’t seem worried and Xander wasn’t about to say anything, not when he didn’t have anything more than suspicion to go on. Who knows, maybe Buffy had gotten lucky with her new guy last night and Willow was just in match-maker heaven. She hadn’t exactly been subtle about pushing Buffy at that Scott guy.

Deciding once again that other people’s love lives were something he didn’t want to know about,
Xander gathered his books for his study period with Giles.

“Xander, are you absolutely sure Oz was secure all last night?” Giles looked worried when Xander arrived at the library and his voice was anxious as he greeted Xander.

“Absolutely. Spike kept watch when I was sleeping.”

“Is there any possibility that Spike fell asleep on watch?”

Xander looked at him in disbelief. “Spike? No. He woke me up before he left, so Oz was guarded the entire time. Why?”

“A student was killed last night. The newspaper reports that he was horribly mauled.”

“It wasn’t Oz.” Xander was positive. Spike would never have fallen asleep because he had been there last night to protect Xander, not Oz. “Who died?”

“Oh, a...a student named Jeff Walken. Oz apparently knew him.”

The name didn’t ring a bell with Xander and he focused on Oz. “Did you tell Oz it couldn’t have been him?”

“I suggest you tell him yourself, if you don’t mind missing our study session today. Despite my reassurances, he was worried, which is understandable.”

“On it. See you later.” Xander gathered up his book and went in search of Oz.

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It took him awhile to track Oz down but Xander finally found him in one of the small music rooms behind the auditorium. Oz was holding his guitar but his hands were still on the strings. He was staring blindly at the blank walls, lost in thought and Xander hesitated for a long minute before tapping on the door. He didn’t wait for Oz to respond, just stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Hey, Oz. Are you ok?”

Oz shrugged. “Not really.”

Xander came right to the point. “You didn’t get out last night.”

“Pretty much knew that, but thanks.” Oz glanced at him briefly. “I knew Jeff. We were in jazz band together last year.”

“Oh.” Sitting down beside Oz on the table, Xander didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.” After a pause, he asked hesitantly: “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not much to say. I really hate this town sometimes.”

“Right there with you, man.”

They sat together in silence for a long time, remembering lost friends.

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It was full dark and they had almost reached the mansion when Spike stopped abruptly, one arm
thrown out to bar Xander’s passage.

Xander had been filling Spike in on their efforts to figure out what had killed two people connected with the school. First Jeff, then the school counselor, Mr. Platt, had been found mauled to death in his office towards the end of the day. Spike had been very unhappy at the idea of a killer stalking the school during daylight hours when he couldn’t protect Xander. Whatever it was that was killing people, it obviously could move around during the day as well as the night, and was inconspicuous enough to kill someone in their office at the school without being seen.

At Spike’s sudden stop and warning gesture, Xander froze obediently, the words dying in his throat, knowing Spike had sensed something. Xander couldn’t hear anything but the normal quiet suburban sounds during the long tense silence that followed, as Spike stood a half a step in front of him, scanning the area around them with all of his senses.

“Somethin’s been here,” he said finally, his voice quiet. “Think they’re gone now, but best be careful.”

Suiting action to words, he pulled a knife out of his boot and handed it to Xander. With Spike in the lead, they slipped into the mansion, entering silently through the already open door.

Some kind of struggle had taken place inside the mansion. The training mats that covered the floor were knocked out of place and the rack of axes and crossbows had been smashed, although none of the weapons seemed to be missing. Spike grabbed two axes from the mess and handed one to Xander, automatically sliding the knife Xander returned to him back into his boot.

A quick search of the mansion turned up nothing. The struggle had apparently been confined to the main room and the rest of the mansion was deserted. As they made their way back to the living room, Xander asked: “What do you think happened?”

“Dunno, luv.” Spike was still tensely alert, not relaxing his guard at all, despite the seeming quiet.

“Do you suppose it could just be ordinary burglars? The house does kind of look empty from the street. Maybe they got ticked off that there was nothing to steal.” Xander didn’t want to even suggest it could be whatever had killed Jeff Walken and Mr. Platt. They had so little information to go on, just that whatever it was, it was stronger than human, probably had claws, and had killed both during the day and the night. Willow had hacked into the morgue computer and confirmed that both bodies had been similarly mauled and there were no obvious signs of bite marks. They simply didn’t have enough information to narrow it down to anything in particular.

Spike shook his head, his eyes sweeping the room restlessly. “If this was just vandalism, they would have used the weapons to destroy the walls and furniture. Probably pissed on the floor as well. Nothing’s missing and nothing’s really damaged, this was something else.”

Spike crouched down by the weapons rack, his slender fingers sifting through the debris. Xander watched, puzzled, as Spike occasionally picked up a piece of broken wood and sniffed it, his expression turning first shocked, then grim.

He stood abruptly, dropping the last piece he’d smelled. “Need to get you back home, luv.”

“Spike?”

Spike hustled him out the door and pulled him along the street until Xander was practically running to keep up. “Spike?” he asked again.

“Promise I’ll explain later, Xander. Right now, there’s something I have to take care of. Won’t lie to
you, luv, it could get dangerous. Need you to stay inside the factory tonight.” Spike stopped for a moment and turned to face him. “Xander, promise me you won’t leave the factory until morning.” His eyes were frighteningly intense. “I’ll be back before dawn, if possible and I’ll explain then.”

“Can’t I help?” Xander wasn’t sure he wanted to get involved in whatever had Spike so on edge but he had to offer.

Spike’s quick head shake put an end to that idea. “Need you to be safe, luv. And you wouldn’t be able to keep up with me. I’ve got to find the thing that was at the mansion tonight.”

“Is it the thing we’ve been hunting? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Later. Do you promise?”

“All right,” Xander agreed reluctantly.

Spike began walking quickly again, still obviously watching for danger. Spike was always alert to his surroundings but this was different. This was red-alert-this-is-no-drill combat readiness and Xander’s own unease grew to near panic levels.

Arriving back at the apartment, Spike left Xander in the kitchen and told him to wait. Taking the seldom used back entrance into the factory, he returned almost immediately with Jose following hesitantly behind him. Xander was astonished at the sight of the other vampire. None of the vampires of Spike’s Court had ever been allowed in the apartment before.

“Jose’s going to sit with you ‘til I come back. If I’m not back before dawn…” he held up a hand to forestall Xander’s automatic protest. “I’ll try to be back, but if I’m not, Jose is going to stay here in the apartment until I do get back.”

The fear that had been growing steadily in Xander was now almost choking him. “What’s going on Spike?” he asked sharply. “Tell me, or I’m going with you.”

Spike was across the room in one stride, his arms going around Xander tightly. “It’ll be all right, luv.”

“I’m serious, Spike. Talk to me or I’ll just imagine worse things than could possibly be really happening.”

Spike sighed, holding him, and Xander knew that Spike could feel his heart pounding and feel the slight tremors that shook his body, as he clung to Spike.

Pushing back slightly, Spike looked steadily at him. “Two people were at the mansion recently, Buffy and Angelus.”

Xander stared at him, shaking his head dazedly. “That’s not possible. Is it?”

“Dunno how, but they were there.”

“But…” Xander shot a quick look at Jose, not sure how much the other vampire should be hearing. “Willow did the spell, it shouldn’t be that big a deal, right?”

“Hell dimensions are tricky, Xander. Time moves differently. He could have been there for years, even centuries. All we know is that him and the Slayer appear to have gotten into a fight. That doesn’t say good things about the state he’s in. No dust, so she didn’t win.”
“She was at school today.” Xander said, thinking quickly. “The school has basement access, could Angel be what’s been killing people? I’m pretty sure Buffy knew both of them. Jeff was a friend of that Scott guy she’s been dating and I think she’s been seeing the school counselor.”

Spike nodded. “Anythin’s possible. Dunno what any of this means. But if it’s Angelus, I’m not risking him getting his hands on you again.”

Xander agreed with that. Oh boy, did he agree with that. For one moment, all he could feel was Angelus’ weight pinning him down, cruel hands twisted painfully in his hair, the sadistic voice purring threats into his ear.

“Xander! Not going to happen, luv. Give you my word.” Spike’s gentle shake brought him back to the present and Xander nodded. Spike’s voice in his ear erased the last hint of Angelus’ as he whispered, “Love you, Xander.”

“Love you, Spike. Be careful.”

Spike nodded, kissing him hard, then turned to face Jose, who was discretely looking at the far wall. Pinning him with a cold glare, Spike growled: “Don’t leave him alone for a second and nothing comes in here until I’m back. If he has so much as a scratch when I return, you will beg me to stake you before I’m done.”

“If he has a scratch, it will be because I am already dust, Master Spike.” Jose’s voice was calm and Spike nodded, accepting the pledge. He looked at Xander for a long moment, then was gone out the door in a swirl of black leather.

Xander and Jose looked at each other. “So, tv or poker?” Xander offered, knowing he wasn’t going to be able to sleep until Spike got back.

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Spike went back to the mansion, for lack of a better place to start. It wasn’t like he was a bloodhound who could follow a cold trail by smell alone. Standing in the main room, he stretched out his senses to their limits, inhaling deeply, mouth open, tasting the scents that came to him. Disregarding the familiar smells of himself and Xander, he concentrated of the faint traces of the Slayer and his Sire.

There was a hint of the coppery tang of blood still present, Slayer blood. A couple of the splinters of wood from the broken rack had traces of blood, which meant that the Slayer was most likely the body that had smashed into the weapons rack, propelled by demonic strength. Some of the scattered training mats bore marks resembling charcoal dust, which carried a faint reek of brimstone.

Angelus’ trunk, still tucked away in the back of the bedroom closet, had been hurriedly rifled through. The souvenirs his Sire had somehow managed to keep over the centuries were tossed everywhere: some of Darla’s silk underwear; an old doll Drusilla had cherished, its lace-edged dress faded with age; a pair of reading glasses Spike had thought he’d lost before he left England for the first time, plus dozens of things Spike didn’t recognize. He sorted through the mess, straightening things and tucking them back inside the trunk with nostalgic fingers. He hadn’t gone through Angelus’ things after his Sire vanished into the portal, his own feelings about his Sire had still been too convoluted to process and Spike had opted for not dealing, as Xander would say. Now, he was astonished to learn that Angelus had kept mementos of his family. Through all the years he’d abandoned them, Angelus had still clung to these reminders of the past he denied. He couldn’t tell whether anything was missing but it was the Slayer’s scent overlaying the items, not Angelus’, meaning the Slayer had been the one tearing through the trunk searching for something.
Closing the lid firmly on the bittersweet knowledge that his Sire had still cared about them, Spike rose to his feet and considered what he knew. Angelus had returned from the hell dimension, how and why wasn’t important right now. The Slayer either knew he had returned or had stumbled over him and the two had fought. There was no trace of ash, so it was unlikely the Slayer had dusted Angelus. Nor was there enough blood to assume Angelus had killed the Slayer, especially since she’d been seen out and about today.

If Angelus had won the fight, it would be likely he would still be here. Angelus was territorial, like all vampires, and this had been his home. He would have been determined to re-claim it from the interlopers using his property. That meant the Slayer most likely came out on top.

Since Angelus’ dust wasn’t littering the mansion, the Slayer had once more not been able to bring herself to kill him. It was obvious someone was using the mansion, so she wouldn’t have dared leave Angelus here. The scent left by the two was older than a few hours, they must have fought sometime during the previous night. Slayer hadn’t told anyone of his return at school - probably because no one else was going to be dancing at the return of the vampire that caused them all so much pain and misery. That meant she’d stashed Angelus somewhere to hide him from her friends.

Where would a Slayer hide her vampire lover?

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Turned out, it hadn’t been that difficult to find him. Ruling out the Slayer’s home, that pretty much left Sunnydale’s cemeteries: filled to the brim with convenient crypts for hiding vampires in. A determined vampire hunting with his sense of smell wide open could cover a lot of ground in a hurry.

In the end, it was sound rather than scent that gave Angelus’ hiding spot away.

Spike studied the thing secured to the wall of the crypt by a set of manacles and a heavy length of chain. Angelus was growling and snarling and struggling futilely against the manacles that restrained him. The sounds were those of a wild dog, not a vampire and there was no glimmer of intelligence in the dark eyes. What puzzled Spike was that Angelus was in human face. For a vampire this out of control, he should have lost the ability to control his demonic features as well.

Given that Angelus was restrained for the moment, Spike had time to think about what he was going to do. He perched on the crypt’s sarcophagus and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply and letting the familiar warmth of the nicotine relax him after the tense hours of hunting.

“Question is,” he said finally, more to himself than to the creature in front of him. “What exactly are you? My Sire; the off-his-trolley version of Angelus you were last spring; or the souled poof who abandoned his family, breaking Dru’s heart? Or are you somethin’ else entirely?” He took another long drag, hoping to settle his churning thoughts. “More to the point, what am I going to do with you?”
“Bugger this.” Making up his mind at long last, Spike flicked his cigarette away and stood, pulling a stake out of his duster as he did. He crossed to the exhausted vampire, who was hanging limply in the chains, head down, and grabbed a fistful of the unkempt hair, yanking Angelus’ head up so the dark eyes were facing him.

“You’re not my Sire;” he snarled, not for the first time. “You’re nothing. Just a mad dog that needs to be put down.” The vampire made a weak attempt at a growl and Spike shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. “None of that, you pathetic half-wit. That little trip to hell did you in, didn’t it? Don’t got the brains of a soddin’ village idiot anymore. Nothin’ but a wild animal and I’m putting you out of everyone’s misery.”

Spike had been watching Angelus for well over an hour, talking to him, insulting him, and just sitting and studying him in silence. Perched on the sarcophagus, chain smoking, Spike had watched as Angelus struggled against the chains until he’d dropped, exhausted. In that entire time, Angelus had not spoken one coherent word. He’d growled and snarled and bared his human teeth at Spike, but mostly he’d been eerily silent.

Physically, he appeared unharmed. The toned muscular body was just as Spike remembered it - Angelus was wearing only a pair of pants and Spike wondered idly if the Slayer had put them on him; they were clearly not something that had been worn for long and Angelus wasn’t exactly up to his usual fussy dress sense. Wherever he’d been, Angelus had been feeding regularly, that was obvious, although it didn’t make much sense to Spike, unless Angelus had been feeding on other inhabitants. It all depended on what kind of a place he’d been and how long he’d been there. Maybe somebody running the place kept the inhabitants well fed so they would live for a long time while being tortured.

Mentally, Angelus was another story. The feral creature in chains had shown not the slightest indication he understood Spike, or anything else, for that matter. Flinching away from touch, finally simply hanging exhausted in the chains, the creature had ceased to give even token acknowledgement that Spike was in the room with him, and ignoring a potential threat was something Angelus would never do, except as a ploy.

Spike had given up expecting a response from the thing by the time he’d used his first cigarette to light his second. Staring at the creature wearing his Sire’s face and body, he’d let himself think about everything Angelus had meant to him: safety and terror, love and hate, rage and bitter jealousy. Angelus had meant all of those things to him and more. He’d been lover, companion and mentor, his Sire with all that relationship’s complicated layers of meaning. He’d loved and hated Angelus, mocked him, been bitterly jealous of him, had tried to kill him more than once. Angelus had once been nearly his entire world. Here in Sunndale, Spike had begun to form a tentative connection with Angel, almost coming to respect the difficult road his Sire had chosen, even as he ridiculed him for walking it. Then Angelus had returned, nearly as insane as this creature, and tried to use Xander against Spike. Spike had formed an alliance with a Slayer to take him down.

Almost made him wonder which of the two of them was the more insane.

He had more reasons to kill Angelus than he could count and he’d thought of them all as he sat there, reliving the bitter fury that had flavored so many of his encounters with his Sire. But he couldn’t help remembering the good times as well: traveling through Europe as a family, Angelus teaching him how to be a vampire when he was so overwhelmed by the change he was a danger to himself and everyone around him, even the more recent days, drinking peacefully with his Sire and struggling to
find common ground with him.

What finally decided him was the thought that Angelus wouldn’t want to be like this. Angel would like it even less.

A tiny part of him wanted to be sure his Sire understood why he was doing this. Tightening his grip in the dark hair, he made sure the creature was looking directly at him as he spoke, not caring that it wouldn’t understand his words. “Not doin’ this because I hate you. ‘m doin’ it because it’s what you would want if you still had two brain cells to rattle around together in that huge head of yours. Right?”

He stared down into the dark eyes, given Angelus the chance to look death in the eye, even if it didn’t mean anything to this pathetic thing. He raised the stake and started to bring it down, when the creature began working its mouth strangely. Curious, he stopped his motion in mid-air, head cocked to one side as he listened to the thing struggle to make a sound.

“S…sp…Spike?”

It was the hoarse whisper of a voice that hadn’t been used in a long time, barely audible even to vampiric hearing, but it hadn’t been his imagination. It was clearly his name and there was a glimmer of... something in the confused dark eyes locked on his. “Angelus?”

Swearing, Spike flung Angelus away from him, not caring that the motion caused the other vampire to smack hard into the wall. He spun away, beginning to pace in sheer frustration. He hated being indecisive, it reminded him too much of that pathetic fop William who couldn’t make his mind up about what cravat to wear, much less about anything significant. Spike preferred to make a decision and act on it. If his decision was wrong, so be it, at least he’d made one.

Clearly, something of Angel was still in there. He didn’t have time to re-think what to do, the Slayer could return at any moment. She wouldn’t leave her precious Angel alone long, not helpless like this. Probably planning to hand feed him blood and soothe his fevered brow until he recovered, he thought viciously.

“Right then.” Having made up his mind, Spike moved swiftly. Picking up the ax he’d brought with him while he hunted Angelus, he swung it against the metal bracket the chain had been threaded through. After several blows, it broke and the chain dropped.

Angelus watched him warily but made no move to attack or flee. “Come on,” Spike said impatiently. He tugged Angelus to his feet and pulled him outside the crypt, stopping in the doorway to check the surrounding area. Sensing nothing dangerous, he got Angelus moving again by the simple expedient of pulling him along by the chain still attached to the manacles on his wrists. “Let’s get you somewhere the Slayer won’t find you.”

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It was dangerously close to dawn by the time Spike returned to the factory. He’d gotten Angelus settled in a crypt in a different cemetery; an old cemetery on the edge of town. It wasn’t used anymore, all the plots had long since been filled up. As a result, the Slayer didn’t patrol there often. It would do as a temporary place to stash Angelus until Spike decided what to do with him.

Angelus had been remarkably passive. He hadn’t spoken again, letting Spike lead him without protest as they had trotted through the deserted streets. Spike wasn’t sure if Angelus understood that he was expected to stay put, but he had taken the precaution of choosing a crypt with no tunnel access and wedging the door shut behind him when he left. It would take a fair bit of effort to force it
open and Angelus didn’t seem to be at full strength, despite the fact that he looked healthy. He’d been exhausted by the pace Spike had set as they moved and had collapsed into the new crypt, panting like an unfit human after a morning jog. Spike had hesitated briefly, wondering again if he shouldn’t just stake Angelus and be done with it, but something inside wouldn’t let him do it.

Shaking his head in disgust at himself, Spike set to work on the manacles, finally prying them open with a combination of lock picking and brute force. Taking the chain with him as he left, he headed back to the original crypt, detouring to pick up a minion at one of the bars. He brought the minion back to the crypt with him - one of the advantages of being Master was not having to explain his actions. He’d simply pointed at a fledge and said: “You. Follow me,” and the minion had obediently dropped whatever it had been doing and followed without asking any questions. Idiot.

Stepping into the crypt, Spike had told the curious minion to stand against the wall. “Need to set up a scenario,” he’d explained truthfully. Being as dumb as he looked, the minion had obediently stood against the wall to be staked. Spike hung the chains back onto the broken metal bracket, propping it back up so it looked normal to a casual glance.

Finished, he’d headed back to the factory through the rapidly lightening dawn, still wondering why he hadn’t just staked Angelus.

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It had been a long, anxious night. Xander usually enjoyed talking with Jose, but not when he was listening for Spike’s return, jumping at every sound and trying to ignore the fact that the vampire who still haunted his nightmares was back in town.

Shuffling the cards for about the millionth time that night, Xander began dealing a hand of Texas hold ‘em. He’d asked Jose to teach him some new variations since he really only knew how to play stud poker, hoping that concentrating on the rules would keep him from worrying. It had helped a little, as they’d worked their way through five- and seven- card stud, Manila and five-card draw. He was working on his bluffing skills because vampires had such unfair advantages with their ability to smell emotions and hear heartbeats, but it wasn’t really a good night for that. The variations in his heart rate and emotions all came from factors outside the game. Which actually meant he’d be cleaning up if they were playing for money but wasn’t of any use in the long term.

Still, the night had dragged. At midnight, Xander had turned on the television for background noise, trying to forget that Spike had been gone for hours. By 5 a.m., Xander thought that Jose probably deserved to be nominated for sainthood for not killing him. Which led to weird speculation on whether the Catholic church could nominate a demon for sainthood or whether that would make the Vatican implode and the realization that he was really, really tired. This was the second night in a row he’d been up half the night and he was seriously short of sleep.

When he heard footsteps on the stairs at 5:30, Xander was up and running for the door. Jose stopped him before he got two steps. “Xander, please allow me to see who it is first.”

That made sense. Given that the apartment was actually Spike’s, vampires could enter it without an invitation. Apparently when a vampire and a human lived together, the invitation rule was waived. Xander frequently wondered just who made up the rules anyway.

Vibrating with nervous tension, Xander waited behind Jose as the door opened. It was Spike, looking tired but unhurt. Xander threw himself forward and flung his arms around Spike, clinging to him and relishing the feeling of Spike’s strong arms enfolding him in turn.

Spike pushed him back after a moment and smiled. Looking past Xander at Jose, he said: “Thanks
for watching him. Owe you one.”

“It was my pleasure, Master Spike. Unless you need anything further, I will leave you two alone.”

“Nothing for now, Jose. Everything’s under control.”

Xander added, “Thanks, Jose. Sorry I was such lousy company.”

“Perfectly understandable, Xander.” Jose nodded to Spike and left by the back entrance to the factory.

“Did a good job when I picked that one,” Spike said as the door closed behind the other vampire, deliberately pitching his voice so that Jose could hear him.

“What happened, Spike? Are you all right?”

“’m fine, luv.” Spike tightened his hold, nuzzling into Xander’s neck, his tongue tasting the Claim mark.

Ignoring the arousal that always accompanied Spike’s tongue on his mark, Xander asked: “You said things are under control, that means it was Angel, right?”

Spike stopped teasing at the Claim mark and just rested his forehead in the juncture of Xander’s neck and shoulder. After a moment, he lifted his head again and stepped back half a step, his arms still loosely encircling Xander. “Not really either one of them, luv.”

Whatever Xander had been expecting, that wasn’t it. “Huh?”

“It’s not really Angel or Angelus,” Spike repeated somewhat unhelpfully. “More like a wild animal than a vampire right now.”

“Ok, that doesn’t sound good. Did…did you kill him?”

Spike looked away. “No.”

“I don’t want to sound bloodthirsty or anything, but why not? He doesn’t sound like something you want running around loose.” Xander kept his voice even with an effort but he knew his heartbeat was giving him away. He couldn’t help it. Angelus scared him spitless, the thought of the vampire so out of control Spike would describe him as a wild animal was terrifying.

Spike tightened his arm reassuringly. “Meant to. Was going to but I just couldn’t. Don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Spike scowled.

Xander clung to him for a long minute. Underneath the bluster, Spike sounded so lost. “He’s contained, right?” Spike nodded, burying his face in the crook of Xander’s neck again. “Then let’s go to bed. We’ve both been up all night.”

Pulling Spike with him, Xander headed into the bedroom. He undressed and climbed into the bed, glad that Spike was quietly following suit. Xander piled up the pillows on his side of the bed and pulled Spike down so his head was on Xander’s chest, knowing that Spike liked to listen to his heartbeat while they slept.

When Spike had settled, his arms holding Xander fiercely, Xander freed one hand and began to rub soothing circles on Spike’s back. After a long time, Spike said quietly: “Was going to stake him but then he said my name. He’s changed, maybe truly insane this time, but he’s still my Sire. Should’ve
killed him for you, luv, but I couldn’t do it.”

Surprised he wasn’t more upset, Xander just held Spike for a long time before answering. He could feel the tension in Spike’s body, knew the vampire was worried about his reaction but he needed to think about this new development. He’d spent the night thinking about Spike’s options, but it hadn’t crossed his mind that reality would be door number 3, instead of the more simple stake Angelus, let Angel live that he thought he’d be dealing with when Spike returned.

He’d hated Angelus and had wanted him dead. Angelus had made it personal, had hurt Spike, tortured Giles, kidnapped Xander and tried to use him against Spike. Xander had willingly abandoned his place on the fence and hopped on the kill Angelus bandwagon. Angel he was more ambiguous about. He didn’t like him, but there were a lot of people he didn’t like, and he didn’t want to kill any of them.

Angelus was Spike’s Sire. In some ways, it had made it easier for Spike that Angelus had been sucked into hell because Spike hadn’t had to deal with his issues about his Sire. Angelus was gone forever and Spike had pretty much opted out of dealing with the fall-out from the whole Angel/Angelus drama. Demons didn’t angst about things the way humans did but they weren’t immune to the kind of emotional upheavals and conflicted feelings that humans were prey to.

When he finally spoke, Xander was calm, his own roiling emotions settling down to one thing: he trusted Spike to protect him.

“You know how I feel about my Dad, Spike. It’s been a long time since he’s treated me with anything other than indifference. But I still remember what he was like when I was little. It’s not like he was ever a great parent, but there are some good memories. I guess what I’m saying is, no matter how much he’s disappointed me, he’s still my dad and I don’t want to see him hurt. Killing Angel when he was trying to kill you, trying to hurt you, is one thing. You were fighting to protect me and for your own life.”

Spike had lifted his head and was staring at Xander, the blue eyes wide as Xander continued. “Angelus has been punished for what he did, punished big time it sounds like. That leaves you remembering the better times and able to see him as your Sire again. You make the decision, Spike. Don’t leave it to Buffy, or me, or anyone else. You’ll make the right decision because he’s your family.” He smiled crookedly. “None of us get to choose our families but we know them better than anyone else.”

Spike surged up, kissing Xander hard. When he stopped, he lifted his head and stared at Xander. “Love you, Xander.”

“I love you, Spike. Don’t leave him where Buffy gets to make the decision about his fate.”

Spike looked shamefaced. “Already moved him to a crypt in a different cemetery.” He looked worriedly at Xander. “There’s no tunnel access and he can’t get out during the day. I promise, if I think for one second he’s going to be a danger to you, I’ll stake him.”

“I know, Spike”

Spike settled back down against his chest with an almost inaudible sigh. Xander slid a little lower in the bed, holding his vampire as they both fell asleep. He’d tell Giles what was going on this afternoon, but there was no way he was going to school today, not after being up for most of two nights in a row.

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Of course, Giles wasn’t in the library when Xander arrived. A quick sweep through the school didn’t turn him up, but did allow Xander to grab a tray from the cafeteria as he realized belatedly how long it had been since he last ate. Against all the rules, he carried the tray to the library and settled down to eat and wait for Giles.

He had finished eating and was drinking the cup of soda when he heard footsteps approaching in the hall. He hopped off the table, hoping it was Giles returning.

Buffy blew through the library doors like a hurricane. Xander had barely even registered that it was Buffy and not Giles when he was slammed backwards into the table, the cup of soda he’d been holding flipping into the air, spraying its remaining contents over both himself and Buffy. His body reacted instinctively, kicking out hard at his attacker while his fingers clawed at the hand gripping his throat and cutting off his oxygen.

His kick landed and the grip on his throat slackened enough for him to breathe. He kicked again and rolled clear, managing to get to his feet, still gasping with shock, unable to believe it was Buffy who’d attacked him. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked hoarsely, cautiously moving further away from her. Willow was standing at the door, having followed Buffy inside but her presence didn’t make Xander feel any safer. He really wanted it to be Giles standing there because Giles would do something if Buffy attacked him again.

“Where is he?”

“Where’s who?” Xander wondered wildly if he’d missed something.

“Spike.” He’d never seen Buffy so angry and that was saying something.

“What’s going on?”

“Like you don’t know. He killed Angel.”

“What?”

“Don’t lie to me. There were cigarettes everywhere in the crypt where Angel was hidden. It had to have been Spike.”

Xander shook his head. Even if he knew where Angel was, he wouldn’t tell her. Spike was probably with Angel right now and, while it might calm Buffy down to know Angel wasn’t dead, learning that Spike was still trying to decide whether or not to stake Angel would be badness on a whole new level. This was not a good time for Spike and Buffy to cross paths.

“Where. Is. He?”

Xander shook his head again stubbornly and opened his mouth to tell her what she could do with herself when he found himself saying: “He’s probably at the factory, he was still asleep when I left.”

What the hell? He hadn’t meant to tell her that, even if it was obvious that Spike was unlikely to be brisking around in the sunshine. He shook his head to clear it, wondering if the buzzing in his head that was jumbling his thoughts was because he was still tired. He missed most of what Buffy said next, just hearing one word.

“…Angel?”

“Spike didn’t kill him. He moved Angel to a different cemetery.”
He slapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late, the words had already escaped. He couldn’t believe he’d just said that. He stared at Buffy, appalled at the words that had somehow come out of his mouth and found her staring back at him with shock and the beginning of joy.

“Angel’s still alive?”

“Yes,” he said unwillingly. This time, he was aware of the external pressure to speak, to tell the truth. He could feel something prickling inside his mind, tiny sparks of something alien, something not him, forcing him to answer. He tried. Oh god, he tried to stop the words from coming, to keep them locked inside.

Behind Buffy, he could see Willow, her eyes fixed on him, huge and unnaturally dark in her pale face as she chanted something quietly, almost under her breath. “Spike hasn’t decided what to do yet.” The words were dragged out of him unwillingly, slurred and distorted as he struggled unsuccessfully to keep his jaw clenched and his mouth shut.

“WILLOW!” Giles’ outraged roar had all of them jerking around to face him and Xander felt the prickling die away as Willow spun to face Giles. “What are you doing?!” Giles’ voice was horrified, as if he’d found Willow in the midst of an obscene act. Relief swamped Xander that Giles was here and handling the situation and he sagged back against the table, his whole body shaking with reaction.

“Just a truth spell,” Willow said meekly, dropping her hands and looking down. She was facing Giles and her performance was for an audience of one. From his viewpoint in the wings, Xander could see the unrepentant look on her face that she was hiding from Giles behind the swing of her hair.

“Just a truth spell,” Giles repeated with deceptive mildness. Xander suspected he wasn’t fooled at all by Willow’s contrite act and the arctic cold in Giles’ voice when he continued confirmed that. “Miss Rosenberg, truth spells are black magic, coercive by their very nature. Their sole purpose is to compel obedience to the spell-caster’s will. What have you been doing?”

Even Buffy was silenced by the fury in his voice. Xander couldn’t have spoken if his life depended on it. Willow had done a spell on him without his knowledge or consent? A spell that had forced him to betray Spike? How could she do that to anyone, let alone him?

“I was just helping Buffy,” Willow began defensively and Giles cut her off in scathing tones:

“Miss Rosenberg, I would think that after our review this summer of the ethical boundaries of witchcraft that you would never consider raising a defense of the ends justifying the means. You used a magical compulsion against a human. Unless you can honestly tell me that you felt the fate of the world hung on the information you sought to obtain through that spell, you had no right to use it.”

The silence following his reprimand was deafening. Willow looked away, her cheeks burning, her eyes filled with tears. Xander just wished he could tell if it was shame or anger causing the reaction.

“Where did you learn that spell?”

Willow answered reluctantly, unable to resist Giles’ thundering tones. “When you wouldn’t teach me, I found someone who would.”

“Who?”

“I won’t get someone else in trouble.” Squirming under Giles’ glare, she finally said: “I found the
truth spell in one of your books.”

“And just how did you obtain that book?”

“I… borrowed it from your apartment this summer.”

“You stole it.”

Willow tried for a casual shrug. She didn’t carry it off well. “It’s not like I did anything Xander didn’t do.” She shot Xander a look he couldn’t read as she said it.

“While I do not condone Xander’s actions in pilfering my books last year, I must point out that he reached that point only after I had refused to answer his questions about vampires. You, on the other hand, were freely offered my knowledge and decided to steal books you had specifically been told you were not yet ready to use.”

“It’s the same thing,” Willow said stubbornly. “We were both just trying to get information that you refused to give us.”

“It is not the same. Your intentions were quite different. Xander sought information only, you were looking for power you are not yet ready to handle, as you have clearly demonstrated today.”

“Giles…”

“No, Buffy. I will not have you defending her. You have no idea of the risks inherent in what Willow has done. Willow, however, does understand the ramifications. She has deliberately chosen to ignore my warnings about playing with magical forces she is not prepared to handle or even comprehend.”

“I understand more than you think, Giles.”

“That statement, Willow, tells me more clearly than you can imagine how little you have heeded anything I have said to you on the subject.” Turning to Buffy, he asked: “What, exactly, did Willow feel she was ‘helping’ you with?”

Buffy didn’t answer for a long moment. Her lips parted several times as if searching for words, before finally she said simply: “Angel’s back. Spike’s hiding him from me.”

Shocked, Giles rocked backwards, almost as if he’d received a physical blow. “What?!”

“It’s true,” Xander confirmed quietly, worried about how still and pale Giles had gotten at the mention of Angel’s name. “Spike found signs that Angel was back and tracked down where Buffy had hidden him.” His eyes accused Buffy and she met his look stubbornly. “Spike couldn’t decide whether or not to kill him, so he moved him where Buffy couldn’t find him. Willow,” he faltered as he said her name, then cleared his throat and continued, “used her little spell to try and force me to tell where Spike hid Angel. Fortunately, Spike didn’t tell me.”

“Spike doesn’t have the right to kill Angel,” Buffy said furiously.

“Then who does? If Angel is dangerous, we all know you’re not going to do a damn thing about it. Spike is the only family Angel has, he’ll decide whether Angel is safe to be at large or if he should be killed.”

“Buffy, how did you know Angel was back?” Giles’ question was deceptively mild and Buffy looked away.
“I found him at the mansion, I just wanted to see if he was better before telling anyone.”

Xander suddenly found himself adding up several seemingly unrelated facts and he swore loudly, furious at himself for not having figured it out sooner. As everyone looked at him in surprise, he forced himself to look straight at Willow, despite the sickness that roiled in his gut at the sight of her. “You did it, didn’t you? That’s why you were so…” he couldn’t find an adequate description but it was just an extreme version of the high Willow had always gotten when she had solved a difficult problem, especially something she’d worked on for a long time. “You’ve been trying to find a way to bring Angel back for a long time now and you found one, didn’t you?”

The glow that had lit Willow yesterday returned. Her smile would have been beautiful if it hadn’t been more than a little smug. “You said it couldn’t be done, Giles, but I did it. I found a way to fix things and bring Angel back.” She smiled triumphantly at Buffy, who couldn’t help smiling back, even though Buffy at least looked troubled by second thoughts.

“You arrogant amateur. You could have damaged the boundaries between dimensions and destroyed this world.” If Giles had been pale before, it was nothing compared to the whiteness of his face now. He stared at Willow like he’d never seen her before.

“I knew what I was doing. I worked on that spell for weeks.”

“Then you will have the privilege of sharing your work with me so that I can ensure that you have not permanently damaged the walls between dimensions and that nothing will follow Angel through the hole you so foolishly created.” Giles looked pointedly at his watch. “I will expect you back here in one hour with every scrap of material you used in fashioning the spell, as well as any books of mine you still have.” His voice softened a little. “By the time you return, Willow, I hope you will have taken the opportunity to think seriously about what it is you have chosen to do with the magic you have learned. You have tampered with a human’s soul, recklessly opened a portal to a hell dimension, and turned your power against a friend.”

Willow stared back at Giles, wide-eyed, the glow and the smugness dying at Giles’ words. After a long moment, she nodded and ducked her head, hurrying quickly out the door of the library.

Her silent acquiescence didn’t surprise Xander. Giles’ anger was terrifying. He wouldn’t cross Giles in this mood, he’d just nod and agree to anything he said. He’d never known the librarian was capable of this kind of rage and Giles’ disappointment would have burned Xander like acid if it had been aimed in his direction.

Buffy obviously had similar thoughts as she said quietly, “I’ll go, too.”

She edged towards the door and flinched as Giles turned his arctic glare in her direction. “After I am sure that Willow has not released unimaginable catastrophe on us, you and I will be having a talk about the responsibilities of a Slayer. Bringing Angel back was a foolish risk, especially considering that you agreed to let a witch with less than three months experience tamper with the very fabric of our reality. A reality, I remind you, that you are sworn to protect.”

Buffy bit her lip and nodded contritely. She had just reached the door of the library when Giles’ voice stopped her in her tracks. “Buffy, you will remain here at school until your last class and then you will go directly home and stay there until I arrive.”

“But…”

“You will not spend the evening attempting to find Angel. There are far more serious issues in front of us. It is quite possible that we may all spend the next days fighting for our lives because of what
Willow has done. You will go home and wait for me.”

Buffy’s shoulders slumped and Xander could tell she would obey. He let out his breath in a long, inaudible sigh of relief that Buffy would not be hunting Spike, at least for tonight. In the silence that followed, the only sound was the banging of the swinging door behind Buffy.

“Is it really that bad?”

Giles took his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes. He looked tired and beaten down by the scene that had just taken place. “I hope not. Willow is very intelligent but she is reckless. She seems to have no grasp of the dangers inherent in magic. I had hoped that she had lost interest when she stopped studying with me. Obviously, it was foolishly optimistic of me.”

Xander didn’t know how to respond and silence fell again before Giles shook his head as if banishing disturbing thoughts. Slipping his glasses back on and straightening his shoulders, Giles looked at him carefully. “Xander, are you all right? Truth spells can have some rather disturbing side effects.”

“Side effects?” Xander echoed faintly. He had been trying not to think about what had happened. The idea that Willow had used a spell against him made him almost physically ill and he couldn’t think about it without wanting to scream and hit things.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I’m almost certain both of us would already know if there were any lingering effects.” He sighed. “I wasn’t exaggerating when I said that such spells should be used on humans only under the direst of circumstances.” He looked lost in thought again and Xander started mentally checking himself, trying to see if anything felt differently, probing at the corners of his mind like someone stretching their limbs carefully to check for broken bones. The truly frightening part was not knowing if he would even be able to tell if something was different.

“Your hair’s blue,” he said firmly, trying the obvious first.

Giles looked at him in surprise, then smiled. “The side effects tend to be a bit more subtle than that, Xander.” His smile turned into a chuckle and, despite his disgruntlement at being laughed at, Xander was relieved to see the tension disappear from Giles’ face. Giles’ laughter died but the smile lingered in his eyes, banishing the fatigue. “I apologize, Xander. I know it’s not funny. The effects are more of a… shift internally, a slight loss of autonomy to the spell-caster, rather than an inability to lie at all.” The smile faded completely and his voice turned serious again. “If you find you are more inclined to do what Willow says, even in small ways, let me know immediately. However, given your anger and lack of defending her just now, I am confident you have suffered no ill effects.”

That was a creepy thought, that Willow could bend him to her will, even as a side effect, through magic. A shiver ran through him as he considered the possibilities of that when he realized Giles was speaking again.

“I owe you an apology, Xander. I have tended to think you were being too hard on Willow, that you should forgive her for her part in what happened with Acathla and move on. Now, I’m afraid that perhaps you have been right all along and the rest of us have been blind.” There was bitter self-recrimination in his voice. “Certainly I should have known better. I warned Willow before the re-souling spell that those kinds of magics can unlock doors inside you that you cannot close again. Magic that powerful is almost a living thing and it can change the person who wields it. That is particularly true on the Hellmouth, which tends to influence the environment around it and not in a good way.”

Xander thought about that for a long moment. “Oz saw her doing the re-souling spell, he said she
was almost alien looking. It freaked him out, big time. I think I got a glimpse of what he was talking about back then, but today…” He looked unhappily at Giles. “When she was using the spell on me, her eyes were black. It was terrifying. Willow and I have been drifting apart for a long time, but she’s always been Willow.” He shivered again, convulsively. Giles looked shocked speechless, like his worst nightmare had just come true.

“I’ve been thinking that if Willow could just accept Spike and not want to kill him, we could find our way back to being friends,” Xander continued slowly when Giles didn’t say anything. “But after today…” he shook his head. “I don’t think I want to be friends with someone who could do that to me.” He got to his feet. “And it doesn’t help that I don’t think she thinks she did anything wrong.”

“That is the question,” Giles murmured, almost to himself. “Rest assured, I shall be monitoring Willow closely from now on.”

“How are you doing?” Xander wanted to leave before Willow came back but he needed to ask. Giles had looked so shaken by the news of Angel’s return and he hadn’t had even a moment to deal, too busy with their problems. “Angel’s return has to be hardest for you.”

Giles kept his eyes on the bookshelves. “It was a decided shock,” he said dryly.

Xander persisted. “I know I said that Spike was the one who had the right to decide what happened to Angel, but you have to be number two in line right behind him after what Angel did to you.”

Giles glanced at him. “What about yourself? Angel put you in hospital as well.”

Xander shrugged. “I was wigged when Spike told me Angel was back, but I trust Spike. If Angel is a danger to me, Spike will kill him.”

Giles smiled at the certainty in his voice. “That’s very reassuring as I suspect that Angel is either a danger to both of us - to all of us - or else he isn’t a threat to any of us. I’m willing to let Spike judge, since he will err on the side of caution where you are concerned.”

“Thanks for not letting Buffy go hunting tonight. I’m not looking forward to her next meeting with Spike, especially if Spike decides Angel needs to be killed.”

“I am going to have a serious talk tonight with Buffy about letting her feelings for Angel overrule her common sense. I will make sure she does not seek revenge against Spike regardless of what happens with Angel.”

“Thanks, Giles.” Xander glanced anxiously at the clock. “I’m just going home, I don’t want to risk running into either Buffy or Willow.” Hesitating again, he asked: “Ummm, are you ok if I take off?”

“Probably a wise choice,” Giles said with a faint, understanding smile. “Run along, I’ll be fine.”

Halfway to the door, Xander stopped and looked back. “Giles? I just… thank you,” he said inadequately. “For everything.”

Giles smiled. “Be careful on the way home,” was all he said.
Dusk was approaching and Spike was just beginning to stir when Xander got home. Pleased with his timing, Xander pulled a bag of blood out of the refrigerator and warmed it in the microwave before carrying it in to Spike. He knew that breakfast in bed for his vampire was a guilt issue with him but Spike either didn’t care or was indulging him. Spike didn’t seem to mind drinking bagged human blood and, although Xander knew it didn’t fill all of Spike’s feeding needs, he cherished the illusion that Spike wouldn’t be biting people on the days when Xander was there when Spike woke with a cup of blood and hopefully some nookie. If he was a better or stronger person, he probably shouldn’t be able to live so easily with the knowledge that Spike injured people frequently, but he’d settled with his conscience a long time ago that he was not going to ask Spike to change more than he already had for Xander. Not to mention that living completely human blood free didn’t seem to have done much for Angel’s personality. 

Speaking of which…

“Mornin’, luv.”

“Hey.” Xander handed him the mug and slid onto the bed, curling up next to Spike without saying anything else as he drank it. He hadn’t come home straight from school after the scene in the library. He’d been too angry and unsettled by what had happened, despite his talk with Giles, and he knew that Spike would sense it and ask questions. He’d spent the rest of the afternoon checking up on his regular customers, doing quick jobs or scheduling ones that needed materials or more time than an hour to fix. Talking with his customers had helped and so had a quick fence repair, just involving nailing up some boards that had come loose. Pounding nails had helped release some of his pent-up anger and if anyone had noticed how hard he was hitting them, they’d been polite enough not to comment.

The mug was emptied rapidly - Spike hated how fast bagged blood cooled and always gulped it down quickly so it didn’t have a chance to drop below internal body temperature - and Xander set it down on the bedside table before asking, with deliberate casualness: “What are your plans today?”

“Gotta go see Angelus. I’ll take him some bagged blood and see if it helps.” Spike looked at him intently. “I’ll go straight there as soon as the sun’s down, Xander. Crypt door’s wedged shut and he won’t have been able to open it today without frying himself. I won’t let him hurt you.”

“I know.” Xander made a face as he began his carefully edited version of what had happened at the school. He’d decided while viciously pounding nails that he wasn’t going to tell Spike about the truth spell. There was no way he’d be able to talk about it like it hadn’t really shaken him, like he wasn’t still a little freaked that Willow could have permanently changed him in ways he couldn’t even tell because he’d been changed, like he wasn’t still feeling betrayed and hurt and furious about what Willow had done. Spike was sure to overreact. While Xander didn’t think he ever wanted to see Willow again, he didn’t really want her torn limb from limb.

“Buffy knows Angel’s still alive and that you moved him. Sorry, I didn’t mean to tell her, it just kind of slipped out.” He gave Spike an apologetic look. “She thought you’d killed him because of the cigarette butts all over the crypt. I got really mad and told her that you were the only one who had a right to decide his fate and she figured it out.” He brightened. “Good news is, Giles read her the riot act about how she let Angel distract her from her responsibility as the Slayer and ordered her to not look for him.”
“Hmph. Wonder how long that will last.”

“Tonight at least, Giles was pretty impressively angry.”

“Must have loved it that she didn’t tell him that the vampire who tortured him was back in town.”

Xander sat up straighter, eyes sparkling as he recalled Giles’ words, practically bouncing on the mattress. “That was part of it, but Spike, the best part is that Giles trusts you to make the decision about what to do with Angel.” He knew that Spike didn’t care what Giles thought like Xander did, but to him it was huge that Giles was trusting Spike for something like that. There were so few people who knew about, much less trusted, Spike, Giles being one of them was… was huge, he thought again.

“Watcher trusts me?” Spike sounded doubtful and Xander nodded vigorously.

“Said you would err on the side of caution when it came to me and if you thought Angel wasn’t dangerous to me, he shouldn’t be dangerous to anyone.”

“Good for Rupes,” Spike said casually, but Xander could tell he was pleased. His eyes narrowed as he looked closely at Xander. “Something you’re not telling me, luv?”

Xander worked to keep from reacting. “Nothing important. It’s just… Angel still makes me a little jumpy. I’ll feel better when you’ve diagnosed him.”

“Not a bloody doctor, just still considering my options,” Spike said grumpily, apparently buying Xander’s explanation for whatever he was sensing. It was both flattering and annoying to have a lover who could read him so well, Xander thought, tucking away his guilt at, not lying, but not telling Spike everything about what had happened at the school. What Spike didn’t know wouldn’t lead to bloody retribution, he reminded himself.

“What is a ‘riot act’ anyway?” he asked idly.

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It had been barely dark enough to avoid singeing around the edges when Spike left the apartment. Gathering up all the blood in the refrigerator, Spike made his way quickly to the crypt where he’d stashed Angelus the previous night, not running, but close. He still wasn’t sure what he was going to do in the long run with his returned Sire, but he was going to pour human blood down him and see if it could heal him mentally as it would if Angelus’ wounds were physical.

Pondering his Sire’s condition before going to sleep this morning, the mental breakdown, the physically undamaged but not up to strength body, Spike had reached the conclusion that his Sire had been feeding fairly regularly, but not on human blood. Decades of improper feeding had left Angelus weaker than he should be before his little sojourn to hell. It seemed unlikely there were many humans to feed off in a hell dimension, even if his restored soul had let him. Stretch that starvation diet to centuries, along with whatever other little delights had greeted him on the other side of the portal, and it might just be that Angelus was simply loony for lack of a vampire’s proper food.

Worth a shot anyway.

Arriving at the crypt, he was relieved to see the door was still jammed shut from the outside. No sound emerged, so Spike set down the bag of blood and worked the rocks wedging the door shut out. He picked up the bag of blood and opened the door, carefully scanning for movement inside. “Angelus?”
A low growling came from a corner, and Spike entered, pulling the door shut behind him. Angelus was crouched defensively in a far corner, eyeing him mistrustfully. The crypt was a shambles: the sarcophagus lid shattered into pieces, the dried remains of death offerings scattered and crumbled to powder.

“Had fun last night?” His Sire had obviously had enough awareness of his surroundings to know he was trapped and to be frustrated by that. “Brought you some blood.”

He tossed a bag of blood to Angelus, who flinched away and let it fall to the floor without trying to catch it. After a long, suspicious pause, during which Spike didn’t move, Angelus stretched out a hand and picked it up. Still keeping a wary eye on Spike, he investigated the bag then, with surprising suddenness, shifted to his true face and tore into it with his fangs.

“What completely forgotten you’re a vampire, I see,” Spike commented. He tossed Angelus another bag as soon as the first was drained. This time, Angelus caught it and tore into it immediately.

Five more bags disappeared as quickly. Vampires were capable of drinking astonishing quantities of blood but they didn’t need volume so much as they craved the living warmth flowing into their undead bodies. He couldn’t give that living warmth to his Sire, the bags, hastily warmed at the apartment, had cooled to the temperature of the mild night by the time he’d reached the crypt. But whatever it was in human blood that vampires needed, it was present whether the blood was fresh from living prey or stored in cold bags.

“Spike?” The voice was still rusty from disuse, but the identification was a bit stronger.

“Yeah. You feeling any better?”

“C...cold. Hurts.”

“Gonna have to convince me you’re not still off your trolley before I do anything about that.” Spike crouched down and studied Angelus. His Sire was huddled in on himself, as if trying to preserve a body warmth he no longer owned, but he looked as if he was aware of his surroundings in a way he hadn’t been yesterday.

Making up his mind, Spike stood. “Let’s get you something warm to eat.”

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It was a good thing Spike had years of practice in coaxing a finicky eater or he would have staked Angelus out of sheer aggravation long before he was able to convince his Sire to drink the warm blood of a living human. Not that Drusilla had ever shied away from the hunt for the reasons Angelus was; Drusilla had just been distractible, so caught up in her own mind she often didn’t realize she was hungry. It had taken a combination of persuasion, force and an unconscious, bleeding human shoved into his unwilling arms to get Angelus to feed. Spike had been counting on Angelus’ confusion and his instincts overriding his pangs of conscience but it had been a near thing. In the end, the smell of fresh blood and the feel of a living body in his arms had done the trick and Angelus had dropped his head and drank.

Spike even stopped him from draining the victim, knowing both Xander and his Sire - obviously still connected to the bloody soul - would be upset if he killed the man. Not that he expected to be getting a lot of thanks for it from anyone.

The second and third humans were easier. Angelus stopped fighting him and drank, stopping when
Spike tugged the meal away, lifting his bloody lips from the third unconscious body and there was more comprehension in the dark eyes as he looked around. Spike let the third body drop to the ground and pulled Angelus away, deeper into the alley.

Once well away from the victims, Spike let Angelus stop and lit a cigarette, leaning against the wall to study his Sire. Angelus no longer seemed as nervous and confused, and certainly less feral and more manageable, as he stood obediently, his eyes fastened on Spike as if trying to remember who he was. The amount of blood Angelus had drunk was more than enough to speed physical healing, and Spike was curious whether it would fix whatever was wrong with him.

“Always been a pig headed moron, trying to live without feeding properly,” he remarked, not for the first time. “How are you going to fight evil if you aren’t at full strength?” he continued acidly. “Like a boxer going into the ring with one hand amputated. Don’t need to kill, don’t even need to bite innocent victims. If you can’t bring yourself to feed off murderers and other low lifes, drink bottled. Don’t have to starve yourself drinking animal blood.”

Angelus seemed to follow that. “It’s wrong.”

“Not for us, you great poof.” Spike cocked his head. “Two words now, eh? Guess you are feeling better.”

“Buffy?”

A surge of fury tore through Spike and before he realized what he was doing, he had slammed Angelus against the wall and was shaking him viciously as he snarled: “bleedin’ Slayer’s how you got into this condition, you moron. You lost it over a bit of skirt. She’s the one who exiled you to that place.”

Angelus struggled briefly, but didn’t stand a chance against Spike in the condition he was in. “Where is she?”

“She’s alive and still killing our kind. You plannin’ on lookin’ her up? And what exactly are you goin’ to say? Sorry for torturing your Watcher? Sorry for killin’ your friends?”

Angelus wilted, his eyes dropping, the hands that had been ineffectually pushing at Spike going still. Sure that his point had been made, Spike released him.

“Even if she’s blind stupid enough to forgive you, what makes you think things would go better this time around? Ready to lose your precious soul over her again? ’Cause that worked out so well for everyone last time.” Spike glared at him, furious that Angelus would even be thinking about the Slayer after everything that had happened.

“You put my boy in danger,” he hissed. “‘m not risking that happening again. You may be my Sire, but you’re dust if you so much as look at him cross-eyed again. Go near the Slayer without your head on straight, same thing happens. Clear?”

After a long moment, Angelus nodded.

“Right. ‘m taking you back to the crypt and you’re going to stay there, agreed? We’ll pick up some stuff for you on the way so it’s a bit more comfy. I’ll be back tomorrow with more blood for you.” At Angelus’ small gesture of protest, Spike rolled his eyes. “I’ll make it bagged but you’ll just have to deal with it not being warm.”

He took the precaution of wedging the crypt door shut again, locking Angelus inside with some warm clothes and a blanket, unwilling to completely trust Angelus’ word that he would stay put. He
was fairly sure that Angelus would do as he’d been told, but it was reassuring to know that it was unlikely his Sire had the strength right now to force the door. He suspected another couple of good feedings would see Angelus mostly back to normal - if a souled vampire could ever be considered normal.

And he couldn’t deny that he got a perverse satisfaction from ordering Angelus around like a fledge. It wouldn’t last once his Sire got back to full strength, but he was going to enjoy it while it did.

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By the time he reached the school grounds, Xander was about ready to turn around and head home again. The thought of bumping into Willow in the hallways was making his stomach churn and at one point, about a block from the school, he’d simply clung to a tree, his fingers digging painfully into the bark, willing the incipient nausea to settle. He counted it a small victory that he didn’t actually lose his breakfast, but he had to stuff his hands into his pockets to hide their shaking and his heart was pounding in his chest as he got closer to the school.

Only the thought that if he didn’t face her now, he might never be able to, kept him stubbornly moving forward. It was humiliating to be so torn up about seeing someone he’d known almost his entire life, but Willow had become a stranger in the moment when he’d looked up and seen the black eyes boring into him and felt her spell crawling inside his mind and he finally admitted he was more than a little frightened of that stranger.

Trudging up the walk, head down, avoiding looking at anyone, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand touched his arm. “Buffy!”

She was blocking his path, her whole body radiating tension. “What happened with Angel?”

How stupid was he that he hadn’t anticipated this? Of course, Buffy would be after him first thing about Angel. He sighed, knowing only Giles’ laying down the law had kept her and Spike from meeting and undoubtedly coming to blows. “He’s still alive, dead, whatever. Spike says he’s still a little out of it but he’s getting better,” he reported dutifully, feeling like the middleman in one of those ridiculous conversations where two people were ostentatiously not speaking to each other.

“How stupid was he that he hadn’t anticipated this? Of course, Buffy would be after him first thing about Angel. He sighed, knowing only Giles’ laying down the law had kept her and Spike from meeting and undoubtedly coming to blows. “He’s still alive, dead, whatever. Spike says he’s still a little out of it but he’s getting better,” he reported dutifully, feeling like the middleman in one of those ridiculous conversations where two people were ostentatiously not speaking to each other.

“Where is he?”

He really didn’t need this right now. “I thought Giles told you that you had more important things to do.”

Buffy didn’t back down… much. “Willow did the spell right. The dimensional walls, or portals, or whatever they are, are safe.” Her jaw tightened and she looked away. “I’m not asking to see him, I just want to know if he’s alright.”

Not asking to see him. Giles must really have ripped her a new one when they had their ‘discussion’ about her responsibilities. “He is.” After a brief hesitation, he continued: “Spike brought him some bagged blood and he’s locked away somewhere safe from the sun,” he added grudgingly, knowing that he’d want more information if it was Spike they were talking about.

Buffy looked slightly relieved and stepped out of his way, walking beside him into the building. Xander deliberately broke away, heading for the men’s room. It was just about the one place he knew she couldn’t follow him.

And if he happened to stay there until he had to sprint through the halls to make his next class, well, that was his business.
“Hey, Oz.” Seeing Oz was alone, Xander relaxed. He was kind of at Oz’s picnic table after all. The one on the farthest edge of the grounds that Oz retreated to sometimes when he needed to be alone.

“You ok?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Giles had told him what happened.

Oz shrugged. “It probably shouldn’t, but knowing that Pete killed Debbie and Jeff makes it easier.”

“Not to mention Mr. Platt.”

Oz sat down beside him and stared off into the distance. “Giles said that the Hellmouth twists things, influences them,” he said, after a long pause. “He thinks that its influence made it so Pete didn’t even have to drink the stuff he’d invented any more.”

Xander had heard the story from Giles: that Pete Mansfield had been turned into some kind of Jekyll and Hyde monster by some weird science experiment he’d cooked up. That he had been the thing they were hunting, killing anyone who threatened his relationship with his girlfriend Debbie. Oz had been left alone to lock himself in the cage with no one on watch, for once. Willow had been sent home after her session with Giles with specific reading materials and orders to write an essay on magical ethics and the misuse of power and Giles himself had gone to Buffy’s house to ‘discuss’ her actions during the whole Angel fiasco.

Xander had been horrified when he’d learned that Pete had attacked Oz, tearing the door off the book cage last night just before sunset, berating himself for not remembering to tell Giles that Spike thought the cage door was too weak to hold Oz. As a result, Pete had nearly killed Oz. From what Giles said, Oz had barely been able to fight him off long enough for the wolf change to happen. The wolf had killed Pete. Fortunately, the wolf had received enough injuries in the fight that he’d retired to the cage to literally lick his wounds. Werewolf healing being on a par with a vampire’s, Oz had suffered no serious physical effects, the wolf’s wounds had healed to scars by dawn, leaving Oz stiff and sore but basically unharmed.

But Oz wasn’t talking about that and Xander didn’t think he wanted to hear what he was sure would sound to Oz like empty platitudes about acting in self defense. He had a sinking feeling he knew where Oz was going with this.

Oz’s eyes were steady on his. “I think the Hellmouth is influencing Willow. I’m not making excuses for her but the person I know wouldn’t do that to anyone, much less a friend.”

“Maybe but if so, it’s influence, not control. She made the decision.”

“Agreed.”

They lapsed into silence but it wasn’t their usual comfortable silence. Xander tried to think of something, anything, that would express what he was feeling, but came up empty. Surprisingly, Oz got there first.

“I love her.” He slid a sideways glance at Xander. “But I’ve told her if she does something like that again, I’m gone.” He smiled crookedly. “Giles is giving her more stuff to read and has her doing book reports on witches who lost themselves in dark magic.” The smile faded and his own eyes seemed unnaturally dark as he continued. “For what it’s worth, I think she understands what she did
was wrong.”

“Maybe.” Xander didn’t try very hard to conceal his skepticism. “I hope you and Giles can get through to her but I’m done. I’m not interested in her apologies or her excuses,” he said bleakly, feeling again the prickle of magic inside his head, being used against him.

Oz shook his head. “I’m not asking you to forgive her, I just wanted you to know.”

Giles had said pretty much the same thing: that he didn’t expect Xander to just forgive and forget. Even Willow seemed to get that much. She hadn’t come anywhere near him all day, for which Xander was profoundly relieved. It was a small school and they were going to have to talk to each other eventually, but hopefully not for awhile. Not until his heart didn’t pound and his hands shake at the sight of her anyway.

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Spike didn’t bother knocking, slamming his boot into the elaborate wood door and watching with satisfaction as the latch gave and the door flew open, smashing into the wall amid a shower of splinters and plaster chips.

Despite the violence of his entry, he stepped over the threshold calmly, listening intently for any reaction to his presence. “Trick! Show yourself,” he called loudly.

“What’s that about?” Trick complained, gesturing at the door as he walked into the foyer. “I’m expecting guests.”

“Wasn’t in the mood to wait for you to open up,” Spike explained shortly. “Want to tell me what the hell you think you’re doing?”

“Just running a small side business.” Trick gave him a disarming smile.

“Your side business is attracting a lot of unwelcome attention, Trick.” Spike tossed the small duffle bag he was holding to Trick, who fielded it neatly, even though his distaste at touching the grubby, stained material was obvious.

“What’s this?”

“Two of your potential customers.” Spike looked at the other vampire witheringly. “Humans, Trick? You’re recruiting armed humans to take out a Slayer? That’s not how the game is played.”

“Invitation was open to all,” Trick answered smoothly, still holding the bag at arm’s length like he wanted to drop it but was afraid of staining the oriental carpet. “Not my problem if some of the acceptances were from humans.”

“It’s just become your problem. Game’s off. Tell your customers to pack it up and go home. SlayerFest is cancelled. If you really feel the need to hire people to kill a Slayer, wait for the next one. Or until this one’s not in my territory.”

“I’ve already accepted down payments,” Trick objected.

“Like I said, that’s your problem. Don’t care how you do it, but shut it down and send your customers home.” Spike fixed him with a hard look. “If I have to do it for you, you and me are going to have a bit more than words.”

“I can cut you in on the profits,” Trick offered.
“Don’t need money from a bunch of wankers stupid enough to pay to kill a Slayer,” Spike snorted. “’s like paying a human to let you feed. Slayers are there for the taking. Don’t need anyone’s permission to fight one.”

Trick shrugged. “People are always willing to buy things they don’t need, I’m just trying to make a semi-honest living.”

“We’re vampires, we don’t make a living, honest, semi-, or otherwise. You going to shut it down or am I going to take out the rest of your customers after your dust settles into the rug here?”

“No need for violent demonstrations, I’ll take care of it.” Trick smiled again. “As I said, it was just a small side business.”

“Whether you’re a member of my Court or not, Trick, don’t pull this kind of shite without clearin’ it with me first.”

Spike left. He knew Trick well enough to know the other vampire would shut down his ridiculous ‘Let’s Kill the Slayer’ party. When Michael, still faithfully keeping an eye on Trick, had brought him word of Trick’s SlayerFest, Spike had had a hard time believing it wasn’t some kind of joke. Who would pay money for what was essentially a hunting permit for the Slayer? Not like Slayers had game wardens enforcing hunting regulations for them. It was hard for Spike to imagine a demon dumb enough to fall for that.

That humans had fallen for the scheme was more understandable. Humans could be incredibly stupid: Spike had lived through fads for the Charleston, beehive hairdo’s, and pet rocks. In his opinion, humans were capable of any kind of idiocy.

If it had just been demons responding to Trick’s little scheme, Spike probably wouldn’t have stepped in. Slayers were there to be hunted. He wasn’t hunting this one himself, but he’d never agreed to protect her. But the two German assassins had attracted considerable attention within hours of their arrival in town. Even the lackadaisical Sunnydale police had been forced notice their presence. Interpol had that effect on the local constables everywhere in the world. Spike didn’t need official attention on Sunnydale, a couple of articles in outside papers about the small town with the extraordinary death rate could cause considerable problems for the demon population.

He’d taken out the Germans. Known murderers and terrorists, responsible for hundreds of deaths, he didn’t think Xander would mind, although he had no intention of mentioning the incident to his Claimed. He’d scrupulously not fed from them, honoring his word to Xander that he wasn’t killing when he fed, but it hadn’t really been a temptation. Their blood had reeked of chemicals, steroids most prominently, as he’d severed their heads to give to Trick as a hint of just how seriously he was taking the situation.

For hired assassins, they had been surprisingly easy to kill. He’d simply yanked open the door of the van they were using to survey the town and had one out of the van with a broken neck before the second had time to do more than drop his night vision goggles. He’d taken a bullet in the side from the second one before disarming him and twisting his neck viciously until it cracked. That one had managed to get a second gun out before dying but hadn’t gotten another shot off, to Spike’s relief. Bullets hurt and were a decided annoyance.

The bullet had gone cleanly through and Spike had fed deeply from three humans to speed the healing. It should be healed sufficiently by morning so that Xander wouldn’t notice it, not on a school morning when his boy left early with no time for amorous dalliance.

He’d promote Michael to Lieutenant status, since his information had been valid and he’d proved he
could follow orders. Glancing up at the night sky, Spike swore. The whole idiotic business had taken far too much time. He’d already visited Angelus and brought him more blood but had had little time to talk with his Sire before leaving to deal with Trick.

Michael had been waiting at the foot of the apartment stairs when Spike had been leaving at the beginning of the night to visit Angelus. He had a packet of information he’d gathered about Trick’s SlayerFest and, although he’d been incredulous, Spike had known he couldn’t take the risk that the whole thing was just a joke. He needed to check it out immediately, which meant his stop at Angelus’ crypt was by necessity extremely brief.

His Sire was significantly improved and had taken the fresh packets of human blood Spike had lifted from the hospital eagerly and, for a change, without asking how Spike had come by them. Angelus seemed to recognize he was still as weak as a human and had agreed to stay in the crypt one more night. Spike had even brought him a couple of books from the mansion to help him pass the time. He’d debated with himself, but ended up wedging the crypt shut again. He thought it was unlikely that Angelus wouldn’t keep his word, but if Angelus did leave the crypt, he wanted to know it.

It hadn’t taken long to verify Michael’s information that the first of Trick’s customers had already arrived in town, with more expected shortly. Finding the Germans the Sunnydale police station was buzzing about had taken several hours, then feeding and dealing with Trick had used up the rest of the night. It was too close to dawn to return to check on Angelus.

If his Sire continued to improve, maybe tomorrow he’d let him move back to the mansion where he could lay in his own supplies and start taking care of himself. Spike hadn’t been aware of consciously making up his mind but he’d obviously decided at some point that his Sire was back to being Angel, the Vampire with a Soul, and wasn’t a danger to Xander or any other human.

At least as long as Spike kept him away from Buffy, he thought grimly.
“Xander.”

Xander’s whole body tensed at the sound of the quiet voice. He closed his eyes and braced himself, struggling to compose his features into a blank mask before shutting his locker with elaborate care and turning to face Willow.

She looked the same. He almost wished she looked different somehow. As she stood facing him with her arms wrapped around an armload of books, every detail and feature was so achingly familiar: the way her hair glowed in the afternoon sunlight, the curve of her cheek, and the little wrinkle between her mobile eyebrows when, like now, she was worried. How could a stranger be hiding behind her familiar face?

He’d foolishly hoped they wouldn’t have to do this. That, for once in her life, Willow would leave it alone. That she wouldn’t try and fix things that had been shattered beyond repair. He knew it stemmed from the fact that Willow hated change. She liked her world settled around her and, when it inevitably did change, she either tried to put it back the way it had been, or became angry and upset at the fate that wouldn’t bend to her will. For the first time, Xander wondered if that had been part of the reason that Willow never willingly talked about Jesse. Having irretrievably lost a key part of her childhood, had she chosen to deny it had ever existed as her way of coping?

It didn’t matter any more. Xander had Mrs. Cooper. He’d talked to her several times over the summer, sitting on her porch across from Jesse’s old house and exchanging stories about the laughing, dark-haired boy they both missed. He had Spike and Mrs. Summers and Mr. Olsen and other friends, who hadn’t known Jesse but were willing to listen when he needed to talk about the friend whose loss still left an aching hole in his heart.

He knew Willow wanted him to forgive her for what she had done. Even though she had scrupulously avoided him - which he’d suspected was more Oz’s doing than her own inclination - on some level, he’d known this was going to happen sooner or later.

Willow looked dismayed when Xander didn’t say anything, just leaning back against his locker and waiting for her to say whatever it was she had come to say. He didn’t want to do this but, planted directly in front of him, she wasn’t giving him a choice and he saw no reason to make it easy for her.

“How exactly do you think you can do that?”

“I don’t know but, if you let me, I want to try.”

Xander stared over her shoulder for a long moment, wondering if there was even any point in trying to make her understand. “If someone mugged you in an alley, would you be interested in letting that person ‘make it up to you’?” he asked finally.

“I… I don’t know,” Willow admitted. “Maybe, if I thought they were really sincere…” her eyes were begging him to believe in her sincerity.
“You’re telling me you’d agree to walk down a dark alley with the person who mugged you just because they said they were sorry?” He shook his head. “I don’t buy it. You violated my mind, Willow. You used magic to force me to do things I didn’t want to do. It’s not like you can bake me cookies and make it all go away. Why would I ever trust you again? Why would I want to?”

“I didn’t think about it that way. I just thought that it would help Buffy. I never thought about it as dark magic, or as any big deal really. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you did.” Xander turned to walk away.

“Xander!”

“No, Willow. I’m not interested in having you make it up to me. Prove to me you’ve changed first, then maybe we’ll talk.”

Ok, he didn’t really mean that last part, but for Oz’s and Giles’ sake, he threw her a crumb, even though he disagreed with them. If Willow was only reconsidering her actions because she was worried she was going to lose all her friends if she didn’t, then she wasn’t doing it for the right reasons. Xander’s father had tried to quit drinking alcohol for years because his dad’s many bosses had told him to quit or be fired. It never lasted because his dad didn’t really believe he had a drinking problem. And maybe he was being petty, but he couldn’t help noticing that Willow hadn’t actually said she was sorry. It wouldn’t have made a difference, but he’d couldn’t help wondering why she hadn’t said it.

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“Right, on your feet.”

Angelus growled threateningly. “Don’t take that tone with me, Childe.”

“Someone’s feelin’ better,” Spike commented.

The regular supply of large amounts of human blood had done the trick: Angelus was nearly back to full strength. He might not be in full fighting trim yet but that would come soon, as long as Angelus didn’t stop feeding on human blood. For now, Spike still held a slight advantage, in addition to which, Angelus owed him for getting him back on his feet and for sheltering him while he was out of his head. But souled or not, Angelus had always been about control when it came to his family, especially his Childer. Spike had known that the passively obedient Angelus of the past few nights hadn’t been going to last. He hadn’t pushed his control - much - knowing that it wouldn’t last. Angelus was 150 years older than Spike, or at least he had been. That had given him an advantage over and beyond his status as Spike’s Sire. But Angelus had aged substantially during the few months he’d been gone. He felt centuries older. Even in his current weakened state, Spike could feel the increased power that only came with age.

“I appreciate what you’ve done, Spike, but I’m not staying here any longer.”

Spike studied him. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’ll move back into the mansion.”

Spike refrained from rolling his eyes with an effort. Angelus clearly hadn’t lost his taste for conspicuous living. Ridiculous, unsuitable house for a vampire. Not to mention that Spike would have to find a new place to train with Xander. “Bloody stupid living space for a vampire,” was all he said.
“It’s mine.”

Despite the lack of heat in his Sire’s tone, that pretty much summed it up. If Angelus remembered anything about how and where he’d returned, he would have known instantly that Spike had been using the mansion. Spike couldn’t help smirking as he thought about how much that fact must grate on his Sire. Regardless of how and why Angelus had first laid claim to the mansion, it was his, and he was too much a vampire to give up ground to another vampire, even family.

Especially family.

Better than him moving into the factory, in any case. Angelus wouldn’t be part of his Court, wasn’t pleased that Spike was keeping a Court, and it would be awkward, to say the least, to have him there. Just asking for trouble to have an older, stronger vampire, who was also his Sire, not to mention being the notorious Vampire with a Soul, around mucking up the hierarchy. Angelus had lived on the Hellmouth for more than a year without causing much of a ripple in demonic circles. Angelus killed demons, he didn’t associate with them. Let him live at the mansion and help the Slayer. So long as he didn’t lose the bloody soul again, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“Stayin’ in town, then?” he asked casually.

“I was brought back for a reason. I’m supposed to help Buffy.”

This time Spike did roll his eyes. “Oh, please. You were brought back because a teenager with more magical talent than good sense wanted to give a friend a present. Nothin’ pre-ordained about it. You’ve got no more mystical destiny than a lump of coal does. Just got lucky, is all.”

Angelus looked grumpy at the idea that his return wasn’t due to some great, higher purpose. “Buffy got me out of there?”

“Don’t be an idiot, the little redhead brought you back.”

“Willow brought me back?”

“Don’t go rushin’ to thank her. She’s also the one who slapped the soul back in you just before the Slayer shoved you into the vortex.” Spike shrugged, as if flickers of anger didn’t still rise every time he thought about the whole Acathla mess. “Like I said, more power than good sense. And while we’re on the subject, I wouldn’t be fallin’ all over myself to get back with the Slayer, either. She’s the one who couldn’t be bothered to listen to her Watcher long enough to know she didn’t have to shove you bodily into a hell portal to seal it. You owe your little vacation spa century to her.”

Angelus looked away but not before Spike saw the confusion and hurt in his eyes. Oh yeah, Angelus remembered the sword tearing through his chest. Said something about a person that they would kiss you, then stick a sword in you.

“Long as you’re not shagging her, do whatever you like.”

Angelus’ eyes flared with temper. “I don’t need your permission for anything, Childe. Now that I know my soul isn’t permanent, I won’t risk losing it. Other than that, you have no say in anything I chose to do.”

“It’s my territory. I have a say in everything that goes on here.”

They stared each other down for a long moment. Spike wasn’t expecting a response so wasn’t surprised when Angelus deliberately broke eye contact and stepped towards the door. “If you want anything out of the mansion, you should pick it up tonight. I’ll be cleaning out anything that’s left
come the dawn.”

Oh, yeah. It was great to have his Sire back.

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The main room was still a mess and Angelus surveyed it with displeasure. “What have you been up to here, Spike?”

“Teachin’ my boy to defend himself against vampires with delusions of grandeur,” he answered sharply. He and Angelus were going to talk about Xander before he left.

Angelus closed his eyes, looking pained. “Sorry,” he muttered. It wasn’t gracious but it was more than Spike had been expecting.

Bending down, Spike picked up one of the broken pieces of wood from the smashed weapons rack. As his fingers closed around it, he snapped back upright and, in the same swift movement, slammed Angelus back against the wall, bringing the stake up to rest over his heart.

“While we’re on the subject: Xander is mine. Touch him again, for any reason, and you won’t live through the night.”

Angelus stirred, anger showing in the tense lines of his body, and Spike leaned on the makeshift stake a little harder, until it penetrated the skin. Eyes burning into his Sire’s, he growled: “Are we clear?”

He saw Angelus fight down his anger. The dark eyes locked onto his as Angelus said: “I don’t approve but I acknowledge your Claim.”

“Don’t care whether you approve or not, just so long as you stay away from him.” Spike stepped back and let the wood clatter to the stone floor.

Angelus moved like lightning, both hands grabbing a fistful of Spike’s duster as he whirled them around, reversing their positions and slamming Spike up against the wall. “Just once, Childe, because I sorely provoked you with your boy. Don’t threaten me again or you’ll regret it.”

Spike made a scoffing noise at the threat and Angelus shook him once, hard, until his head cracked back against the wall. His point made, Angelus released his grip and took several steps back.

Spike grinned crookedly, knowing his Sire was deliberately disengaging so that they didn’t get caught up in a perpetual cycle of who-threatened-who-last. Tempting as it was, he didn’t respond to Angelus’ threats.

“Left some weapons behind, other than that there’s nothing I want here.”

From the look Angelus shot him, he hadn’t missed the dig but he just nodded and waved for Spike to go ahead.

Collecting the best of the weapons he’d stored at the mansion, Spike hesitated for one second, then just shrugged. “Ta, mate,” he said flippantly and strode off without another word.
Chapter 16

“It’s not enough that I already have one job. No, not for old Snide-man. I have to do a second job - the band’s job. They’re too good to raise their own money.”

Spike had woken to the sound of Xander’s voice, muttering complaints quietly to himself in the living room. Listening for a moment, Spike grinned as Xander expressed his remarkably colorful opinion of the school principal. Stretching, Spike rolled to his feet and padded barefoot across to the couch where Xander was sitting, moodily eating candy bars. Judging by the wrappers scattered around him, a lot of candy bars. Dropping a kiss on Xander’s forehead, Spike swung himself over the back of the couch and sat down beside him. “Didn’t really follow that, luv.”

“Principal Snyder is making everyone sell band candy. Personally, I think the band should have to sell their own candy but Snyder just gives you that ‘I can wipe out your GPA with one computer keystroke’ look and somehow resistance seems very futile.” Xander took another bite. “Fortunately, it’s really good chocolate. Much better than the stuff Cordy passed out when she was bribing people to vote for her for prom queen.”

Spike cocked his head curiously. “Thought you said you were selling it?”

“Hey, working guy here. I can buy a few bars from myself if I want to. Like I said, it’s really good.”

“Bad vampire. My chocolate.”

“Not a dog,” he snapped, annoyed.


Spike’s irritation faded. “Got somethin’ in mind, luv?”

“Yep. Sex, lots and lots of sex.”

Spike’s eyebrows rose in amusement. “Interesting plan, that,” he purred. “Anythin’ I can do to help?”

“Now that you mention it…” Xander launched himself at Spike, pushing him back down into the cushions and kissing him hungrily. Spike returned the kiss with enthusiasm, opening his mouth under Xander’s, as Xander’s tongue darted in aggressively, tasting, exploring, plundering. Xander moved on quickly, nibbling his way down Spike’s neck and Spike threw his head back, shivers going through him at the erotic feeling of Xander’s teeth at his throat. He sometimes wished that Xander had proper fangs, so that Spike could experience again the ecstatic pain/pleasure of needle sharp fangs sinking into his flesh. After sex with Drusilla, Spike had often been covered with bite marks and it was a purely demonic pleasure he sometimes missed.

He actually jumped when Xander bit him, hard, on the shoulder, hard enough to draw blood, he realized in astonishment as Xander’s tongue darted out to lap at the droplets with little cat licks. “Pay attention,” Xander scolded.

“I’m payin’ attention, luv,” Spike assured him, thrusting his hips up against Xander’s weight in case
his boy had any doubts.

“Good.” Xander sat up slightly and yanked at Spike’s shirt, trying to tear it off and failing. He growled. “Off, get this off.”

“Right, luv. Off it is.” Spike obligingly reached up with both hands and tore his black t-shirt off in one quick jerk, baring his chest to Xander’s avid gaze.

Xander ran his hands over the smooth, pale flesh. “Mine,” he crooned, “all mine.” Bending down, he slid his hands under Spike’s back and began licking and nipping at his nipples, quickly bringing them to hard peaks, as his nails scratched down Spike’s back.

Arching his back to give Xander more room to work, Spike lost himself in Xander’s unusually aggressive love-making. Xander was moving against him, rubbing his erection against Spike’s thigh and Spike could feel how close he was to orgasm already. Spike wasn’t far behind his eager partner, the biting and scraping nails having brought him to a quick, hard arousal. Neither even had their jeans off yet, he realized and was reaching down to remedy the situation when Xander gave a sharp cry and stiffened, jerking a last few times against Spike’s thigh as he came hard.

Chuckling, Spike rolled them over so he was on top. “In a bit of a hurry tonight, luv. See if I can catch up.” Straddling Xander’s leg, Spike humped himself against Xander’s thigh, nuzzling into the crook of Xander’s neck and inhaling deeply, loving the mingled odors of sweat, semen and Xander. Feeling his own orgasm approaching rapidly, he shifted to game face and yanked Xander’s collar down, exposing his mark. He slid his fangs in, renewing the mark and tasting Xander’s pheromone-spiked blood even as he exploded into orgasm, his hips jerking along Xander’s thigh as he came hard.

Relaxing back onto Xander’s body, Spike licked the last few drops of blood off the fresh bite mark. He’d been renewing his mark more frequently since Angelus’ return. Despite all indications that Angel was in the driver’s seat and had no interest in Xander, Spike couldn’t help himself. He needed to know that Xander was clearly marked as off limits to anyone else. Fortunately, Xander didn’t mind, loving the eroticism of Spike drinking from him. Spike smirked down at his boy, still panting and dazed from the short, frantic bout of sex. He slid his fangs in, renewing the mark and tasting Xander’s pheromone-spiked blood even as he exploded into orgasm, his hips jerking along Xander’s thigh as he came.

Something was slightly off, though, and Spike’s brow furrowed as he tried to pin it down. Running his tongue over his lips, he lifted his head and looked thoughtfully at Xander. His boy was sprawled beneath him, looking thoroughly shagged and incapable of moving and Spike smiled in satisfaction at the sight, but his smiled faded rapidly as that sense of something not quite right lingered.

Bending over, he ran his tongue over his mark, probing, tasting the blood. Xander’s blood tasted subtly wrong. He probed again, rasping his tongue over the still open marks, ignoring Xander’s mutter of protest. Closing his eyes, Spike concentrated hard on the taste, extending his senses to their fullest. Rich and hot, flavored with Xander’s unique scent, spiked with pheromones from sex, there was a slightly bitter after-taste, like wine turning to vinegar, a minute prickle of sickly orange beneath the warm greens and browns that were Xander’s natural flavors.

Magic.

Spike swore and sat up, pulling Xander up to a sitting position, despite Xander’s drowsy: “le’m go.”

“Xander!” Spike said sharply. “Need you to talk to me.”
“Wanna sleep.”

Ordinarily, Spike found it endearing that Xander was usually so sated after sex that he just wanted to fall asleep immediately afterwards, cradled in Spike’s arms. Right now, it was just an obstacle.

“Sorry, luv. Need you to stay awake.” He shook Xander gently until Xander opened his eyes and fixed him with a bleary, annoyed look.

“This is so not the way to get more sex,” he muttered. “What?”

“Xander, someone’s done a spell on you. What’s going on?”

“No one’s done any magic,” Xander protested, but his bleary look sharpened and he began to look worried.

“Can taste it in your blood, luv,” Spike told him. “Might not be a spell directly on you, but you’ve been exposed to magic, enough that it’s lingering in your blood.”

The last of the sleepiness vanished from Xander’s eyes. “No one’s done any magic around me, except that spell Willow did.” Xander looked completely panicked now. “You mean, what she did was permanent? Giles was sure there weren’t going to be any side effects. I’m not cut out to be a mindless robot. Oh, god, what if I become just like the Cordettes? They don’t have a single original thought between them, they just do whatever Cordelia says. I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to have to do everything Willow says.”

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“Willow, she did that spell, and Giles said there could be permanent damage but then he said that I was so pissed off about it that there probably wasn’t. And I was sure there wasn’t, because man did I let Willow have it, well, actually Giles did, I was too freaked out to say much of anything, but I felt like telling her off and I didn’t forgive her when she asked me to, so we were sure there weren’t any permanent effects, like being a mindless robot or never being able to lie to anyone again, and sometimes you just gotta lie because otherwise people might get torn to pieces and I don’t want that even if I’m still mad at her, but now you say you can taste magic in me and…”

“Xander, stop!” Really worried now, Spike put his hand over Xander’s mouth, cutting him off in mid-stream. He could feel Xander squirming, trying to say something but he needed to think. “One minute, luv. Can’t think when you’re babbling like that.”

He pushed back the rising fury and forced himself to think. He’d bitten Xander last two nights ago and his blood had not tasted of magic then. “When did Willow do a spell on you?” he asked, lifting his hand off Xander’s mouth.

“Um, about a week ago…” Xander’s voice trailed off and he looked wide-eyed at Spike. “Oops, I didn’t mean to tell you about that. Pretend I didn’t say anything.” Xander looked sly, like he was pulling something over on Spike and he opened his mouth to continue but Spike held one hand up sharply for him to be quiet. Xander looked mutinous at being cut off again but closed his mouth obediently.

Spike looked at him sternly. “You’re going to tell me exactly what you’re talking about, but not right now. Whatever is going on is more recent than last week. Has anything different happened in the last day or so?”

Xander shook his head emphatically. “Nope. Nothing new. Just the same old boring class stuff. Nothing Hellmouthy going on at all: no spells, no demons, no research, no…”
Spike’s hand cut him off again. “Got it, pet,” he said dryly. “You’re not aware of anything unusual.”

Coming to a decision, he stood, pulling Xander up behind him. “Let’s go see the Watcher, luv. See if he knows what’s happened to you. Get changed.”

“Who died and made you god?” Xander complained even as Spike hustled him into the bathroom for a quick shower. He couldn’t drag Xander through town smelling of sex, boy was enough of a target already without adding that temptation. Xander seemed to find his own remark very funny and started giggling. “Oh, that’s right, you’re a vampire. You died.”

Spike rolled his eyes as he quickly stripped first Xander’s, then his own clothes off, and started the shower, wondering what kind of magic would cause someone to act like an drunk 15-year old. What would be the point of something like that?

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By the time they arrived at the Watcher’s, Spike was ready to gag Xander. The boy hadn’t stopped talking once as they went first to the school, then to the Watcher’s apartment: streams of inane blather and lame jokes just poured out of him and Spike had found himself thinking that, if Xander was normally like this, he’d never have been interested in the boy, much less fallen in love with him. As it was, he just kept reminding himself that it wasn’t Xander’s fault and promising himself he would make whoever did this pay.

Even if it wasn’t dangerous, it was incredibly annoying.

As they approached the Watcher’s apartment, a black SUV screeched noisily around the corner, swinging wide and nearly clipping a parked car.

“Hey, isn’t that Buffy?” Xander twisted around to watch the car careen down the street, his pace slackening as he did. “How come her mom lets her drive? Spike, would you loan me the money to buy me a car? If Buffy can drive, I should be able to, too.” He giggled. “To, too. That came out weird. Seriously, you know I’m a better driver than you, so what d’ya say?”

“But Buffy’s driving.”

“If that’s an example of her driving, Slayer shouldn’t be allowed behind the wheel. Probably stole the car from her mum.” Spike tugged Xander after him down the steps to the Watcher’s apartment, The Watcher better have an answer, and fast. “You’ll have to fetch him outside, luv,” he reminded Xander. “I’ve never been invited in.”

“Really? That’s rude of Giles,” Xander looked upset.

“Not really, never been here before.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, that’s ok then, he can invite you in and we can all sit around and talk. You and Giles still don’t really know each other.”

“Right.” Spike had taken to mechanically agreeing to most of Xander’s suggestions. He was fairly sure that at one point he’d even agreed to take Xander to Disneyland. If Xander remembered any of this, Spike was going to deny that one ‘til he was dust.

“Hey, G-Man!” Xander rat-a-tatted on the door, then quickly pushed it open. “We need to… Oh, my
Looking over his shoulder, Spike was astonished to see the Watcher in mid-snog with Joyce Summers. The two jumped apart and the Watcher looked furious.

“What the bloody hell are you two doing? Shift’s over and I’m off the clock. Sod off, the both of you.”

“Giles?” Xander looked pole-axed, whether from the sharp reprimand or, more likely, from the unbelievable sight of the Watcher snogging with his Slayer’s mum.

“Yeah, well you’re back on the clock now, mate. Something’s going on.” Deciding there was nothing he could say to Joyce that she wouldn’t take the wrong way, Spike settled for nodding at her to acknowledge her presence. Any other time and he would have given her a thumbs up. Joyce could undoubtedly do better but the lady deserved to cut loose. The fact that the Slayer was not going to like this little development was just a bonus. Spike couldn’t wait to describe it to her in excruciating detail as soon as whatever was going on was over.

“Take care of it yourself,” Giles snapped and Spike glared at him, his eyes narrowing in yellow-eyed anger.

“Someone’s done a spell on Xander. Bit more important than you gettin’ some. Sorry, Joyce,” he added.

“Someone’s done a spell on Xander? Ripper, we have to help. I’m sure it won’t take long. You’re so smart, you’ll figure it out immediately.”

Giles just looked sulky. “Oh, very well.” He reached for a pack of cigarettes off the mantle and lit up, eyes sparkling with malicious enjoyment. “Can’t invite you in, of course,” he said provocingly. “Just because Xander and Buffy are bloody stupid enough to get involved with vampires, doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“Giles! What’s wrong with you?” Xander looked bewildered and hurt and like he was sobering up a bit.

Spike tightened his grip on Xander’s wrist slightly, preventing Xander from entering the apartment. He wasn’t going to let Xander go somewhere he couldn’t follow, not when whatever was going on seemed to be affecting the Watcher as well. Joyce too, probably, given the way she was talking to the Watcher like a teenager with a crush rather than the smart, feisty woman that Spike knew. He took a deep breath, scenting the air, but couldn’t smell anything other than cigarette smoke, alcohol, chocolate and pheromones. Two had been getting ready to make a right bloody orgy of it from the smell of the apartment.

“Gettin’ bloody tired of you children expecting me to fix things for you,” he heard Giles say spitefully to Xander.

“Watcher!” Spike roared as Xander took a step backwards, looking devastated. “Shut your gob!” Spell or not, he was furious that the Watcher would lose control enough to hurt Xander. His boy thought of the twit as a surrogate father. After his own father’s neglect and indifference, hearing similar sentiments from his chosen father figure would crush Xander. Watcher better hope Xander didn’t remember what he’d just said when this was all over, Spike thought wrathfully.

Probably due to the fact that Joyce gasped and stepped closer to him, clinging to his arm as Spike shifted to game face to emphasize his fury, the Watcher did shut up. “Stop acting like a prat and
focus,” Spike told him angrily. “Xander’s under a spell and, from the looks of things, so are you and Joyce.”

“Oh, I don’t think we’re under any kind of spell, Spike,” Joyce said. “We’ve just been talking about Buffy and, well, one thing lead to another. Ripper’s quite exciting when you get to know him.”

Xander looked appalled and Spike couldn’t help agreeing with him. He was worriedly aware that the Watcher was almost no use to him under these circumstances.

“Anythin’ unusual happen today?”

“Just me realizing what a waste my life’s been recently.”

Spike held back a snarl with an effort. “I meant magical or havin’ to do with the Hellmouth, not you realizing what a pathetic git you are,” he snapped.

Giles glared at him. “Don’t have to take that from you.”

“You’ll take anything I tell you to.” Spike shook his head, this was a waste of time. “Come on, Xander. We need to find someone useful.” He stalked off, tugging Xander after him. No way would he trust the Watcher in this state to look after his boy. Xander was better off staying with him.

At the top of the stairs, Spike paused, having no real idea of what to do. Magic was not something he generally involved himself with. Killing the witch who cast the spell sometimes broke the enchantment, but not always. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully on Xander. He’d said something about Willow doing a spell on him. If the witch was working mojo again, maybe she was responsible for what was happening.

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Spike cursed. The redhead wasn’t home. They’d already been to the school and the Watcher’s and she wasn’t at either place, they’d seen the Slayer driving in her mum’s car, so it wasn’t likely she would be at home. Fortunately, Sunnydale didn’t offer many options for teenagers on a school night. “Let’s check out the Bronze, luv.”

“No.”

“Xander?” Spike was surprised by Xander’s sudden intransigence. His boy had trotted along after him docilely, complaining about Giles’ attitude and vocalizing every other thought that went through his mind, no matter how ridiculous. Now, suddenly, he was digging in his heels and struggling against Spike’s hold.

“I don’t go to the Bronze.”

“Looking for the Slayer and Red, luv. Not many other places they’re likely to be. Not plannin’ on spendin’ any more time there than necessary.”

“No.”

“Xander, we need to find out what’s wrong.”

“You go without me.”

“Not leavin’ you alone, luv. Not ‘til I know what’s happened to you.”

“Don’t want to.” Xander looked away and Spike smelled the salt of tears.
“Xander?” When he didn’t respond, Spike put a gentle hand to his cheek, turning Xander’s face back towards himself. “What’s wrong, luv?”

“Jesse died there.” The whisper was so quiet that Spike could barely hear it.

“Oh, luv.” He folded Xander into his arms and held him as Xander clung to him, shaking.

“I’ve only been inside once since the night he died,” Xander admitted. “It used to make me sick to even think about going inside.” He sniffed loudly and pushed back. “Dumb, I know,” he said, shamefaced, wiping the tears away angrily.

“Not wrong to mourn your friend.” Spike gave him a crooked smile. “Drank myself into a stupor every night for a month after Drusilla died. We all grieve in our own ways.”

He gave Xander a moment to pull himself together. “We need to do this, luv. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah.” Spike thought Xander was going to say more, but apparently the mood swing had dried up his streams of prattle for the moment. He gave Xander a quick hug.

“Let’s see what we can find out.”

Ok, I’m officially sorry we came.”

Spike agreed. He didn’t have much use for the Bronze even under normal circumstances, but tonight’s crowd was exceptionally worthless. The dance floor was filled with a crowd of people much older than the teens who usually frequented the place and all of them were behaving like public school kids on holiday - drinking, screaming, snogging and whatnot. A group of middle-aged men were on stage, tunelessly belting out ‘Louie, Louie’. Spike was fairly sure even Xander would agree that was grounds for torturing and killing them.

There were a couple of vampires in the crowd, but neither was a member of his Court, Spike was pleased to see. He’d expressed his contempt for vampires who went after easy prey often enough, and the people inside the club tonight wouldn’t pose a challenge to a day-old fledge. It was good to know the members of the Court were following his lead in choosing their prey.

Xander was looking around, appalled. “A lot of these people are my teachers. Oh my God, Mrs. Whitcomb… Gross, that’s Mr. Talbert she’s making out with. I’m never going to be able to concentrate in math class again.”

Spike was glad to see Xander’s fascinated horror had overcome his reluctance to enter the club. He’d felt Xander’s tension and seen the way his eyes avoided one particular spot, until the middle-aged orgy had caught his attention and made him forget the past. It was worryingly obvious that the spell had affected half the town. He caught a glimpse of a familiar blonde.

“There’s the Slayer,” he pointed out to Xander.

Forcing their way through the crowd, Spike was seriously tempted to start feeding. A nice stampede would be useful to clear these ridiculous prats out of the club.

“Buffy, what’s going on?”

“Xander?” Buffy turned to face them, and Spike was amused to see the same look of horrified disgust on her face that was still on Xander’s. “I don’t know what’s happening. Oz and Willow just left. They’re going to contact Giles and start researching, try to figure out what’s causing everyone to
behave like this.” She looked around again, like someone who couldn’t tear their eyes away from a traffic accident. “This is just not normal,” she complained, watching a short, balding guy with big ears chasing a 40-ish brunette who looked like she was wearing her daughter’s clothes.

“’course it’s not normal, it’s a spell.”

Buffy’s eyes swung towards him. “How do you know that?” she asked suspiciously.

“What else would cause something this widespread?” Spike asked, exasperated. “Xander’s infected as well, can feel the magic in him.”

“Why would anyone want to do this? This is just… gross.” Xander was still staring at the crowd, wincing at some of the overt sexual activity. “Grown-ups aren’t supposed to behave this way.”

“Don’t generally mind orgies myself, but I tend to agree with you about this one, pet.” Spike looked around dismissively, his eyes falling on two grey-haired men pushing each other in what looked like the start of a uniquely pathetic fight. Something was odd about the way they were pushing each other and Spike realized they were each clutching a candy bar in one hand, and only using their free hands to push at the other.

Candy.

Spike scanned the club again, and opened up his sense of smell at the same time. He was immediately assaulted by the odors of sweaty bodies, too much perfume, alcohol, pheromones… and chocolate. Half the people in the club seemed to be holding candy bars even as they drank, danced, played pool, and groped each other.

“The candy bars.”

“What?” Buffy looked at him like he was losing it.

“Where did the candy come from?”

“The school,” Xander said helpfully. “I told you, Snyder is making everyone sell Band Candy this year.”

“You ate a bunch of it, luv. Watcher’s apartment smelled of chocolate and this place reeks of it.”

“You think something’s wrong with the candy?”

“Xander’s been acting off since he ate half a box of it.”

“I have not! And it wasn’t half a box…”

“Hush, luv. Not your fault.” Xander subsided unwillingly and Spike hid a grin. Seeing the evidence of the spell’s effects all around him had done wonders for snapping Xander out of it. He seemed to be trying to behave normally as if to prove he wasn’t as bad as the adults who were currently displaying whole new levels of meaning for the word immature. “Makes sense, don’t it? Look around - half the wankers in here have a candy bar in their hand.”

“Oh, no. I sold half of mine to my mother and half to Giles,” Buffy groaned.

“Yeah, we saw how that turned out.”

“What do you mean?” The Slayer asked sharply and Spike didn’t even try not to say it.
“Nothing to worry about, just caught the two of them snogging.” Despite the circumstances, Spike couldn’t help smirking at the look of absolute horror on Buffy’s face.

“You mean…? My mother and Giles were kissing? Oh, god, I’m going to need years of therapy. Where are they?”

“Safe enough. They’re at the Watcher’s.” He couldn’t resist. “Don’t fret. Chances of them producing a kid from tonight’s little love-in are low, they’re still physically the same age.”

“What? And you left them there? I’ve got to stop them.” Buffy turned to leave and Spike shot out a hand to stop her.

“Got more important things to take care of, Slayer. We need to find out who’s doin’ the mojo and stop them.”

To his surprise, the Slayer actually listened. She gave herself a quick shake, like she was clearing her head, and settled down to business. She glanced at Xander, who was still having difficulty focusing and was looking around the club again, and seemed to accept he wasn’t going to be of much use tonight. “I didn’t eat any of the candy and neither did Willow. Oz, I’m not sure about but he seemed normal. We could…”

“Not having the witch anywhere near my boy.” Spike interrupted with a growl. Until he knew what Xander had been talking about, he wasn’t taking any chances.

Buffy shot Xander a quick, somewhat guilty look. “She didn’t mean any harm, Spike. She was just trying to help.”

It infuriated Spike to have the Slayer confirm that she knew about whatever had happened between Willow and Xander. He couldn’t even call her on it without revealing his own lack of knowledge. “Don’t need her kind of help,” he snarled. He hadn’t missed the fact that the Watcher knew about it as well, and he was both furious and hurt that Xander hadn’t told him about something like that. As soon as Xander was back to normal, they were going to have a talk, but it had to wait, for now.

Buffy buried her face in her hands for a second, before looking up again, her eyes sharp with clear purpose and Spike found himself adjusting his opinion of her intelligence. Slightly.

“Where is the candy coming from?” she asked. “We need to find the source. That will probably give us the person doing the spell and why.

“Don’t really care why,” Spike said, all he cared about was getting his hands on the person responsible.

“There has to be some reason, this is too much for someone’s idea of a joke,” she responded, gesturing around at the crowded club. “And I doubt that the reason is something good.” She looked hard at Spike: “This is about stopping them, not killing them.”

Spike responded with a feral grin. “Depends on who they are, don’t it?”

Slayer didn’t argue the point, her eyes fastening on someone in the crowd. She exclaimed suddenly in satisfaction and pounced on the short, balding man Spike had noticed earlier, yanking him free of the melee around the shoving match and dragging him back towards Spike and Xander.

“We need to talk, Snyder.”
It had only taken one flash of Spike’s demonic features to get the principal to tell them everything he knew. Spike actually shifted back to human almost immediately when it looked like the man was going to piss himself in fear, he didn’t need that smell adding to the odors already filling the club. Everything wasn’t much in this case, just that the school board had provided the chocolate and Snyder knew which warehouse it was stored in.

The Slayer had wanted him to leave Xander behind as they went to the warehouse but Spike adamantly refused. Xander would be safe with Spike and he wasn’t leaving him at the mercy of a bunch of bespelled morons, not when Xander was in the same condition.

They’d run into the Watcher and Joyce near the warehouse and the Slayer had gotten distracted, arguing and attempting to reason with two people under a spell. Xander had watched wide-eyed as Joyce and Giles played the part of teenage rebels to Buffy’s fussing adult but Spike rapidly lost patience with the show.

“ENOUGH! All of you!” he roared. Three heads snapped around to face him. “Watcher, either sober up or clear off. Slayer, we don’t have time for this. Joyce, well actually, you keep doin’ what you’re doin’, like you like this,” he finished with a grin. Hearing Joyce say ‘screw you’ to her daughter and seeing the look on Buffy’s face had been priceless.

“Now, if we’re all back on track, let’s do something about the candy give-away program, shall we?”

Buffy seemed to give up on persuading Giles to take her mother home. “Fine, you guys can come. Mom, stay close to me.” Still flushed with anger from arguing with teen-rebel Giles, she stomped towards the warehouse, towing her mother behind her in a flurry of long skirts and ridiculous feathered coat.

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Getting inside had proved easy. The crowd jostling for candy outside weren’t interested in anything beside getting more chocolate. Spike and Buffy had taken out the two men distributing the chocolate with a pair of well-placed punches, then simply kicked in the door and hauled their protesting charges into the relative calm of the interior.

“You guys stay here and try to stay out of trouble.”

Hearing a voice, near the back, Spike told Xander, “wait here, pet. Stay out of trouble.”

“Of course I will. Not a five-year old.”

“I know, luv. Just a little off your game today.”

The Slayer clearly recognized the slender man talking on the phone in the back of the warehouse. “Ethan Rayne.”

The man spun around to face them, then broke and ran. Spike was on him before he’d gotten five feet, grabbing him and slamming him down against the table, pinning him easily. The man reeked of chaos magic, overpowering even the smell of the thousands of chocolate bars in the warehouse.

“Ethan.”

Great. The Watcher had followed them into the back.

“Hello, Ripper.”
The two might as well be carrying signs saying they used to be lovers; the emotional history between them so obvious it was practically visible. Spike tightened his grip, bringing the man’s attention back towards him.

“So, Ethan, what are we playing here? We’re pretty much in a talk-or-bleed situation. Your call.”

As an intimidation attempt, it wasn’t too bad but the Slayer really needed to work on her technique, she sounded more perky than menacing. The Watcher wasn’t helping, hopping around in the background encouraging his Slayer to just hit the man. Spike shifted to his true face and glared down at the slender man, who was clearly not a fighter. He grinned ferally as the fear scent sharply increased.

“Not a patient man,” he said. “Not a man at all. Your spell affected my Claimed.” He wrapped a hand around the man’s upper arm. “Answer the question or this is the first body part to go. What did you do to the candy?”

Satisfyingly, his captive went white with fear, his heartbeat speeding up to panic levels and he said quickly: “Just a spell, it won’t have any permanent effects. It’s a combination that lowers inhibitions and decreases the subject’s sense of responsibility. It’ll wear off in a few hours with no permanent effects. Your Claimed will be fine.”

Spike appreciated the fact that the man obviously recognized how serious a mistake it was to harm a Master Vampire’s Claimed human. He was clearly telling the truth. Seeing Spike relax slightly, Rayne continued, still nervously: “I-I’d just like to point out that this wasn’t my idea. I’m subcontracting. It’s Trick you want. I’m just helping him collect a tribute.”

“Trick?” Rage flooded him. This was Trick’s idea of low profile? He’d warned Trick not to pull stunts that got the attention of the authorities. SlayerFest had been bad enough but this stunt had affected half the town. Trick was dust. What on earth had made him think Spike would permit this kind of thing? Or that he wouldn’t find out who was responsible?

Spike focused on his surroundings again. The Slayer was asking questions and the chaos mage was doing his best to answer around Spike’s constricting hold on his throat. He hadn’t even realized he’d nearly shut off the man’s air. He eased up slightly and listened as the man described the reason behind tonight’s fun and games: a demon that needed tribute.

Spike snorted in disgust. You didn’t pay demons tribute, you killed them. Much easier. The mage didn’t know anything more and Spike shook him. “You endangered my Claimed,” he said, his voice low and deadly. “That’s not something you walk away from.”

“Spike! Let him go!” The Slayer was pushing between them, trying to get between him and his lawful prey. Spike snarled.

“Stay out of this, Slayer. I protect what’s mine.”

“Stop, right now, or I’m getting Xander. You going to kill him in front of Xander?”

Spike glared at her. Killing a chaos mage who’d put a spell on his Claimed was clearly within his rights but Xander probably wouldn’t see it that way. Reluctantly, he gave in to her tugging.

“You get to live, because that’s what my boy would want,” he told the white-faced man. Still gripping the man’s jaw, he squeezed hard, relishing the feeling of the man’s struggles to breathe. “This is a one-time deal. If you’re still in town tomorrow, I’ll eviscerate you and my boy will never know.”
He released his hold and let the man slip to the floor as his knees buckled. He stayed there, gasping for breath, thoroughly cowed, looking up at Spike with frightened eyes. Unable to speak, he just nodded acquiescence.

Yanking him up by his shirt front, Spike threw one punch that sent the mage crumpling unconscious to the floor. “Right. That takes care of that.”

“Not exactly. There’s still the demon to be taken care of.”

Spike looked at her in exasperation. “That’s your territory, not mine. A demon that wants tribute probably isn’t worth fighting.” He strode back towards the front of the warehouse where he’d left Xander without waiting for a response.

Xander and Joyce were talking and staying out of trouble, as promised. Xander’s eyes lit up at the sight of him. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, all taken care of, luv. Let’s head home.”

“Not so fast. We still have to take care of Lurconis.”

“Lurconis?” Xander’s brow furrowed. “Why does that sound so familiar?”

“You’ve heard of it?” Buffy asked sharply.

“Not sure, but it sounds familiar.”

“It’s a demon, it needs a big tribute, that’s all I know.”

“Lurconis…” Everyone waited while Xander searched his memory. “Lurconis!” he said again, triumphantly this time. “It’s a ssrushnar demon.” He beamed, proud of himself.

“Good work, luv. Ssrushnar, huh? That means big snake to you,” Spike told the Slayer. “Tribute will be humans of some kind, probably kiddies.”

“Xander, do you know where it can be found?” Buffy pressed urgently.

“‘Lurconis dwells beneath the city,’” Giles muttered.

“What?”

“I know this one. ‘Lurconis dwells beneath the city, filth to filth,’” the Watcher repeated, obviously quoting something. “Lurconis means ‘glutton’ and we’ll find him…”

“…in the sewers!” Xander finished excitedly. Then he made a face. “Great, more disgusting stuff in a night that’s already had more than its share.” He shot a meaningful look at Giles, who didn’t notice.

“Well, good luck with that, all of you. C’mon, Xander, let’s get you home until the spell wears off.”

Xander just gave him that look. The one that said without a word that he understood Spike’s position but that this was non-negotiable. Spike sighed. The candy was obviously wearing off if Xander was back to getting Spike to behave completely against his grain with barely more than a token protest. “Right, the sewers it is.”

Xander’s brilliant, loving smile was back as well.
They made a motley crew, traipsing through the sewers towards the area that the Watcher thought was the most likely spot to find Lurconis: Joyce in her feathered coat and long skirts, determined to help the intended sacrifices; the Watcher doing his young Marlon Brando impression, still inclined to grope Joyce occasionally, despite the Slayer’s attempts to separate them; the Slayer, dressed as always fashionably, not practically, picking her way through the muck and complaining about demons living in non-shoe friendly places when she wasn’t trying to get her mum and her Watcher to behave; Xander, twining his fingers with Spike’s and rattling on about everything he’d read about sssrushnar demons; and Spike, bringing up the rear with Xander and thinking it would be easier to herd cats than control this lot, was wishing Xander was back to normal and hoping that somehow this night would end in a good, rousing fight that would allow him to work off some of his pent-up aggression. He couldn’t believe he’d let the chaos mage live after pulling this stunt.

He couldn’t believe he’d let the chaos mage live after pulling this stunt. Maybe the mage would ignore his warning and stay in town so Spike could kill him. The thought cheered him up considerably.

As they neared the juncture the Watcher had been leading them to, Spike could hear voices chanting. Great. Not only were these wankers paying tribute to a snake demon, they were doing it ritually. Oh, well, he’d had always enjoyed mucking up rituals - made the participants cranky.

Spike stopped his group well back from the area and signaled for everyone to be quiet. Listening intently, he struggled to sort out what was happening. “Right, then,” he told them quietly. “They’re a level below us and in what sounds like a large space. They have at least two babies - can hear them crying - and there are four or five people involved in the ritual.”

“Spike and I will go in first,” Buffy decided. “Giles, wait for a minute, then follow us and get the babies out of there.”

“What about us?” Xander asked, indicating himself and Joyce.

“Yes, honey, we want to help too.”

“Mom, I need you to stay out of this. I can’t fight if I’m worrying about you.”

“Get over yourself, Slayer.” Did she really think that was the way to handle things? “Xander, follow the Watcher down. Watch Joyce’s back and keep an eye out for Lurconis.” Spike fished a stake out of his duster and handed it to Xander. “Joyce, we’re going to need you to look after the babies. You’re the only one got any experience with kids. Stay close to Giles and the two of you get the babies out as fast as possible. Don’t wait for us.”

Buffy’s lips tightened at Spike’s orders but she didn’t counter them. Probably actually knew that her mother wasn’t the kind to hang back and stay out of danger, had just been hoping to guilt trip her into it. “Ready?” he asked.

Everyone nodded. Spike and Buffy took the lead, closing the remaining distance to the entrance to the room where the ritual was nearing the finish. Looking down through the circular opening, Spike disdained the ladder, jumping the one-story drop and landing lightly, moving aside quickly as the Slayer followed suit. He took in the set-up with one sweeping glance as he heard the Watcher jump down behind his Slayer, landing clumsily and much harder than either Spike or the Slayer.

Four babies were in some sort of wheeled contraption with a robed vampire chanting over them and
drizzling blood around. Three others stood nearby, also dressed like rejects from a monastery. Trick was there as well, and Spike let his gaze linger on him for a moment, making a silent promise of painful final death. A human was already halfway out the ground floor entrance, having turned to slip out the moment Spike appeared.

The vampires were barely worth the trouble staking, the ashes of the first pair clouding the air before Xander finished helping Joyce down the ladder. Trick ducked back against the wall, sidling around the fight and sprinting for the same entrance the human had left by in the few moments that the Slayer and he were occupied. Typical. Joyce and the Watcher did as ordered - grabbing the wheeled cart and pushing it and its cargo of screaming babies out the main entrance and away from the fight.

Mopping up the remaining vampires went quickly and was over before Lurconis showed his ugly head. Spike was reluctantly impressed by the Slayer’s use of the exposed pipes to create a makeshift flamethrower. Not a fan of open flame weapons, it wasn’t something Spike would have thought of himself, but it made quick work of Lurconis.

“Right, then,” he announced over the fading roar of the flames consuming the snake, tucking his stake away and settling his duster properly over his shoulders. “All taken care of and we’re off.” He snagged Xander, who was watching Lurconis burn with a half-fascinated, half-nauseated expression, and tugged him towards the exit and away from the smell of roasting snake. Xander was not talking him into helping return the babies to wherever they belonged. Between the squalling and the stink of messy diapers, he simply wasn’t prepared to guarantee their safe arrival if he was involved.

Xander gave him a sloppy, affectionate kiss, oblivious to the reaction of the others, and followed him without protest, apparently as willing as Spike to let the others deal with the babies.

“Let’s get you home, luv.”

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Trick had repaired the door that Spike had kicked in on his last visit and Spike felt a flicker of amusement through his anger as he splintered the jamb for a second time. Trick should really consider investing in a metal door that might actually keep unwanted guests out.

He’d left Xander at the apartment, after extracting a promise that Xander would stay put and go to bed. Hopefully, Xander would be back to normal in the morning, as the chaos mage had promised. It seemed likely, given the relative silence as they walked through the quieting town back to the factory. Xander seemed far more normal as the never-ending stream of words seemed finally to have dried up at the source as his boy walked beside him, leaning wearily into Spike, blessedly quiet at last. He’d simply told Xander he had some business to take care of, cleaning up the last of the mess from the spell. Xander had been too sleepy to ask many questions and Spike was confident his boy would stay put, leaving Spike free to deal with Trick.

Stepping over the splintered wood and into the foyer, Spike saw Trick leaning with studied casualness against the wall in the arched opening that led to the interior of the house. “You haven’t really adapted to the invention of the doorbell, have you?”

Spike lifted an eyebrow, glancing unrepentantly at the damage he’d caused as he drawled with a calm he didn’t feel: “They never put them in the same place. Got better things to do than search around for a little button.”

“What the part where you tell me I’ve been a bad boy and I’m no longer welcome in your little town?”
“Not exactly.” Spike strode forward into the main room, letting Trick retreat before him. He glanced around at the overdone interior, noting that Trick looked like he’d been gathering stuff up preparing to bolt. “Mind telling me what tonight’s little party was all about?” he asked mildly, still idly studying the room.

“Just a harmless diversion while a tribute was collected,” Trick replied airily. “Nothing to worry about. Whole town was affected so no one is going to be saying nothing about what happened by tomorrow. Everyone is going to be so embarrassed by their own actions they aren’t going to be talking about anything except the weather.”

Spike regarded him steadily. “Interestin’ theory,” he commented, although privately he conceded that Trick’s assessment was probably right. Unfortunately for Trick, that was beside the point. “This just another little side job?”

“Just livening things up a bit. These hick towns can be so dull.” Trick’s smile was bright with feigned innocence.

“Know you weren’t the one payin’ tribute to the snake. Who you workin’ for?”

“I like to think of him as an associate, rather than as my employer. Bosses get tedious, don’t you think? All that nose to the grindstone mentality is just so sweat-shop passé. Not my thing really.”

“Fine. Who’s your associate?”

“Sorry,” the mock regret in his tone wouldn’t have fooled a five year old. “One of the conditions of our agreement is strict anonymity.”

Trick had obviously been lulled into complacency by Spike’s seemingly mild curiosity and Spike moved like lightning, taking the other vampire completely by surprise. His hands shot out, fisting in the maroon fabric of Trick’s suit and propelling him backwards until he slammed into the wall with a satisfying crack of the polished wood paneling.

“Apparently, I didn’t make myself clear during our last little discussion about protocol in this town.” Yellow eyes glared balefully into Trick’s own demonic ones. “You don’t pull this shite in my town without clearing it with me first.”

“Bureaucracy is so tedious. Where’s the harm? The humans won’t be fussing come morning and we all had a bit of harmless fun.”

Spike slammed him against the wall a second time. “The harm was your little diversion affected my town.” Still gripping Trick’s coat with both fists, Spike spun them both around and threw Trick away from himself, sending him flying backwards to impact against the opposite wall, crashing into the paneling and crumpling to the floor in a shower of splinters.

He was on the other vampire before Trick could regain his feet, crossing the room swiftly as Trick began to struggle upright and sending him sprawling again with a vicious kick to Trick’s side. He dodged Trick’s return kick with contemptuous ease and yanked a stake out of his duster pocket.

Trick froze at the sight of the pointed wood, staying down, holding both hands up in surrender. “Now, let’s not overreact.”

“I believe I asked you a question,” Spike reminded him. When Trick didn’t immediately respond, Spike kicked him in the side again, even harder this time. Trick choked back a scream as the booted foot broke ribs, slumping down against the floor and looking up at Spike, his flickering eyes revealing his racing thoughts as he calculated the odds.
One hand pressed to his injured side, he pushed himself slowly upright and this time Spike let him get up. Leaning against the wall for support, his eyes met Spike’s. “The Mayor.” He winced as an unwise attempt at a shrug tugged at his broken ribs. “The Mayor hired me.” He dredged up a smirk at the memory. “He thought my SlayerFest idea was creative.” At Spike’s glare, he lifted a pacifying hand. “I’ve recently begun to feel that small town life has palled for me. Why don’t I just pack my things and leave you to your small town politics?” he offered. “I believe out of town by sunrise is the traditional grace period?”

“Well, that’s the problem, Trick,” Spike replied with sarcastic relish. “I’m just not a traditional vampire.” He enjoyed the flicker of fear that Trick couldn’t quite manage to hide as he continued, the light mockery replaced by menace: “And I may have neglected to mention that your little diversion affected my Claimed.”

He took satisfaction in the desperation that blossomed in Trick’s face as he finally realized the extent of his miscalculation. Trick exploded into motion, shoving Spike back and trying to slip past him and out into the safety of the night. Spike spun to avoid Trick’s hands and brought the stake up and around in the same movement, driving it deep into Trick’s heart. They both froze for a split second, Spike’s fist holding the stake buried in the center of Trick’s chest and Trick staring down at his chest in disbelief. Spike watched impassively as Trick’s astonished features disappeared into the cloud of dust.

Alone in the wood paneled room, Spike looked around thoughtfully. “The Mayor?” he remarked to himself.

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Spike ran back to the factory, acutely aware of the lightening sky. He’d lingered at Trick’s house long enough for a rapid, thorough search, looking for any information about the Mayor. While hardly a shock that the Mayor of Sunnyhell was apparently not on the side of the angels, he was curious about what the Mayor’s agenda might be. Hiring vampires was not typical for humans. Of course, not all that many humans paid tribute to demons, either. The ones who did usually fell into two categories: ignorant amateurs who usually ended up dead relatively quickly and frequently in spectacularly messy ways and people who actually had some idea of what they were doing and could be extremely dangerous. Question was, which type was the Mayor?

He’d found nothing of use, other than a large stash of money which he’d automatically appropriated - big surprise, Trick was apparently an off-the-books employee paid in cash. Whatever Trick had been hired for, they’d been careful not to leave a paper trail.

To his surprise, Xander was up and sitting at the kitchen table with a pile of books. “Xander?”

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“Hey, Spike, everything go ok?” Xander scanned him anxiously as he always did when Spike returned from “business”, relief showing when he saw no signs of injury.

“Why’re you up, luv? Thought you’d still be sleeping.” He looking searchingly at Xander in turn, relieved to see that Xander seemed fully back to normal.

“I did. Just got up a little bit ago. The SAT’s are today and I kinda blew off studying yesterday.” Xander blushed and looked down at the page in front of him, unable to meet Spike’s eyes. Unfortunately, he remembered way too clearly pretty much everything from last night. It would have been nice if he’d woken up and his memory of his magical chocolate adventures was a merciful blur. Better yet, if the spell had worn off and somehow wiped everyone’s memories of the events. No
chance of that, he thought with depressing certainty. Everyone was going to remember him behaving like a bibbling idiot. “So, on a scale of 1 to 10, how bad was I?”

“Compared to everyone else, ‘bout a 4, I’d say,” he could hear Spike’s amusement. At least he hadn’t driven Spike insane with his impression of a 7-year old on speed. “Not like you were singing in public or snogging with inappropriate partners.”

“So, you’re still willing to be seen in public with me?”

“Anytime, pet.”

Xander lifted his head and met Spike’s amused smile. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault, luv.” Spike looked closely at him again. “Feeling back to normal?”

“Yeah.” He looked down at the books again, wishing he could just crawl back into bed and forget the SAT’s. Wasn’t like he was going to use them to get into college or anything, but he wanted to prove something. To himself. To his parents, even though they would never know. To everyone who thought he was nothing but a hopeless loser. He wanted to do well on the test just to prove he could.

Which probably meant he was a loser anyway. He shouldn’t need numerical validation but he wanted it. Even if he wasn’t going to admit it to anyone.

Shaking his head and deciding he wasn’t going to think about why he wanted a standardized number that meant nothing outside the narrow world of college admissions so badly, he looked up at Spike, remembering what he’d been thinking about when he first woke up.

“We have to make sure all of that chocolate is destroyed. I don’t think the town could handle a repeat performance.” He thought about that for a moment and smiled crookedly. “At least I’ve got a lot of company in the humiliation department. There’s probably a lot of embarrassed people this morning.”

“Too right. Looking forward to mentioning this frequently to the Watcher.” Spike had a wicked gleam in his eye at the prospect. Xander just wished he was in a position where he could tease anyone else about their behavior last night but, given his own performance, he so wasn’t going there. Fortunately, only Spike and Buffy were in a position to mock him and Buffy had been focused on her mother and Giles. Maybe he would live through the humiliation after all.

“Why don’t you get some sleep. I’m going to study for a couple hours.” Xander snagged one of Spike’s hands and tugged him close for a quick kiss before turning back to his books. “I’ll be back early, as soon as the test is over. I’ll talk to Giles about the leftover candy and see if he’ll take care of it.”

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Spike looked at Xander in frustration as his boy clearly dismissed him from his thoughts, once more burying himself in his books. He wanted to shove the books to the floor and confront Xander about what he’d let slip during his magic-fueled ramblings. Xander had been put in danger and hadn’t mentioned it to Spike. The bloody Slayer knew about what had happened and Spike didn’t. Even the Watcher knew.

Xander had lied to him. His Claimed had trusted everyone else over Spike and the hurt and anger of that fact boiled inside Spike.

Now Xander expected Spike to just let him go to school and act as if the redhead had never done a
spell on him. Spike had meant it when he’d said that he wasn’t going to let Xander be around the witch until he knew if she was a danger to Xander. Apparently, the witch had been scolded for whatever she’d done, but that didn’t mean Xander was safe around her. He couldn’t even follow Xander to school effectively, the tunnels only surfaced in a couple areas in the school and half the bloody building was flooded with sunlight during the day.

The lack of information was infuriating. The redhead had done some kind of spell that carried at least the risk of permanent damage. She’d done it to help the Slayer and everyone but Spike knew about it. Spike tended to agree that there hadn’t been any change, because he would have noticed it but obviously the risk had been there. And Xander hadn’t said a word even though it had happened about a week ago.

Glaring down at the back of Xander’s oblivious head, Spike was torn. He knew today’s test was ridiculously important to Xander. His boy had been studying whenever he could find the time for nearly two weeks, shamefacedly admitting that he wanted to do well. Spike knew it was because Xander wanted to prove to everyone, even himself, that he was smart. His boy was embarrassed about needing the validation so badly, Spike had been able to smell it on him, seen it in the way Xander couldn’t meet his eyes when he mentioned the test, but Xander was unable to shrug it off or do more than pretend it really wasn’t a big deal.

Reluctantly, Spike realized he was going to have to let Xander go to school unprotected, even though it meant letting him be around Willow unsupervised. Oh, obviously, the Watcher had made some attempt to step up to the plate but it had been too little, too late from what Spike could tell. Fortunately, the witch was unlikely to be doing anything involving witchcraft while the test was happening.

He faded back out of the kitchen and into the bedroom. He would wait until Xander came home tonight, the test safely behind him. The confrontation would go better if Spike wasn’t tired and cranky when they discussed the situation. He’d go to sleep and he and Xander would have a calm discussion about Xander’s status as Claimed when his boy got home from school.
“Hey, Spike. You’re up early.” Xander swung his backpack onto the kitchen table and opened the refrigerator. He emerged a moment later with a frozen snack pizza and carried it to the microwave, wrestling with the plastic wrap they insisted on smothering the boxes with.

“Giles is taking care of the leftover magic chocolate.” He grinned at Spike over his shoulder. “He got Snyder to convince the Mayor to issue a recall, claiming the chocolate was tainted at the factory and was making people sick. The Mayor made a speech on the news about it and promised to seek damages against the factory. They’ve been broadcasting it on the news all day.” The cellophane ripped suddenly and he had to make a quick grab to keep from dropping the pizza. Popping it into the microwave, he turned to face Spike, shaking his head in bemusement.

“Personally, I think Giles blackmailed Snyder. I’m thinking photos of Snyder hitting on Mrs. Williamson at the Bronze last night. Her husband is this huge truck driver and gets really jealous. I can’t think of any other reason that Snyder would listen to him. He and Giles don’t exactly see eye to eye on anything.”

The microwave dinged and Xander tweaked the pizza out and onto a plate. Turning back towards Spike as he took his first bite, he saw Spike watching him steadily. “I’m sorry, Spike. Did you want one?”

He set his dish down, intending to put a second pizza into the microwave. Spike liked pizza and always shared them with Xander. He was crossing to the refrigerator when Spike spoke for the first time.

“When exactly were you planning on telling me that Willow did a spell on you?”

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Spike watched as Xander froze for a bare second before turning with guilty eyes to look at him.

He’d spent the day stewing over what he’d learned last night. He’d even rousted his lieutenants for a sparring session on the main floor to help burn off the anger that kept returning whenever he thought about Xander lying to him. Xander trusting the Slayer and the Watcher over him. Xander taking everything that Spike did for him for granted then throwing it back in his face.

After an hour’s session, three on one, he’d emerged panting and bruised but calmer. His three lieutenants had limped back to their rooms, much the worse for wear and the watching minions had been greatly impressed. It was the first time most of them had seen Spike fighting all out and it had been gratifying to see that even the stupidest of them hadn’t missed the fact that his lieutenants were still alive only because Spike hadn’t wanted to kill them.

Dismissing his lieutenants, he’d spent the rest of the afternoon watching tv and occasionally pacing the apartment, thinking about how he was going to calmly discuss the situation with Xander. He would lead into it gradually, he wouldn’t be aggressive or confrontational. He would just explain firmly, but kindly, that Xander was completely in the wrong. Xander would see that Spike was right and everything would be fixed between them.

Apparently, he hadn’t quite burned off all his frustration in the impromptu sparring session. Now, fisted hands buried in his pockets, Spike cocked his head to one side and waited for Xander’s response.
Xander turned carefully, trying not to look like someone who was in the wrong. That hadn’t been a shot in the dark. Someone had told Spike about Willow’s little foray into the dark arts. From Spike’s expression, it was obvious the cat was well and truly out of the bag. In fact, the cat was obviously out of the bag and dancing on the tabletop. There was no way he could claim ignorance or that Spike was mistaken.

“Kind of… never,” he admitted. At Spike’s darkening look, he added hastily: “Maybe not never-never, more like eventually-when-it-will-be-so-long-ago-you-won’t-get-mad-never.” He winced at his own nervous idiocy. “And that didn’t really help, did it?”

“Xander, you lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t. I just didn’t tell you what happened. I didn’t actually lie about it.” Xander thought back to that day. He was pretty sure he just hadn’t mentioned what Willow had done. How had Spike found out about it anyway? Oh. Wait. His magic induced talking jag last night. Great, he couldn’t even blame someone else for this.

Spike’s blue eyes were showing a hint of yellow and his whole body was stiff. “So tell me now,” he ordered and Xander sighed.

“Willow did a truth spell on me. It was right after Angel came back and you’d hidden him from Buffy. Buffy thought you’d killed him and kept asking me where you were. Willow did a truth spell to help Buffy get her answers.” Although he tried, Xander couldn’t help the shiver that ran through him as he remembered Willow’s black eyes boring into him and felt again the magic prickling inside his mind. Spike was not looking even slightly appeased and he hurried on. “Giles came in and stopped her. He ripped her a new one. I’ve never seen him so angry. He’s been monitoring Willow ever since and giving her all sorts of punishments: reading about people who’ve misused their magic and stuff like that.”

It was almost a relief when Spike broke off his unrelenting stare and turned away, beginning to pace back and forth across the kitchen, obviously struggling to control his anger. His silence was unnerving. Usually, Spike’s anger was accompanied by noise: taunts, threats, and running sarcastic commentary. Spike was making way too much of this, just like Xander had feared.

“It wasn’t that big a deal, Spike. Really. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you but I was afraid you’d overreact.”

“You’re tellin’ me Red did a bit of black magic on you, something that could have permanently harmed you, but it wasn’t a big deal?” Ok, maybe the silence had been better.

“Pretty much.” Xander tried a smile but it died rapidly under Spike’s withering glare. “Look, Spike, you’ve got to admit, you tend to overreact a little to this kind of thing. Giles handled it and it’s over. I didn’t see any point in getting you all upset when everything was over and there wasn’t anything you could do about it anyway.” Xander could hear the exasperation in his own voice even as he struggled to keep his tone reasonable. He’d made the decision not to tell Spike for a reason and now, hearing Spike’s rising growl, he knew he’d been right.

“See! This is exactly what I wanted to avoid - the growling and the game face and the ripping off of important body parts. You’re overreacting.”

Spike was moving before he even realized it. Grabbing Xander, Spike shoved him up against the
wall and pinned him there. Glaring at his Claimed, he growled: “You lied to me. You trusted the Watcher to protect you. You’re my Claimed not his.”

“You lied to me. You trusted the Watcher to protect you. You’re my Claimed not his.”

“Spike!” Xander put his arms up and tried to push Spike back. Spike didn’t budge, leaning forward even further into Xander’s face, hands tightening on Xander’s arms as Xander snapped: “Back off. I said I was sorry.”

Spike was barely keeping his temper in check. Now that he knew exactly what had happened, he wanted to tear the witch apart with his bare hands, to thrash them all within an inch of their lives until they understood the hazards of interfering between a Master Vampire and his Claimed.

He had to make Xander understand or he would give in to the almost overwhelming need to lock his boy in the apartment and never let him out again. Xander took for granted the freedom Spike gave him and didn’t seem to realize how hard it was for Spike or how unusual it was for a Claimed human to be allowed to roam freely during the daylight hours, alone and unsupervised. Spike had allowed it because it made Xander happy and because it was good for his boy and Xander was throwing it back in his face.

Almost shaking with the effort it took to control his temper, Spike forced himself to relax his grip and step back just a little. He was rewarded for his forbearance by Xander folding his arms stubbornly and glaring at him without the slightest sign of repentance.

Seeing Xander staring at him like that, apparently baffled by Spike’s anger, Spike felt like shaking him till his teeth rattled. How could Xander not see that Spike lost face when he didn’t know what was going on with his Claimed? How could Xander not know that Spike needed to protect him? His demon was screaming with the need to keep Xander chained by his side, and Spike was sorely tempted to give in to that need, to make Xander a typical Claimed human: obedient and submissive, paraded before his Court, by his side day and night. No more waking up in an empty bed and having to learn after the fact and secondhand what had happened during the hours they were apart.

Spike closed his eyes, breaking their glaring match, and let himself picture it: Xander, naked in his bed throughout the long days, ready and available for every erotic impulse, his own cool body wrapped around the delicious human warmth as they slept through the deadly sunlit hours. Xander, by his side during the long, boring Court sessions, sitting obediently at Spike’s feet, leaning into Spike’s leg as Spike toyed with the dark waves of his hair, his brown eyes filled with bitter resentment and hurt. Spike swore to himself.

It always came back to that: Xander wouldn’t be happy if Spike kept him as a traditional Claimed human. The love that shone so clearly in his dark eyes would vanish, to be replaced by confusion and even hatred and Spike couldn’t bear for that to happen. He let Xander run free because it made Xander happy and that happiness was reflected back at Spike. They didn’t have a lot of hours together but the hours they had were filled with more love and quiet happiness than Spike had ever known. He’d known for a long time now that he was going to have to be patient with Xander, give him his freedom and the time to develop and mature. He just hadn’t realized how hard it was going to be.

Opening his eyes, he studied Xander. His boy had lost his defiant glare and was now vibrating like a tuning fork with anxious distress, waiting for Spike to talk to him. He allowed himself to soften a bit at the reminder of how important he was to Xander. Xander loved him. He didn’t always understand how his actions affected Spike but he loved Spike and that was worth a lot.

It was worth everything.

“Xander,” Spike began, more quietly than he’d thought would be possible a minute ago.
Xander puffed out a quiet sigh of relief as Spike broke the long silence that had stretched between them. His own rising anger had been checked as he realized how agitated Spike was. He’d never seen Spike shifting in and out of game face like that, fists clenched, obviously struggling to control himself. Eyes closed, his brow ridges thrown into prominent relief, Spike had been as distant and unapproachable as the most terrifying demon Xander had ever studied. As the silence stretched out and Spike still didn’t speak, Xander felt his stomach tightening into knots at the thought that somehow he’d done something unforgivable and Spike was going to tell him to leave. He hadn’t thought he’d done anything that wrong, not relationship-ending wrong anyway.

“Xander, you’re my Claimed. Means you belong to me. We’ve worked out our own ways of doing things but that part doesn’t change. I’m responsible for you. It’s my job to protect you and I can’t do that if you lie to me.”

“But…”

“Hush, luv, let me finish.” Xander was so relieved that Spike had called him ‘luv’ again that he closed his mouth without protest and let Spike finish what he was saying. Besides, he didn’t understand what Spike was going on about, this seemed way off the topic.

“You don’t trust me, Xander…”

“That’s not true,” Xander interrupted, unable to let that pass without correcting it. Spike’s voice overrode his.

“Trust me with yourself, Xander. You don’t trust me with other people.”

Xander shifted uncomfortably, looking away as Spike’s gaze bored into him. He couldn’t deny there was some truth to that, he did tend to not tell Spike about things he was afraid Spike would overreact to.

“I lose face if my Claimed doesn’t respect me and that’s dangerous for both of us,” Spike continued remorselessly. “Can take care of myself, Xander, but I won’t have you putting yourself in danger needlessly.”

“Spike…” Xander didn’t know what he was going to say but Spike didn’t let him get any further.

“No. This isn’t up for debate. You’re mine. I’m judged by your behavior. If I can’t keep my Claimed in line, I’m not respected as Master of the Hellmouth. I’ve kept you separate from that as much as I can, but demons are aware of your existence. Don’t give a piss what most of them think, and I can handle any challenger that wants to take me on, but you make me vulnerable, Xander. If they think they can get to me through you, then someone’s going to try it. And that makes you vulnerable.”

“That’s not fair. I’m not part of your Court, only a few of the vampires even know my name and I don’t exactly hang out with any of them.”

“Xander,” Spike said sharply, “you’re not stupid, don’t act like you are. Every vampire in the Court knows who you are, what you look like, your name, your scent, everything. You’re the source of constant gossip, because you aren’t a typical Claimed human. I don’t treat you like a pet and you aren’t seen at Court. That makes you very unusual. Hardly a member of the Court doesn’t speculate on our relationship and whether they can use it against me in some way: either by currying favor with you or by using you against me.”

Xander stared, aware that his mouth had dropped open and he was probably looking like the village
idiot. He’d talked to Spike’s three lieutenants a number of times, Jose the most frequently, but he probably wouldn’t even recognize most of the other vampires who made up Spike’s Court. How could they all know him, much less spend their time talking about him?

Spike made an exasperated sound. “They all know it’s death to lay a finger on you Xander, but I can’t stop them from watching you when you leave this apartment. I can’t stop them from thinking - not that most of them spend a lot of time doin’ that - and I can’t stop them from puttin’ two and two together.”

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Spike glared at his clueless lover, who still looked astonished at what Spike had just told him. “I trust you, Xander. I trust you to tell me what’s happening during the hours I’m not with you. I trust you to not put yourself unnecessarily in danger and I trust you to tell me when people have put you in danger. What am I supposed to think when even the bloody Slayer knows more about your life than I do?” Despite his best efforts, the hurt he felt at being left out threaded through his angry tone.

“When someone hurts you, I’m seen as weak if I don’t do something about it. A weak Master can’t hold his territory or his possessions.” When Xander still looked more disbelieving than convinced, Spike continued remorselessly. “We talked about this last year when Angelus went off his rocker. Almost the first thing he did was attack you because he knew he could get to me through you.”

“Ok, point taken,” Xander acknowledged. “But Spike, the members of your Court don’t know what goes on at the school during the day, so they wouldn’t know about the spell. What would you have done if had I come home and told you: ‘guess what? Willow used a spell on me and I’m scared it might have caused permanent damage’? You would have gone all overprotective and tried to kill her.”

“Xander, protecting you from people who are hurting you is not being overprotective. It’s just keeping you safe.” Spike was about to point out blisteringly that Xander shouldn’t assume that vampires couldn’t know what went on at the school. Not like his boy didn’t know about the tunnel and basement access to the school. But Xander’s quick response cut him off.

“It is being overprotective when I have to worry about you hurting them physically after it’s all over,” Xander answered hotly. “See, that’s the point, Spike. It was over already and it wouldn’t have done any good to say anything. I didn’t want you to get all angry when it was over and taken care of already.”

“Taken care of how? Watcher givin’ her a lecture? The wolf poutin’ at her and tellin’ her he was disappointed in her? Slayer probably applauded her.” Spike was getting angry all over again as he thought about it. Humans had such bizarre ideas about what kind of things deterred people. “You think any of that is actually going to change her?”

Xander looked away, his own doubt showing clearly in every line of his body. “I don’t know,” he answered, barely audibly. “I hope so.” He turned back and said earnestly: “I know it probably doesn’t make sense to you but, even after what she did, I don’t want you to kill her.”

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Xander could see the baffled frustration in Spike’s eyes. To Spike, it was simple: you killed whatever it was that was causing problems - problem solved. He tried to think of a way to put it that Spike would understand. “It’s kind of like you and Angel: even when you were pissed off at him and he deserved it, you didn’t really want to kill him.” He could see that that had sunk in as Spike’s mouth twisted in a frustrated grimace. After a pause, he asked quietly. “Was I wrong? What would you
Spike met the searching eyes and answered with flat honesty. “Don’t know for sure, luv. But I haven’t killed any of them yet because I know you don’t want me to.”

“How about we agree that I’ll tell you if something like that happens again and you promise you won’t kill any of them unless you have to, to save my life?” he offered. He knew Spike would never accept not placing Xander’s life above another’s and, if it came down to Willow or Buffy getting him killed, he wouldn’t have a problem with Spike stopping them. Ok, he’d have a problem with it, but it was one he could live with.

“You promising to tell me immediately whenever one of your little friends does somethin’ stupid, whether you think it’s a big deal or not?” Spike clarified.

Xander winced at hearing his own words shot back at him. “Yes. Honestly, Spike, this is the first time since we’ve been together that I’ve kept something like this back.”

Spike looked skeptical but somewhat mollified and Xander wound an arm around Spike’s waist, relieved when the vampire didn’t shrug him off. “I love you, Spike. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Spike let himself be held, feeling the tension gradually leaving him. He could tell Xander was sincere and that helped. The compromise didn’t sit well, although he was depressingly certain that his Sire would approve - if he ever found out about it. Spike had no intention of letting Angelus know that Spike was so whipped he’d agreed to forgo a demon’s right to avenge their Claimed except under the most extreme circumstances.

He couldn’t help growling a little at the thought of having to hold back and conform to human standards but then he’d always been love’s bitch. At least it wasn’t tea parties with bloody dolls this time around, he thought resignedly, winding his own arms around Xander and holding his boy tight.
“Must have been mistaken thinkin’ we had a clear agreement that this sort of thing wasn’t goin’ to happen again.”

Spike had been standing in the doorway observing the two occupants of the room for far longer than it should have taken them to become aware of his presence. Going at it hot and heavy, they hadn’t noticed him even when he’d leaned against the door frame and pulled out his lighter and smokes. A wave of fury at their heedlessness swept over him when even the sound and smell of him lighting up hadn’t penetrated their lustful absorption in each other.

The Slayer and Angelus jumped apart as his sarcastic comment finally pulled them out of their obliviousness and they realized they were no longer alone in the mansion. The Slayer put a shaking hand to her lips, looking stricken and guilty. Angelus hid his feelings better but Spike could read the embarrassment and guilt behind the seemingly blank mask he faced Spike with.

“Love a good apocalypse much as the next demon,” he continued with brittle sarcasm, taking a deep, steadying drag on his cigarette. “But I was under the impression that you two weren’t plannin’ on playin’ that game again.”

“We’re not together like that. This was… this was a mistake.”

Spike snorted, lifting a scarred eyebrow inquiringly at the Slayer. “Snogging with the wrong vampire? Or you both develop sudden amnesia about what happens when Angelus gets a little too happy?”

“You’ve made your point, Spike,” Angelus growled. “Doubt that, seein’ as how I made the same point when I let you live and you gave me your word you weren’t goin’ to be sniffin’ ’round the Slayer’s skirts anymore.” Spike took another deep drag then flicked his cigarette directly at his Sire. “’pears your word ain’t worth much these days.”

The Slayer stepped between them, as Angelus’ growl rose dramatically at Spike’s accusation. “Stop. This was a mistake. I know that. We didn’t mean for it to happen and it won’t happen again.”

“Too right, it won’t. ‘m not cleaning up the mess again. Last time you two did the mattress dance, Angelus here decided to celebrate by destroying the world. And you did piss-all to stop him, Slayer, despite the fact that most of the bodies in his wake were people you claim to care about. Thought we were all agreed we weren’t up for a repeat of that little fiasco.”

“We’re not together, Spike.” For a wonder, his Sire sounded almost conciliatory. “As Buffy said, it was a mistake. We were training and it just… happened.”

“Just how stupid are the pair of you? Training’s about sweat, and heat, and body contact. Might as well have gotten starkers and climbed into bed together. What the hell are you two doin’ here together anyway?”

Angelus and the Slayer exchanged a quick glance that had more than a little guilt in it. “I was just checking on Angel, making sure he was ok. That he was getting his strength back.”

“Great plan. Are you two even fooling yourselves? You’re not friends. Saying that you are, telling yourself you’re just playing Florence bleeding Nightingale doesn’t make it true. You want each other until the lust stinks up the room. If it was just you two torturing each other with what you can’t have,
“That’s one thing.” He glared directly at Buffy. “Your idiotic doomed romance endangers your mother, your Watcher and all your friends. More importantly,” his yellow-eyed glare swung back to Angelus. “You are endangering my town and my Claimed. If I ever catch the two of you alone again, one of you is going to die. ‘m not letting you risk the world because you two can’t keep your hands off and you’re too stupid to stay away from each other.”

Both of them were silenced by the fury and withering scorn in his voice. He was right and they knew it. Pair of bleeding idiots, wallowing in their star-crossed love. Slayer was a teenaged girl, on some level she probably got off on the idea of a forbidden, dangerous love, but Angelus should blood well know better. Spent enough time whining about how his soul made him different, you’d think he’d act like someone who wasn’t trying to end the world.

Part of Spike wanted to just let loose and attack them. Even though they’d settled things between them, enough turmoil and resentment and hurt lingered from what had happened with Xander that an all-out fight would feel good. Clear the air and purge the last of his unsettled emotions. Nothing like dragging yourself home, battered and bloody and triumphant to let a vampire get a good night’s sleep.

Shaking off the pleasant thought of Angelus’ bones splintering beneath his fists, Spike fished in his duster for his smokes and lit up a second cigarette, letting the smoke warm and calm him as it filled his lungs.

“Let’s go, Sire. Slayer can find her own way home.”

“No, stay here Angel. I want to talk to Spike.”

Both Spike and Angelus were surprised by that decision. Angelus especially looked dubious, shooting wary glances between the two of them. Spike grinned, Angelus’ concern for the Slayer’s safety cheering him considerably.

“Don’t worry, Angelus. Won’t kill the bint on the way home.” It was ridiculous how much it meant to him that his Sire knew he could take the Slayer.

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They walked side-by-side in silence through the fancy neighborhood the mansion was in, angling across town towards the Slayer’s house. Spike waited for the Slayer to speak but she seemed lost in her own thoughts, head down, eyebrows drawn together as she wrestled with some problem or other. Finally, she seemed to come to some sort of decision and asked: “You keep calling Xander your Claimed. What does that mean?”

Spike shook his head in disbelief. This Slayer had clearly never studied her main opponents. Claimed humans weren’t exactly obscure vampire trivia - a large percentage of Master Vampires took one or more. “Means exactly what it sounds like: Xander’s mine. He’s under my protection and anyone who hurts him has to deal with me.” Seizing the opportunity she’d given him, he added, sharply: “That means the witch as well. Red ever hurts Xander again, ever does another spell on him, ever puts him in danger, she won’t survive the experience. You care anything about her, you keep her in line, Slayer.”

“Thought you supposedly weren’t killing humans anymore.” It was said with less heat than he expected. Apparently Xander was right and the Watcher had actually gotten through to Red’s friends about how serious her actions had been.

“Willing to make an exception to protect Xander,” was all he said.
The Slayer put a hand on his arm and stopped him, turning him so he was facing her and she could see his face in the glow from the streetlights. “Claiming is more than just dating him, right? Did he agree to this?”

“Doesn’t look unhappy, does he?” Spike was torn between amusement and irritation at her belated concern for Xander’s well-being.

Buffy’s eyes studied him intently. “And the ‘my town’ thing?”

“Been Master of the Hellmouth since I arrived, Slayer. You just figuring that out?”

“How can you control the town if you aren’t killing?” she asked suspiciously.

Her jaw tightened under Spike’s scornful look. “Being Master of a territory doesn’t have piss-all to do with humans for the most part. Not like I’m doling out victims to the members of my Court. I’m in charge of demon business in the territory. Humans aren’t really on the radar as far as that goes.”

“Even Xander?”

“Xander’s not part of my Court,” Spike snapped. “And since when do you care about what he does?”

“I don’t. I just don’t want him showing up one night as a vampire and killing my mother or Giles.”

Spike punched her almost before the words had left her lips. She stumbled back, but regained her balance almost immediately, yanking out a stake and dropping to a fighting crouch.

“I’m not turning Xander. Even if I did, I wouldn’t let him hurt your mum,” he snarled, outraged by the accusation.

“Buffy,” Angelus materialized out of the shadows and stepped between them. From her start, she hadn’t known he’d been lurking behind them, listening to their conversation. Spike had known, but considering that he wouldn’t have let Xander go for a walk with Angelus without following and listening, he hadn’t been bothered by it. “Spike doesn’t plan on turning Xander. Not now, maybe not ever. He won’t do it without Xander’s consent and Xander’s not ready for that step.”

“I don’t understand what you two see in each other,” she complained, but apparently accepted Angelus’ assessment of the situation, tucking the stake back into her pocket and standing more at ease.

“None of your business anyway,” Spike replied. He saw no point in defending his relationship with Xander with someone who didn’t like or respect his Claimed. The Slayer was still talking.

“Angel, are you ok with Spike being Master of the Hellmouth?”

Spike smirked, cocking his head to one side and waiting gleefully for Angelus’ answer. The Slayer couldn’t know how much it irked his Sire to admit that Spike controlled the territory that some part of Angelus still viewed as rightfully his or she would have never asked that question. Angelus shot him an irritated look, knowing exactly what Spike was thinking. “I’m not interested in holding the territory, Buffy, so Spike is probably the next best choice,” he answered grudgingly.

“Well, now that that’s all settled,” Spike was about to make one of his trademark dramatic exits when it occurred to him that that would leave the two lovebirds alone again. Scowling, he lit a cigarette and blew a long drag of smoke at them. He wasn’t a damn babysitter. “Which one of you am I escorting home?” he asked flippantly.
“Let’s talk, Spike.” Angelus nodded at Buffy and she turned and walked off. Spike’s lips tightened as his Sire gazed after her departing figure until she had moved beyond even demon sight.

“Meant it, Angelus. If I catch you two alone again, I’ll kill you. Not having you put my boy through anything like that again because you can’t keep your codpiece fastened.”

“I don’t want anyone having to deal with Angelus again,” he answered soberly, meeting Spike’s eyes with straightforward remorse. “Buffy and I are the past. Tonight was an aberration.” After a short pause, he added: “You’re right. We shouldn’t be around each other while our feelings are still so strong.”

Studying his Sire, Spike nodded, accepting his sincerity. “Fancy a drink?” he asked casually and Angelus nodded.

“Yeah, I could really use one.”

Maybe there was hope for Angelus yet.

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Arriving at the library for his regular study session with Giles, Xander was surprised to hear a woman’s crisp British voice addressing the librarian.

“Mr. Giles, your methods are unfathomable to me. I find you entirely confounding. The fact is, there is talk in the Council that you have become a bit too... American. I’m afraid I agree.”

Xander stopped just outside the door, pushing it open a crack and listening unabashedly. Despite the precise accent and over-perfect diction, there was something cutting and abrasive about the speaker’s tone. Whoever it was seemed determined to verbally flay Giles, albeit in a polite, British way. He resented the speaker immediately, not just for the way she was talking to Giles but also for the scorn with which she said ‘American’.

“Mrs. Post…” Giles began and Xander could hear the defensiveness.

“And why do you let your Slayer socialize so much? It hardly seems…” She stopped, not so much trailing off as cutting her sentence off as abruptly as she had just cut off Giles. “Well, no matter. The Council is better suited to address those issues.”

There was a sharp click of heels on the linoleum floor and she spoke again. “Anything in your books that might pinpoint the exact location of the tomb would be useful, but then, we cannot ask for miracles.”

Giles made the kind of stammering response he did when he was completely thrown off balance, and Xander abruptly decided he didn’t want to hear any more. Pushing the door open, he walked in, calling out as he entered: “Hey, Giles. What’ve you got for me today?”

Giles turned a somewhat hunted look in his direction as Xander looked curiously at the woman standing next to him, reading over his shoulder. A slender, brown-haired woman, impeccably, if boringly, dressed in a brown shirt and - Xander did a double take - a long, tweed skirt, hair twisted up in a knot, everything about her suggested the same kind of prim and proper tight-ass Giles had been when Xander first met him.

“And who is this?”

Ok, Giles had never sounded that rude, even when Xander had just been the goofy kid who’d
accidentally learned more than he should have about the existence of a Vampire Slayer. “Xander Harris. Who the hell are you?” Two could play the rude game.

“Xander, this is Gwendolyn Post, she’s here to check on the special collection. Mrs. Post, Xander is a student I have an assigned study period with at this time. If you will excuse us, perhaps I can meet back with you in an hour.”

And wow, Xander didn’t want her to turn that blistering look on him. “Mr. Giles, while I appreciate that you have responsibilities here to the students, the matter I am here on is of considerable importance. I’m sure Mr. Harris won’t mind skipping his session with you for today. He is after all an American public school student. I believe skipping classes is a tradition with them.” She gave Xander a tight little smile that came nowhere near reaching her eyes.

Xander’s jaw dropped. That was way beyond rude. She’d just insulted like 90 percent of the student-age population of America. Giles looked flummoxed by her rudeness and was making a distressed tutting sound. Xander didn’t wait for him to pull it together and respond; it looked like it might take awhile.

“No sweat, Giles. We can re-schedule. I’ll just take my American public school ass out of here and leave you and Mrs. Priss, sorry Mrs. Post, to whatever you’re doing that’s so important.

Giving Giles a smile and ignoring Mrs. Post, Xander left. He stopped almost immediately outside the doors and began listening again, pleased to hear Giles’ angry voice saying: “That was uncalled for, Mrs. Post. Xander is quite intelligent and has been an exemplary student.” Xander smiled, warmed by the compliment.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She sounded anything but. “However, finding Lagos is of far more importance than any of your students.”

Giles sighed. “Yes, of course. The Council had no further information?”

“If it had, I would have already conveyed it to you, Mr. Giles.”

Xander whistled softly to himself. He’d never heard verbal abuse done in a cultured English accent before, but he was way too familiar with it not to recognize it when he heard it and Mrs. Post was good at it. Everything she said was laced with innuendo of incompetence and low expectations.

Wondering what was going on, he left his listening post, heading for an empty classroom. He had a free period now and he might as well still use it for studying. He didn’t want to live down to Mrs. Post’s expectations.

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“Buffy, what’s with Gwendolyn Post?” He said the name in his best snooty English accent and Buffy shot him a sympathetic smile.

“Yes, pretty much a charm-free zone, isn’t she?” Buffy banged her locker closed and turned to face him. “She showed up during patrol last night and criticized me, my clothes, and my Slaying skills. I really didn’t like her.”

“I can see why that might not make her Miss Popularity 1998. What’s she doing here? She’s got Giles completely rattled.”

“Big time.” Buffy agreed, falling into step with him, glancing around automatically to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. “The Watcher’s Council sent her to evaluate Giles and to warn us
about some demon looking for some all-powerful thingamabob, and I gotta stop him before he unleashes unholy havoc, and it's another Tuesday night in Sunnydale.”

Xander shook his head at Buffy’s summary. Buffy was not one for the details, that’s for sure. Still, he was surprised at her willingness to tell him even that much. He’d been dubious when Spike told him that Buffy had learned about Spike’s status as Master of the Hellmouth, but maybe that was the reason for Buffy’s new willingness to share. Either that or Mrs. Post had ticked her off to the point of indiscretion.

“Lagos.”

“Sounds about right. How do you know?”

“Overheard them talking in the library,” Xander admitted frankly. “Look, Buffy, umm… demons are supposed to check in with the Master of the Territory when they hit town. They don’t always, but a lot of them actually do. Do you want me to ask Spike about Lagos?”

Buffy gave him a long, searching look then, unexpectedly, smiled. “Yeah. That might be helpful. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

As they continued walking down the hall, she asked curiously: “Demons have protocol?”

“Go figure. It’s more making nice so the stronger demon doesn’t kill you than actual manners but it kind of works out the same in the end.”

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“Giles, can I talk to you?”

Xander had made sure Mrs. Post wasn’t around before entering the library. One encounter with her per day seemed more than enough. Giles was in his office, books scattered around him and the Englishwoman-from-hell was nowhere in sight.

Giles looked up as Xander stuck his head in the door. “Hello, Xander. I apologize for earlier. Mrs. Post is a bit…”

“Annoying and stuck up?” Xander offered helpfully and saw the harried look on Giles’ face ease slightly.

“Perhaps ‘bracing’ would be a better description.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “If this is about making up our study period, I’m afraid…”

Xander shook his head quickly, dispelling that notion. “No, this is about something else.” He settled one hip on the edge of the desk and wondered how to begin. “Buffy told me that Mrs. Post is here checking up on you for the Watcher’s Council?” he asked hesitantly, watching as Giles looked down at his books to avoid his gaze, hands automatically straightening the untidy piles for something to do.

“Yes. Just a basic review of my training and methodology,” he said with obviously false casualness. “I’m sorry for lying to you earlier about her reason for being here but I thought it best to avoid mentioning that a number of people are aware of Buffy’s identity as the Slayer. It could bring… unwelcome attention from the Council.”

Xander looked at Giles curiously, wondering why that sounded vaguely ominous. He’d always
thought of the Watcher’s Council as being a bunch of Giles-es. Maybe a little stuffy and boring but basically the good guys. Now he wondered if that had been naïve on his part. Filing it away for now, he returned to the subject at hand. “Giles, freshman year, we had this French teacher who was like the toughest grader in the school.” Xander made a face at the memory. Giles frowned impatiently and, for a moment, looked like he was about to interrupt, then settled again and waited for Xander to finish.

“He’s the reason I’m not taking French anymore. Anyway, he used to give these killer tests which pretty much everyone but Willow would fail. And, right before the tests, he would just rag on us about how stupid we were and how French was this beautiful language, much better than English, and how he expected us all to fail.” Taking a deep breath, he came to the point. “I heard Mrs. Post talking to you earlier and she kind of reminds me of our old French teacher.” He took a deep breath and got to the point. “Giles, you’re the smartest person I’ve ever met, but you’re not always good with people.” He grinned at Giles’ mildly affronted look and continued.

“I think Mrs. Post is trying to rattle you. I don’t know, maybe she wants your job or maybe she’s just one of those people who likes to see other people fail. I don’t know about you, but I don’t do well on tests when I’m off my game and even I can see that she’s messing with your head.”

He slid to his feet. “I know this probably isn’t any of my business but you’re a good Watcher and Buffy’s lucky to have you. Don’t let some stuck up harpy make you forget that.”

Giles just gaped at him speechlessly and Xander grinned at him. “Besides, you have a lot better resources than she does. I’ll see if Spike knows anything about Lagos or the glove of whoever thing.”


“Myhnegon. Got it.” Xander slipped out without giving Giles a chance to recover his wits and headed for home to talk to Spike.
“Spike, have you heard anything about a demon called Lagos? New in town, looking for something in the cemeteries?” Xander was really hoping Spike knew something. He really wanted to give Giles a chance to show up Mrs. Post by being able to come up with the information they were looking for before she did.

“Big fella? A medieval armor and tusks look going for him?”

“Could be. Giles hadn’t found a description yet.”

“Some of the boys reported a demon tearing apart the cemeteries the last couple of nights. Was carrying a sweet double-bladed battleaxe.” Spike smirked in satisfaction. The blade was even better than the Watcher’s favorite battleaxe. “It’s mine now.”

“You killed him?”

Spike shrugged. “Wanted that weapon,” he said off-handedly, “Plus, bloke had no manners. His idea of a search was scattering crypt contents over half an acre. Made a hell of a mess in three cemeteries.” He cocked his head and looked at Xander curiously. “What was he looking for?” At the time, he hadn’t really cared, the mess the demon was creating had been enough of an excuse to justify killing him. He’d really wanted that weapon from the second he saw it strapped to the larger demon’s back.

“Something called the Glove of Myhnegon. Ever heard of it?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar. Take it it’s not an opera glove?”

“Supposed to be some kind of really powerful weapon but again, Giles didn’t have any details.”

“Watcher’s a bit off his game, eh?”

“The Watcher’s Council sent someone to check up on him. She kind of rattled him.” He sent a dubious look in Spike’s direction, adding dryly: “You might like her, she’s a real charmer.”

“Don’t generally do tea and biscuits with Watchers, pet. Dead boring that lot, and very intolerant of vampires for the most part.”

Xander gave him a crooked smile. “This one’s more towards the mean and rude end of the spectrum.”

“Maybe you’re right, might like her at that.”

“Probably not, she wears tweed, Spike,” Xander’s voice was appropriately horrified although his eyes gave the game away.

“Hmph. No taste. Unlike some people who have learned how to wear proper clothes.” Spike’s hand slid teasingly up Xander’s back, caressing him through the silk shirt, tracing the firm lines of muscles across his shoulders.

Xander kissed him, shivering as Spike’s fingers began deftly unfastening the buttons on his shirt. “How would you know?” he mumbled into Spike’s neck, “you spend a lot more time removing my clothes than admiring me in them.”
Spike silenced him with a kiss. “Like you naked, pet.”

Xander could deal with that.

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Spike was still asleep when Xander left for school early the next morning. The vampire had left the previous night shortly after sunset, having to take care of Court business and hadn’t returned until long after Xander had fallen asleep. Nights like this happened a couple of times a week, when their schedules didn’t coordinate at all, but they were both used to it by now. Xander knew that, when Spike slept through Xander getting up and leaving, the vampire hadn’t returned to their apartment until shortly before dawn. Some mornings, Spike came drowsily awake and they could spend an hour or so together before Xander had to leave for school and Xander loved those mornings. Sleep mussed and groggy, Spike was adorably cranky first thing in the morning: complaining about the cheerfulness of the early morning birds and muttering death threats to the perky hosts of morning talk shows. Today, however, Xander wanted to let Giles know as soon as possible that Lagos was dead and half their problems had already been taken care of.

“Hey, Giles. Sp…,” Xander stopped in mid-syllable as he saw Mrs. Post standing off to one side of the library. After a bare hesitation, he recovered and finished circumspectly: “William took care of….”

“Mr. Harris,” Giles’ voice overrode his urgently. “I believe I was clear that we would not be able to reschedule your study session until next week. I’m quite busy right now.”

Xander snapped his jaw shut. Giles’ eyes were boring into him intently, carrying a clear warning, and Mrs. Post was listening avidly, her eyes flicking between the two of them.

“Nonsense, Mr. Giles, it sounds like this young man has some urgent information for you.”

“Yeah, I thought you really wanted that book,” Xander ad-libbed desperately, not sure what the problem was. Giles clearly didn’t want him to say anything in front of Mrs. Post and Xander was left floundering.

“Book?”

Xander shrugged and tried to look like he wasn’t making this up as he went. “My friend William runs a used book shop. He’s got a lead on a book Mr. Giles has been looking for for a while now.” Deciding retreat was in order, he said, “Sorry to have barged in, Giles, William doesn’t have the book yet, so this can wait.”

Giles showed unmistakable signs that leaving would be a good thing. “Thank you, Xander. Tell William I am grateful if he has finally located a copy.” He looked at Mrs. Post and added some fortifying details to Xander’s story: “William has been extremely helpful in finding some rare volumes to round out the library’s collection.”

“And what book is it that you are hoping will do so much to ‘round out’ your rather limited collection, Mr. Giles?” Mrs. Post’s voice was full of bright malice: a playful shark circling for the kill. Despite her words, she looked inquiringly at Xander as if expecting him to answer the question.

“Basingstoke’s Daemon Compendium,” Giles filled in smoothly, to Xander’s relief since he was coming up blank. He really needed a bit more time to polish his ad-libs. Except he was pretty sure they weren’t ad-lib anymore if you had the time to polish them.

Mrs. Post’s eyebrows rose. “The Council believes the last copy of that book was burned during the
Inquisition. How fortunate that you have found a book dealer in this town able to supply you with such rare volumes. Good show, Mr. Giles. Good show indeed.”

Oh, boy. The Xander and Giles show would not be taking their act on the road. The audience clearly wasn’t buying it.

“I realize there is very little chance the book is genuine,” Giles responded stiffly, rising to the occasion, which was good because Xander was busy with his fish out of water impression. “However, stranger things have happened and, you must admit, even the remote possibility of finding a copy is tremendously exciting.”

“Why don’t I leave you two to your really dull book talk and just head over to class. I can be this bored in California history and get credit for it.” Xander decided it was way past time he exercised a tactical retreat. Giles would find a way to tell him why information from Spike was suddenly off-limits to the Council lady.

Giles didn’t come looking for him until after lunch, when he pulled Xander out of class to meet with him in an empty classroom.

“Sorry about this morning, Xander. I’ve learned some very disturbing news about Mrs. Post and I didn’t want her to hear what you were about to say.”

“Figured something was up.” Xander cocked his head inquiringly as Giles looked grim.

“I contacted the Council and learned that, while Gwendolyn Post was once a member of the Council, she was kicked out a couple of years ago for misuse of dark power.” Giles took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. “They swear there was a memo.”

“Wow. I just thought she was a bitch. I didn’t think she was evil.”

“The Council believes that she is most likely seeking the Glove of Myhnegon for personal reasons. It goes without saying that we must not allow the Glove to fall into her hands.” Giles put his glasses back on and straightened up. “Thank you, Xander.”

“For what?”

“For pointing out that Mrs. Post was rattling me so badly that I had failed to take even the most elementary steps to confirm her identity and purpose for being here.” His lips tightened. “I’m afraid she reminds me quite strongly of a rather horrific nanny I had when I was seven.”

Xander found himself grinning at the thought of Mrs. Post railing at a seven-year old Giles and Giles smiled back. “I believe you had something to tell me?”

“Right. Lagos is probably dead.”

“Probably?”

“Yeah. Spike killed a demon last night who was tearing apart cemeteries looking for something. Big. Tusks. Wearing medieval armor. Ring any bells?”

“Hmmm. I agree, that was most likely Lagos. I was able to find a reference to him in Friedman’s encyclopedia and that description matches what little information there was.”
“So, with the demon competition out of the race, that just leaves us with finding the Glove before Mrs. Post.”

“Quite. Fortunately, I have found a probable location for the Glove: the Von Hauptman family crypt in Restfield Cemetery. I would prefer to try and retrieve it during the day but I’m afraid that Mrs. Post is making that difficult.” He looked beyond irritated and Xander repressed a grin at his harried expression. There was something funny about Giles being harassed by a prim and proper English lady in tweed.

“Since Mrs. Post is here under the pretext of evaluating Buffy and myself, I have made arrangements for her to patrol with Buffy tonight, ostensibly watching her as she seeks Lagos. Buffy will take her on a swing through the town cemeteries while I pick up the Glove. I’m still attempting to find a means of destroying it, but the most important thing is to remove it to a safe location until it can be destroyed. Are you willing to help?”

“Count me in. You ok if Spike comes along?”

Giles hesitated. “The Glove is a source of enormous power, Xander. Are you sure?”

“Yes. Spike’s not interested in that kind of power, Giles. He likes fighting people one-on-one and proving he’s the stronger person, not nuking half the town just because he can.”

“I highly doubt the Glove can ‘nuke half the town’ but I understand what you’re saying. By all means, if he’s willing, please bring him along. He could be quite useful in keeping the Glove safe.”

It was Xander’s turn to hesitate. “Would you… Why don’t you come to our apartment with me after school and we can head out from there?” It was the first time he’d invited anyone to the apartment but he trusted Giles.

Giles looked surprised but answered matter-of-factly. “That will be fine. Why don’t you stop by the library after your last class. I’ll make sure that Mrs. Post is occupied elsewhere.”

Xander thought about making a joke about Giles not burning down Spike’s home this time but caught himself as he remembered that the factory burning had been a direct result of Miss Calendar’s death. Giles wouldn’t appreciate a joke about that. Instead, he just said: “You know Buffy’s going to make you pay for this, right?”

“So she has already assured me.”

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Walking through the slanting rays of the late afternoon sunlight, long shadows stretching out ahead of them, Xander hoped he wasn’t making a mistake. Although he suspected Giles knew where the factory was, the librarian had never actually said and Xander hadn’t ever specifically told him. He wasn’t ashamed of their home - it was the nicest place he’d ever lived - but it wasn’t exactly guest friendly, being located directly above vampire-central like it was. Still, they were arriving while it was still daylight and the vampire immunity he had via Spike should extend to cover someone he was with.

He was more worried that humans visiting would cause Spike problems. He didn’t think Giles was generally known around town as the current Slayer’s Watcher and, in any case, couldn’t decide if that fact made the situation better or worse. He had a sinking feeling, now that they were approaching the factory, that hosting humans other than his Claimed would reflect badly on Spike in his Court.
He really should have called Spike first before impulsively inviting Giles over but it was too late now. They were less than two blocks from the factory and calling now would be just stupid.

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Spike was waiting in the kitchen when they arrived, having heard their footsteps as they climbed the stairs to the third floor apartment. To Xander’s relief, he didn’t look upset when Giles followed him in to the apartment.

“Hi, Spike. You up for a treasure hunt?”

“Depends on the treasure, pet.” He nodded at Giles. “Watcher.”

“Hello, Spike.” Giles looked around at the apartment approvingly but didn’t comment. “I was hoping you’d be willing to help us locate something.”

“If you mean the Glove thing that Xander told me about yesterday, already done.” Spike smirked at their surprise. “Angelus knew about it and we picked it up last night. He took it to the mansion for safekeeping.” He looked at Xander. “Left before I could tell you this morning, luv.”

Giles’ shock was rapidly turning to anger. “You left the Glove with Angel? How could you take that kind of risk?”

“No risk at all, Watcher,” he said calmly. “Angelus knew about it last year when his soul went walkabout. If he could use it, he would have used it then.” Spike shrugged, “Glove can’t be used by a vampire.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why not?” Xander asked curiously.

Spike perched on the kitchen table, thoroughly at ease. “The Glove lets the wearer channel lightning through their bodies, which gives them the ability to use lightning as a weapon. Vampires and lightning don’t mix. Our bodies are about as conductive as mud so the Glove won’t work for us and lightning tends to turn us into charcoal briquettes, so he’s not interested in anyone else using it either, in case they turn it on him. Angelus isn’t going to mess with the thing, with or without a soul.”

“Of course,” Giles exclaimed. “There is a reference to the Glove in Father Theodore of Wolsham’s text. Although his sources are suspect, he refers to the Glove as ‘calling the fires of hell’, which would be a medieval view of something that controlled lightning. If that part of the text is accurate…” his voice trailed off and Spike and Xander exchanged amused looks.

“I’ll need to do some further checking, but if Father Theordore’s sources are not as unreliable as has been believed, they could tell us a means of destroying the Glove.” He fell silent again, still thinking, and then looked at Xander, “Willow is researching at the library. Would you be willing to return with me and help? We need to act as quickly as possible. The Glove is simply too powerful to be allowed to exist.”

“Sure. Spike, do you mind?” Xander was already pulling his coat back on as he asked.

“Not at all, pet. I’ll come with.”

Xander looked up sharply but Spike simply lifted one eyebrow inquiringly. Sighing, Xander knew he had to trust Spike not to hurt Willow. Physically at least. He had a feeling Spike was going to take the opportunity to mention to Willow how much he disliked people messing with Xander.
He just couldn’t decide if that was a good idea or not.

“Buffy, Mrs. Post. You’ve returned from patrol already?” Giles asked, not quite able to conceal his surprise and dismay as they arrived in the library to find those two, plus Willow and Oz, all gathered at the library table.

“It would appear that your Slayer is not used to being accompanied in the field. After touring through three of the more modern cemeteries, I elected to return here, as it became clear that I was hindering the search.” She shot an ironic look at Buffy. “Your Slayer insisted on escorting me back here.”

Mrs. Post wasn’t really bothering to conceal that she was on to them, at least as far as their stalling tactics were concerned. With luck, she just thought Giles was trying to pull a fast one on her to get credit for finding the Glove without her. She should be able to relate to that, it was clearly something she would do herself.

There was an awkward silence as the Sunnydalers exchanged helpless glances, not sure how to get rid of the interloper and Mrs. Post watched them with shrewd eyes. Xander especially didn’t like the way she was looking at Spike, like someone mentally snapping their fingers trying to recall a half-remembered face.

Xander was sinkingly aware that his presence here was an aberration. Students didn’t usually hang out with school librarians hours after school was out. It was obvious that Willow had been in full research mode when Buffy and Mrs. Post returned: books were piled on the table and her laptop was powered up. There was no way Mrs. Post had missed that they were doing things behind her back and Xander thought they needed a diversion. Badly.

“Why don’t we all just put our cards on the table?” he said impulsively, and hurried on before Giles’ and Buffy’s twin glares could incinerate him. “I know you wanted to keep it a secret, Giles, but it’s a bit late for that.” He looked at Mrs. Post defiantly. “All of us,” he made a gesture encompassing everyone in the room, “know about Buffy being the Slayer. We all found out about it accidentally a long time ago and we’ve been helping research demons and stuff ever since. We work pretty well together, so if the Council doesn’t like it tough.” He was peripherally aware of Buffy and Giles exchanging puzzled glances as he finished: “So, we’re all here to research Lagos and how to destroy the Glove. If you’ve got a problem with that, the door’s that way.”

Xander figured that, as long as they kept up the pretense of not knowing the location of Lagos or the Glove, researching how to destroy the Glove in front of Mrs. Post wouldn’t do any harm. It was both the logical next move and information they would be expected to be seeking. Mrs. Post couldn’t exactly protest without giving her own plans away.

“Xander,” Giles began reprovingly, but Mrs. Post was nodding.

“I appreciate your candor. It has been painfully obvious that Mr. Giles has failed to keep his Slayer’s identity a secret, but that is a matter for the Council. As you have said, our time would be better spent in research than in these childish games. Shall we begin?”

“Works for me.” Surprisingly, it was Spike who was the first to back him up. Xander gave him a grateful smile for going along with the research party idea, and sat down at the table, reaching for a book.

Everyone followed suit and silence fell over the group, broken only by the quiet tapping of Willow’s fingers on the keyboard of her computer.
It took less time than any of them expected. Giles suddenly gave a small, pleased exclamation that had everyone looking up at him.

“There is a way to destroy the Glove. It involves transforming fire into living flame and immolating the Glove. It’s complex but I believe I have all the necessary ingredients.” He looked up from the fragile, handwritten book he’d been puzzling over, and added belatedly, “when we find the Glove, of course.”

“Go, Giles.” Buffy said. “Anyone having any luck on the Lagos front?”

“I believe I have something that will help.”

Mrs. Post stood up and handed her book to Buffy, who glanced down at the opened page as they all automatically looked over to see what she had. With a movement almost too swift to follow, Mrs. Post turned and grabbed a fistful of Willow’s hair, yanked her head back and jerking her half out of her chair. A knife appeared in her other hand and she pressed the tip against Willow’s throat hard enough to break the skin. Willow made a frightened sound that was swallowed up by the clatter of wood against the floor as Buffy’s chair overturned as she leapt to her feet. Everyone else was on their feet an instant behind her, their shocked protests tangling over each other.

“Willow!”

“Stop!”

Xander stared, hypnotized by the dark trickle of blood, looking almost black against the pale skin of Willow’s throat. Spike’s hand clamped firmly on his arm, holding him back as he jerked forward instinctively.

“All of you have been so helpful, there’s no need to stop now. Tell me where the Glove is or I will slit her throat.”

“What makes you think we know where the Glove is?” Giles asked tightly, keeping a wary eye on the knife.

The knife pressed deeper and Willow let out a frightened cry. Oz yelled, “No!” and tensed to spring.

“Stay where you are. All of you.” The threat of the knife was enough to make them obey. Willow was chalk-white, except for the dark trickle of blood running down her throat, her terrified eyes begging them to do something.

“I’m not a fool. You are all a bit too eager to find a way to destroy the Glove and not very interested in locating it. It’s obvious you have already found it. Unless you want her to die, you will tell me where it is.”

“Kill her and you lose your advantage. Five against one aren’t good odds when all you’ve got to bargain with is a dead body at your feet.” Spike might have been discussing the weather for all the emotion in his voice but Xander could feel him coiled to spring at the first opening.

“Spike!” Buffy hissed angrily as Mrs. Post’s arm jerked slightly and Willow moaned in pain. “Shut up.”

Mrs. Post pulled Willow out of the chair completely, using the knife as a goad, edging backwards with her, away from them and towards the doors. “Don’t move.”
“Let her go. I give you my word that you will be allowed to walk out of here unharmed.” Giles took a step after them, but stopped as the knife jerked again and Willow gasped.

“I’m not very inclined to do that, Mr. Giles. I’ll give you two hours. Meet me in the parking lot out front in two hours with the Glove. Try anything cute in the meantime and she dies. If you have the Glove, we’ll trade. Miss Rosenberg for the Glove.”

“Willow!” Oz’s despairing voice whispered as Willow’s white face and red hair were lost to sight beyond the closed doors.
There was an awful silence as the echo of Oz’s desperate cry lingered in the room, then suddenly, the library filled with a cacophony of overlapping voices until Giles’ voice rose sharply over them all.

“Enough! Be quiet, all of you.” The harsh command brought them to their senses and they fell silent as Giles began issuing orders. “Spike, please go to the mansion and bring the Glove back here as quickly as you can.”

Spike nodded sharply, squeezing Xander’s hand reassuringly before disappearing through the library doors.

“As for the rest of us, I know this is difficult but we must stay calm and think. We have only two hours to come up with a viable plan.”

Xander crossed to where Oz stood. “Oz, we’ll get her back. I promise.” He desperately hoped he’d be able to keep that promise.

“We’ll get her back, Oz.” Buffy joined him at Oz’s side, looking worried but trying to show a brave, reassuring face.

Oz just nodded. In the minute since Willow had vanished through the doors, Oz had drawn in on himself, his body language screaming ‘don’t touch’. Xander was afraid to try and breach the wall that Oz had wrapped around himself, afraid of shattering Oz’s composure when Oz clearly needed to be calm and functioning for Willow’s sake.

“We must come up with a workable plan,” Giles said firmly, “because we cannot give Mrs. Post the Glove. For purely practical reasons, if nothing else. Once Mrs. Post has the Glove, she can incinerate us all before we could get out of range and there simply isn’t anything to hide behind in a parking lot.”

“Needing back-story here, Giles.” Buffy held up a hand like a student asking a question. “You’ve obviously learned stuff you haven’t shared yet.”

“Of course. The Glove is at the mansion. Angel apparently knew the Glove’s location and he and Spike retrieved it last night.” Giles removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “The Glove gives the user the ability to use lightning as a weapon.”

“Ok, that doesn’t sound fun.”

“No, it doesn’t. Anyone wearing the Glove must be nearly invincible.”

“So how do we get Willow back and not give up the Glove?” Oz’s quiet question drew everyone’s attention.

“That is what we have two hours to figure out,” Giles answered grimly.

Twenty minutes later, they were still hashing it out, throwing out desperate suggestions for the others to critique and ridicule and no closer to a viable plan than when they’d started.
“We’re running out of time,” Buffy flared angrily. “We have to think of something.”

“Don’t wait the two hours,” a quiet voice suggested. “Take her by surprise now.”

Xander nearly jumped out of his skin at the unexpected voice and spun around to face the library doors, heart hammering wildly. Spike and Angel were standing in the doorway and Xander couldn’t stop the rush of fear at the sight of Angel. Knowing the vampire was around was one thing. Seeing him, being in the same room with him, was a whole different story and, for a moment, Xander was lost in the memory of being chained to a bed, with Angelus’ weight pressing down on him, the silken voice purring threats into his ear.

Spike was at his side in an instant, arm around him, steadying him, his familiar voice murmuring in Xander’s ear and erasing the phantom sound of Angelus’ threats. “It’s all right, luv. He’s here to help. I’ll never let him hurt you again.”

Xander buried his head in the crook of Spike’s neck for one moment and took a deep, steadying breath, inhaling Spike’s familiar scent. The nightmare memory tucked firmly back into the back of his mind, he lifted his head and forced himself to look directly at Angelus, at Angel he reminded himself sternly, who simply nodded at him.

And really, what could Angel say? ‘Sorry my other personality put you in the hospital while my soul was on vacation?’ His jaw tightened, angry at his own self-absorption, and he looked quickly towards Giles to see how he was reacting. Angelus had put Giles through a lot more than Xander had suffered. Giles was white-faced but in control and, if he looked as if he wanted a crossbow in his hands, who could blame him.

“What do you mean?” Buffy asked, either missing their reaction to Angel’s presence or, more likely, ignoring it in favor of more pressing business.

Willow.

Giving Spike a grateful squeeze and a tiny smile to let him know he was all right, Xander made himself listen as Angel explained.

“We can’t let her have the Glove,” Angel set the bulky item he was carrying down on the counter where they all stared at it. It was wrapped in what looked like filthy white rags and Angel stepped away from it, like a man who knew that half the people in the room didn’t trust him with it. “And we can’t not give it to her because she’ll kill Willow. At the exchange, she’ll kill Willow and everyone else the minute she has the Glove. There won’t be time to get far enough away for safety.”

And that pretty much summed up their own reasoning so far.

“The meet is a death trap for everyone. The only way is to take her out before the meet, preferably as soon as possible, when she won’t be expecting an attack yet.” Angel shrugged. “It’s unlikely she’s going to spend the next two hours with her knife to Willow’s throat. Our best chance, our only chance, of catching her off guard is to attack as soon as possible when she is most likely to be far enough away from Willow to not be able to kill her instantly.”

And Xander would have felt a lot better if that had sounded like Angel was used to doing this from the rescuer’s side of things, not the hostage taker’s.

“The problem is that we don’t know where she is,” Giles reminded him, more sharply than necessary but then, Giles had personal experience with Angel as hostage taker and had earned the right to be testy with the man who had kidnapped and tortured him.
“She won’t have gone far. Most likely, she’s still here on the school grounds somewhere,” Spike said. “It’s a mite conspicuous to drag a protesting hostage through the streets, even in Sunnydale, and she wouldn’t want to do it twice - away and back.”

That made sense and they fell silent as they digested the idea, but Xander could feel hope replacing despair in the room at the prospect of doing something.

“Angel, check out the school, see if you can locate them,” Spike ordered quietly.

“Why him?” Giles asked with tightly controlled calm.

“Because he’s a vampire, he’ll be able to hear them long before they hear him,” Spike pointed out and Giles was silenced by the irrefutable logic.

“What if they aren’t making any noise?” Oz asked. Xander could see that, despite his outward control, he was nearly shaking with the effort of holding his emotions in check.

“Oz, you’ve been a werewolf for about a year now, right?” Angel asked unexpectedly.

Oz nodded. “Just over.”

“You should be able to tap into some of your wolf abilities even while in human form now. Like smell.” Angel looked at the group. “I’ll take Oz with me. Between hearing and scent, we’ll know if they’re here.” Typically, he left without waiting for them to agree or disagree, somehow having the ability to fade into shadows even under fluorescent lighting. Oz followed him silently and Xander wondered at his ability to accept the idea of possessing a super-power, even just smell, without one question or protest. He smiled to himself. Better Oz than him, a string of irrelevant questions and observations wouldn’t really be helpful right now.

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The rest of them were still hashing out the details of a tentative plan when Oz and Angel returned.

“They’re in the principal’s office,” Oz reported.

“Makes sense,” Buffy commented. “His office overlooks the parking lot so she can keep an eye on anything we try to set up in advance. Did you hear anything useful?”

Oz shook his head. “They weren’t talking. I could smell Willow.”

“Ok, that’s disturbing.”

“I tend to agree.”

Xander could tell that Oz was shelving a minor freak-out over this new development in his wolf side until a better time. He was having similar thoughts, wondering what this meant for Oz and whether it meant that he was becoming more wolf than human the longer he was a werewolf.

“The principal’s office has two doors,” was all he said, grabbing a piece of paper and making a quick sketch of the layout for Spike and Angel’s benefit. “One to the hall and one to his secretary’s office.”

“If we enter through both doors at once, we have a good chance of containing Mrs. Post, before she can hurt Willow,” Giles said, thinking out loud.

“It’s risky. What if she kills Willow before we can reach her? Are we sure this is the way to go?” Buffy asked, worried. Her eyes turned speculatively towards the wrapped bundle still sitting on the
counter. “Can we use the Glove?”

“No!” Both Giles and Angel answered simultaneously, Giles starting forward and Angel’s hand coming up to physically bar Buffy from the Glove.

More calmly, Angel explained: “Legend has it that, once you put it on, the Glove can never be removed.”

Buffy’s brows shot up. “So…, no touching.” She exchanged a long look with Angel, then deliberately looked away and shrugged casually. “No problem. Gloves don’t work with most of my outfits anyway.”

“As for your earlier question - I don’t think we have any choice,” Giles said. “If we give Mrs. Post the Glove, there is very little chance that any of us, including Willow, will leave the parking lot alive.”

Buffy nodded grimly. “I don’t like it but it’s our best shot.”

“Oz, are you on board with this?” Xander asked quietly.

“Like Buffy said, this looks like our best chance.”

“No time like the present. There’s still an hour to the meet, with luck she’ll have tied Red up and be pacing up and down waiting for the time to move. Slayer, you and Angelus go in the front door. Don’t muck about, kick it in and get in there fast. Secretary’s office’s got a hall door?” he asked Xander, frowning down at the paper.

“Yeah, sorry. Right next to the principal’s.” He quickly added an outline of the secretary’s office to the drawing.

Spike nodded and looked at Buffy and Angel. “I’ll go in that one as soon as you make your move. It’ll mean that you two are in the room 2 seconds before me, make ‘em count.”

“Why not go in the side door at the same time as we go in the front?”

Spike shot her an ‘are you stupid’ look. “Too much chance she’ll hear the hall door opening if we try that. Then the game’s over before it’s begun and we’re back to the knife-to-throat stand off.”

“What about the rest of us?” Oz asked quietly.

“Split up and wait at both ends of the hall until the three of us make our move,” Angel answered, knowing the layout from his reconnaissance with Oz. “Stay far enough back that she won’t be able to hear you. When you hear the door being kicked in, converge on the room from both directions. If she gets out of the room, you’ll have to corner her.”

Everyone looked around at each other and saw they were all in agreement.

“Right. Why don’t we lock away the mitten before some janitor stumbles over it, grab some weapons and get this over with?”

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If someone had told Spike this morning that he’d be leading a rescue operation for the little witch who’d put the truth spell on Xander - who’d done so much to hurt Xander in the time Spike had known him - he would have pointed out, somewhat violently, the flaws in their logic.
He’d seen the fear in Xander’s eyes when the Watcher bint had dragged the witch out by her hair. Deservedly or not, his boy would be devastated if the redhead were killed so, instead of telling the Watcher to piss off and going out to celebrate, he’d tottered off to the mansion as requested, wondering the whole time just when his unlife had come to this: taking orders from a human to save an enemy.

There were times when Dru’s bloody tea parties seemed like the normal part of his unlife.

Angelus had stirred himself at the news that the Slayer needed him - stirred himself a bit too bloody quickly for Spike’s peace of mind about the pair of them but there wasn’t time just then to worry about that. He’d briefed Angelus on the situation on the way back to the library and they were in agreement that a preemptive strike was the only way to handle the situation. Neither was keen on the idea of a rogue Watcher having the power of the Glove of Myhnegon at her command - the thought did not bode well for the vampires on the team.

Not that he was on a team.

Glancing across at his Sire, Spike checked that everyone was in position: Xander and Oz down the hall in one direction, the Watcher in the other, the Slayer and Angelus poised outside the main door. Getting a nod from Angelus, Spike and his Sire kicked in their doors with perfect simultaneity. Spike was through his and across the room in three strides, smashing through the connecting door even as he heard Angelus’ warning yell: “Buffy!”

Entering the office, Spike took in the situation in one sweeping glance. Angelus was down against the far wall with a knife protruding from his back, the Slayer just scrambling to her feet after having obviously been pushed out of the way by Angelus. The witch was tied to a chair, struggling against the strips of cloth that bound her, muffled yells emerging around the cloth stuffed in her mouth. The rogue Watcher was advancing on the Slayer, a heavy bronze paperweight already in mid-swing aimed at the back of the Slayer’s head. There was no time for subtleties and no clear shot for throwing a weapon. Snarling, Spike dropped his ax and launched himself at the bitch, blindsiding her and knocking her away from the Slayer. The two of them slammed into the windows together, glass exploding beneath their combined weights and Spike found himself falling. Pushing the woman away from him as hard as he could, he tried to stop his forward momentum using the shove as leverage to change direction.

It was too late. He was already through the window, twisting like a cat in mid-air, trying to get his feet underneath him before he landed, but the ground was rushing at him too fast. He hit the pavement hard, his side taking the brunt of the impact, and staggered to his feet immediately, looking around for the rogue Watcher. Pain pulled at his side and he could tell he’d cracked ribs on the hard surface. He cursed but otherwise ignored the pain, moving quickly to check if the woman was out or not.

The rogue Watcher was lying crumpled on the ground in an awkward sprawl that spoke of a bad landing and serious damage. Spike turned her over with one foot, and she moved limply, truly unconscious and not faking it. Kicking her hard in the head to be sure, Spike straightened up, his ribs sending a stab of pain through him. Glass cuts on his hands and face stung but would be healed by morning. All in all, not a bad minute’s work.

“Spike!”

Spike looked up at the window to see Xander staring anxiously down. He managed to wave a reassuring hand, wincing slightly as muscles pulled across his ribs at the movement. Xander’s head disappeared, leaving him slightly disgruntled, until he heard footsteps pounding through the hall and
down the stairs. His boy was coming to check personally. He smiled reassuringly as Xander was suddenly there, hovering, hands outstretched but stopping short of actually touching.

“Spike? My god, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Fine, luv.” Spike said airily. “Nothing that won’t heal by morning.”

“Maybe you should sit down.” Xander was clearly afraid of hurting him, his hands reaching for Spike time and again, only to be snatched back instantly before they actually touched.

“I’m fine, luv. Don’t worry. Looks like the bitch is out for the count.”

Xander spared a quick glance behind him at the unmoving body. “Yeah.” He was watching Spike closely and relaxed as he saw the vampire moving with almost his usual fluid grace. “Should we go back inside?”

“Too much trouble.” Spike raised his voice. “Oi! Peaches! Bring ‘em down here. I’ve done my bit and I’m not dragging this bitch inside.”

It didn’t take long for the group to arrive, gathering around Mrs. Post’s limp body and staring down at her uncertainly. Angelus had a makeshift bandage wrapped around his torso and the Slayer was hovering close to him. The witch was clinging to wolf-boy, her eyes still huge and frightened in her pale face, streaks of dried blood obvious on her throat.

“Is she dead?” she asked shakily, carefully keeping Angelus and the Slayer between herself and the rogue Watcher.

“No, just knocked out by the fall.”

“We can’t just leave her here,” the Slayer protested faintly. “We should call an ambulance.”

Spike snorted. Typical human thinking. Take your enemy out then waste your time tending their wounds.

“What do we do with her?” Xander looked around at the group. “We can’t exactly call the police because what are we going to say? She took a hostage because we wouldn’t give her a magical glove? We’re more likely to be arrested for assault than she is.”

“Call the Council, tell ‘em to come clean up their own mess,” Spike said disdainfully.


The Watcher hesitated, then nodded slowly. “I suppose there is a certain amount of justice to that.” He looked tired suddenly and it was obvious he didn’t want to make the call. “I’ll call 911 and report an accident. The Council can be here by morning to pick her up from the hospital. You all make yourselves scarce while the authorities are here. The less you are involved in this the better.”

“Giles?” Xander left the unspoken question hanging, his eyes studying the Watcher intently.

“Not now, Xander. All of you, head home.”

Xander looked at Spike who shook his head. “C’mon, luv. Let’s go home,” he urged.

Xander nodded and Spike waited as he approached the witch. “Are you ok, Willow?”

She mustered a small smile. “Yeah. Just major freakage.” She took a half step away from Oz,
looking hopeful.

Xander hesitated, then gave her a quick hug which she returned with fervor. “See you tomorrow? Take care of her, Oz.”

“Always.”

Xander returned to Spike who maneuvered casually so Xander ended up on his good side, slinging an arm around his boy as they started for home. “You ok, luv?”

“I’m not the one who went out a second story window, Spike.”

“True.”

“So, what is it about Angel that makes perfectly normal people jump out of windows to get away from him?” Xander asked, startling Spike into laughter. If his boy could joke about it, Xander must have gotten over the shock of seeing Angelus again.

“Captain Forehead just has one of those personalities,” he answered, tightening his arm and feeling Xander lean into him carefully. He hadn’t fooled his boy as much as he’d hoped.

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Walking home with Spike through the quiet night, Xander was surprised that he could joke about Angel and what had happened last year. Actually seeing Angel again had been a shock, but he was proud that he’d gotten over it so quickly. It really wasn’t fair to blame Angel for what Angelus had done, despite his gut reaction at seeing the vampire again. Angel had pitched right in to help save Willow and they might not have pulled it off without his help.

Angel was important to Spike, even if Spike didn’t like to admit it. Having Xander freaking out about his Sire wouldn’t help. It was time he got over what had happened and just dealt with Angel as he was now. Overbearing and full of himself, but not evil. He didn’t have to like Angel to work with him.

Angel and Willow. A lot had happened tonight. It wasn’t like he’d just instantly forgiven Willow because she’d been in danger, but it had forcibly reminded him that some part of him still cared for her despite his anger and the distance between them. Oz and Giles thought she was doing better, that she understood how badly she’d screwed up. It had felt surprisingly good to hug her after all this time.

Willow-hugs had once been a weekly, if not a daily, part of his life. Now, he couldn’t remember the last time they’d hugged. They’d barely spoken to each other since the truth spell. He sighed. Maybe he should give her another chance, or at least talk to her and see if she’d really changed.

He sighed, grateful for Spike’s understanding silence as he wrestled with his thoughts. “People should stay in the pigeon holes we put them in,” he grumbled out loud.

Spike just chuckled. “Messy when they insist on being complicated, innit?”
They were barely inside the door when Xander veered off towards the refrigerator, opening it and pulling three packets of blood out. One side of Spike’s mouth quirked up as Xander quickly tore open one of the bags, reaching for a mug with the same motion. He obviously hadn’t done as good a job as he’d thought of hiding that his ribs were hurting.

Xander was already filling a second mug with blood when the microwave dinged on the first one.

“Not that badly hurt, luv,” Spike said mildly as he accepted the warmed blood.

Xander just gave him a look. “You took the stairs awfully slowly for someone who’s feeling fine.”

“Thought you were tired, is all,” Spike informed him loftily, even as he obediently downed the second mug. He could feel the slow flush of warmth as the blood spread through his system. The blood began working immediately: his ribs already less sore and Spike could feel the slight internal shift that meant the bones were knitting, the faint itching sensation that signaled the cuts on his face closing over.

Xander watched him intently and seemed satisfied as he handed Spike a third mug. Cracked ribs and minor cuts were child’s play for vampire healing but Xander’s concern was as warming as the human blood spreading restoratively through his body.

“Thanks, luv.”

“Spike, what was that about the Council cleaning up its own messes?” Xander was frowning slightly as he looked inquiringly at Spike.

“Think about it, Xander. Every few years you’ve got a teenager waking up one morning and finding out she’s the strongest person in the world. Some of them are going to think it’s more fun robbin’ banks than saving the world. Some of their Watchers are going to wonder if having a Slayer under their thumb might be useful for more interestin’ things than just toeing the party line. Council would be idiots not to be prepared to handle problems like that. It’s not a question of if that kind of thing is going to happen, just a question of when.”

“So, Giles is turning Mrs. Post over to the Watcher police?”

Spike shrugged. “Police implies laws and trials and whatnot, luv. Rogue Watchers don’t exactly see the inside of any courtroom you’d recognize.”

Seeing the distaste on Xander’s face, Spike pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around his boy, pleased that his almost-healed ribs didn’t give him so much as a twinge. “Don’t waste your time feeling sorry for her, pet. She would have killed us all without a second thought. She was trying to get hold of a weapon that would make her nearly invincible and it wasn’t so she could play patty-cake with us.”

Xander leaned into his embrace, tightening his own arms around Spike carefully, still needlessly mindful of Spike’s injuries. “I know. I just thought the Watchers were good guys, is all. Turns out they aren’t all like Giles and now you tell me they have their own private enforcement guys to do their dirty work. Just kind of makes you wonder about them.”

Spike made a scoffing noise. “Speak for yourself. I’ve never seen anything trustworthy about a covert organization that keeps tabs on demons.”
“Well, yeah, but you’re a demon so you’re prejudiced.” Xander seemed to shrug off his concern and his eyes sparkled with mischief as he leaned back slightly to grin at his demon. Spike tugged him back for a kiss that Xander enthusiastically returned.

He knew that Xander would file the information away to think about it later. His boy was one for stewing over things, that was for sure. A little healthy distrust of Watchers was something Spike wanted to encourage. Rupert was a good one, but even he would sacrifice most of the little band of do-gooders to keep his Slayer alive. It was what Watchers did and Spike accepted that. It meant he would never truly trust the Watcher with his boy’s safety, but Rupert would always leave that as a last resort, unlike other Watchers Spike had heard of.

Xander had abandoned his lips to nuzzle at his neck and Spike shrugged off his thoughts to concentrate on the feeling of Xander’s teeth scraping lightly along his jugular, tilting his head to the side to give his Claimed more access. Xander’s hands were busily unfastening the buttons on his shirt, even as he nipped and licked along Spike’s neck and Spike let out a small sigh of pleasure at the sensation, running his hands over the strong planes of Xander’s back and down to his waist, holding his boy close.

The last button popped open and Xander pushed the fabric back impatiently, his warm hands running over Spike’s chest and sliding around to the back, before sliding up under the loose silk fabric to trace the sharp angles of his shoulder blades.

Enjoying the warm lips moving along the juncture of his neck and shoulder, pressing a line of tiny kisses against his own, cooler skin, Spike felt Xander’s blunt, human teeth bite down suddenly on the exact spot where Xander’s own Claim mark rested. His teeth didn’t break the skin but Xander’s tongue soothing and laving the spot was unbearably erotic and Spike groaned in pleasure.

Xander lifted his head to look at Spike, arms tightening around the smaller frame of the vampire. “Mine,” he said fiercely. His hands untangled themselves from Spike’s shirt and came up to hold Spike’s face in a firm, gentle grip. “When I got inside the room and saw the smashed window and you not there…”

He didn’t finish, but Spike could imagine his thoughts. He’d had similar nightmares of Xander’s own dive through a second story window to escape Angelus. “Shh, luv. I’m fine,” he murmured reassuringly and Xander kissed him hard, plundering his mouth as if he could never get enough.

Their tongues dueled fiercely, exploring, tasting, teasing until Xander pulled away and began kissing his way along Spike’s jaw and down his neck. His hands were exploring Spike’s chest, and Spike reveled in the warmth of the big hands sliding along his cool skin. His head arched back as Xander’s thumbs began circling his nipples teasingly, refusing to actually touch them, and Spike pushed forward into the touch, shifting slightly, trying to get Xander’s hands where he wanted them.

Xander laughed and moved his thumbs away, still not quite touching Spike’s nipples which had already hardened in anticipation. “Bad vampire,” he chided, the words muffled against the center of Spike’s chest as Xander seemed determined to kiss every inch of skin between Spike’s neck and his belly. Spike growled and Xander laughed again. Relenting, he finally touched Spike’s nipples, stroking over them again and again as Spike sighed in pleasure and arched into the sensation, his nipples tightening as arousal shot through his body. Xander’s warmth and eagerness was the purest aphrodisiac Spike had even known and his cock was proof: hardening rapidly as Xander teased him.

Xander’s lips detoured from their path down Spike’s body, targeting one hardened nipple, his tongue dancing over the small nub, swirling over and around it before his teeth closed over the erect peak, sending a stab of erotic pain through his body that went straight to Spike’s groin. The action was repeated on the other side, until Spike’s hips were jerking forward, his erection straining against the
sturdy denim of his jeans.

A strong hand cupped him through his jeans, stroking and rubbing his erection and Spike gasped, pushing into the massaging hand, the fabric just rough enough against his cock to send shudders of almost unbearable pleasure through him as it scraped along his engorged penis. His hands gripped tightly in the thick waves of Xander’s shoulder-length hair, encouraging him in his efforts to drive Spike out of his mind with pleasure.

Spike groaned as Xander’s fingers began fumbling at the button at his waist, and dropped one hand to speed the process. Xander smacked the helping hand out of the way. “Uh-uh. You want this done faster, stop squirming.” He lifted his head from where he’d been kissing Spike’s ribs to grin at his lover.

“Who’s fault is it that I’m squirming?” Spike muttered, but let his fingers move back up to card through Xander’s hair, leaving Xander to his work.

“Certainly not mine,” Xander lied shamelessly, with a mock innocent look that Spike removed by the simple expedient of dragging him back up for another hard kiss.

Xander had finally succeeded in opening the button he’d been wrestling with and Spike’s intended snarky comeback was forgotten as Xander unzipped Spike in one swift move and his strong, calloused fingers closed around Spike’s erection.

Xander began pumping Spike with an agonizing slowness and Spike let his head fall back, leaving Xander’s lips free to start a second journey downward along Spike’s torso. His fingers continued to glide teasingly along the length of Spike’s erection, enough to drive him crazy but not enough to bring him off. Spike’s hips snapped forward, striving for more contact, and there was a warm puff of air and a chuckle somewhere in the vicinity of his navel. “Someone’s eager.”

Spike was too busy thrusting into the warm tunnel formed by Xander’s fist stroking him with an excruciatingly slow rhythm to answer with the necessary sarcasm. Xander compounded the problem by dropping to his knees and swiping his tongue along the length of Spike’s penis, shifting his grip to Spike’s hips to hold him steady as he began teasingly flicking his tongue over the head of Spike’s engorged cock, lapping at the pre-cum already dripping from the slit and driving him mad with the barely-there licks swirling around and over the shaft.

Spike tightened his grip in Xander’s hair, urging him closer, and Xander obliged, shifting to face Spike as he closed his mouth over the end of Spike’s penis. For a long moment, he did nothing but exhale, hot breath threading along the length of Spike’s erection like liquid fire. Spike fought to keep his hips still, to keep from slamming home into Xander’s mouth and inadvertently hurting his boy. The hot, wet warmth surrounding his cock was almost indescribably erotic to the vampire and Xander knew it.

Just when he thought he was going to lose control, Xander sealed his lips around the end of Spike’s cock and sucked hard, his fingers gripping Spike’s hips. Spike’s orgasm hit with stunning force, sending cum pulsing into Xander’s mouth as his hips bucked wildly, only Xander’s strong grip holding him back as Xander sucked and swallowed until Spike was drained dry, folding over until his forehead rested against the top of Xander’s head.

They stayed that way for a long moment, Spike’s fingers carding lovingly through Xander’s hair as he recovered, until he felt his penis begin to twitch slightly and slowly harden again as Xander’s tongue darted over and around it, cleaning him and sending jolts of arousal through him.

Spike raised his head and smirked down at Xander, who pulled back, letting Spike’s cock slip free
and slanting a smug smile of his own up at his lover as Spike’s erection showed definite signs of returning.

“Luv, if that’s my reward, I’m jumping through a window once a week.”

“Jumping out a window once can be explained, Spike,” Xander replied, looking up at him sternly, although the smile still lingered at the corners of his mouth. “More than once…” he shook his head sadly. “More than once is just an attention-getter and I never reward drama queens with blow jobs.”

Spike laughed and held out a hand to help Xander to his feet. “Noted, pet.”

“Let’s go to bed.”

“Lamb to the slaughter, pet.” Spike followed eagerly as Xander tugged him into the bedroom.

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“Xander!”

Xander turned to see Willow hurrying down the hall to catch up with him. Sighing, he stopped and waited for her to reach his side. She smiled up at him and he was glad to see that, other than a Band-Aid on her neck, she looked unmarked by her hostage experience last night.

“Are you ok?”

“Yep. Giles said that the Council came and picked up Mrs. Post at the hospital before dawn and that just makes it so much easier - not having to worry about her. Giles burned the Glove after you left last night. He did a spell to change fire into something else - it was really cool.” She fell into step beside him as they walked down the hall together.

Xander’s gut clenched and he faltered, staring at her.

“Don’t look at me like that, I just watched. He’s not letting me do any magic yet.”

“Yet.” His voice sounded faint, even to himself.

“Xander,” Willow stopped, putting her hand on his arm and tugging him until he stopped as well. “I’m studying magic with him,” she said quietly, lowering her voice as students brushed past them in the crowded hall. “I know I screwed up, but it won’t happen again. I thought…” she faltered, looking at him with hurt eyes. “I thought, after last night, that you were ready to forgive me.”

“Willow, you could have been killed last night. I was glad you were alive and unhurt. I never wanted you dead but that doesn’t mean things are right between us.”

“But…”

“Willow, I’ve loved you for most of my life. That doesn’t just stop. When I look at you, I see someone who’s been one of my two best friends since kindergarten. The problem is, I also see someone who put a gun to my head and ordered me to do things I didn’t want to do.”

Willow looked stricken, taking a half step back as if she could distance herself physically from his words. Clearly, she’d never thought about what she’d done in those terms before.

“The fact that we were friends makes it worse for me, Willow. I could deal with it better if you were a stranger who did that to me. But you were my friend and you still did the spell. It’s one thing to say you didn’t think it would do any harm if you take my wallet without permission. It’s another thing
completely when you take my thoughts, my will, my control away.”

He stared at her, willing her to understand, and he could see the dawning knowledge in her devastated eyes. He’d thought about this all night, lying wakeful in bed, Spike a comforting weight in his arms as he thought about how he could be so angry with Willow and yet so horrified at the idea of her being in danger. It had almost been a surprise to discover that he obviously still cared for her. He must or he wouldn’t have reacted the way he had to seeing her in danger. As his thoughts had chased themselves into exhaustion, he’d recognized that the bottom line was that he didn’t trust her anymore. Maybe he never would.

“I still care about you,” he said gently, meaning it. “Seeing you in danger was awful. But there can’t be friendship without trust and I’m not there yet. I don’t know if I ever will be. I’m sorry.”

Willow stared at him with enormous eyes brimming with tears and Xander sighed, shifting his backpack to a more comfortable position. “Some things can’t be fixed with an apology, Willow. Oz and Giles both say that you’re doing good and I hope it’s true, but it doesn’t change what you did and it doesn’t make me forget how it felt to have you use magic against me.”

Part of him wanted to tell her to prove herself to him, to give her a time limit - be good for two months and all will be forgiven, but bitter experience stopped him.

His father had collected 30- and 60-day sobriety coins from AA on several occasions and shown them off to people just as if he hadn’t continued to drink from his stash in the basement during those 30 and 60 day periods.

“I’ll always be there for you when it counts, Willow. I just can’t be there day-to-day right now.”

There wasn’t anything else to say. He wasn’t willing to give her a false reassurance that everything would be ok between them soon. Until his first reaction upon seeing her wasn’t the memory of her black eyes boring into him as her magic forced him to betray his lover, he wasn’t comfortable around her.

Knowing he was hurting her but unable to do anything else, Xander left her standing in the hallway, head bowed over her books, the pain he’d inflicted obvious in every line of her body as she stood there, a small defeated island of immobility in the otherwise busy hallway of oblivious students.

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The sound was so unexpected that it took Spike a long, annoyed moment to figure out what it was that was disturbing him as he watched the telly. Someone was knocking on the apartment’s door. His and Xander’s private door. Occasionally, one of his Lieutenants would knock on the connecting door to the factory, but they tapped respectfully, just loud enough for vampire hearing. This was a steady pounding that was gradually increasing in volume.

Their private entrance was on the rear of the building. Even if some over-zealous door-to-door solicitor was working the half-empty manufacturing district, it was unlikely they would have found the second floor entrance behind the seemingly abandoned, boarded-up factory. Whoever it was, they were not discouraged by the delay in answering the door, the knocking continued without pause.

Before Xander, Spike would have considered this kind of intrusion a home-delivered meal. The sudden thought that something might have happened to Xander had Spike crossing the room in long strides and yanking the door open with more worry than irritation. At least until he saw who was on the other side.

Two uniformed police officers were just about the last thing he’d expected. The sun was down but
twilight lingered and true dark hadn’t yet arrived. The officers looked nervous and the one who’d been pounding on the door dropped his hand quickly with an apologetic half-smile.

“Master Spike?”

Surprised at the greeting, Spike hesitated for a bare second, double-checking. The officers were human: hearts beating faster than normal, the stench of nervous sweat tainting the air. He leaned with deliberate casualness against the half-open door andcocked his head curiously. “Who’s asking?”

“The Mayor’s office sent us. He would like you to meet with him in his office.”

“Don’t generally mess with politics. He lookin’ for some kind of campaign contribution?” he asked facetiously, even while his mind was racing, wondering what was going on. Trick had said he’d been working for the Mayor. Any human crazy enough to hire Trick seemed an unlikely candidate for payback but loyalty came in surprising packages sometimes. More likely, the Mayor was looking for better help than Trick.

“No, sir,” the second officer answered seriously despite the sweat beading on his forehead. “He simply wishes to talk to you about something that may be mutually beneficial.”

Spike gave the Mayor credit for sending minions who showed proper respect - and a healthy dose of fear - for a Master Vampire. A lot of humans didn’t have the required subtlety to approach a demon as anything other than a monster. Still, the Mayor hadn’t gone through the Court, which meant he wanted whatever this was handled privately, not as a request made formally before the entire Court.

“When? Not really one for keeping business hours.”

“The Mayor is available tonight, at your convenience. He’s waiting in his office, if you’re willing to accompany us.”

Xander wasn’t home yet. Ordinarily, Spike would have sent them packing with a message that the Mayor could see Spike when Spike bloody well got around to it, but it would be best to take care of this immediately, find out what it was about and whether it posed a threat to either Xander or his position.

“Tell the Mayor I’ll be at his office in 30 minutes,” he agreed. He was curious but he wasn’t fool enough to ride in the backseat of a police cruiser with two cops who knew he was a vampire. Although he had no concerns at all about his ability to break out of restraints intended for human criminals, the few seconds delay in escaping the reinforced cage in a patrol car would be enough time for a prepared human to cause serious damage with fire or holy water. He’d walk.

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The Mayor’s was on the top floor of the mission-style City Hall. Of a decent but not spectacular size, green walls with framed certificates and standard office furniture with the exception of an enormous antique wooden cabinet along one wall. The Mayor himself was… off. Sickeningly cheerful, with a cloyingly sunny nature that instantly put Spike’s hackles up.

“Hello! Nice to meet you.” The Mayor advanced with hand outstretched and seemed completely unfazed when Spike just looked at it, pointedly keeping both hands in the pockets of his duster.

“I'm Richard Wilkins, the Mayor of Sunnydale. And you're... Mr. Spike. Please, sit down.”

Spike didn’t give the indicated chair even a flicker of a glance, studying the Mayor with his head cocked to one side. “Prefer standing.”
“That’s fine, however you’re most comfortable, Mr. Spike.”

Spike didn’t bother correcting the “Mr.”, he didn’t care what the Mayor called him.

“I suppose you’re curious about why I asked to meet with you,” the Mayor continued after a moment, when it was clear that Spike was not going to say anything. He seemed completely at ease, perching on the edge of his desk, legs stretched out in front of him as he waited for an answer.

“Bit. Don’t suppose you’re just a fan.”

“I am a fan, Mr. Spike. You’ve done a tremendous job since you’ve taken over.” Spike was sure that the Mayor’s smile displayed more teeth than a human smile usually did. “You see, I’ve been the Mayor of Sunnydale for quite some time now and I like things to run smoothly. This is a very important year for me.”

“Election year,” Spike guessed.

“Something like that.” Spike narrowed his eyes slightly at the evasiveness in the human’s voice. What could have a politician reaching out to demons, even on the Hellmouth, except an election year?

“Granted, you did kill Mr. Trick and ordinarily I don’t appreciate people who kill my employees. It really isn’t good manners to express your dissatisfaction that way, Mr. Spike. Fortunately for you, you killed him on a day when I was a bit upset with him myself, so I didn’t hold it against you.”

Spike was seriously tempted to simply break the Mayor’s neck and leave. The perky good humor and relentless cheer was getting on his nerves. Only his innate wariness stopped him from doing something so rash. There was no way the Mayor could possibly be as harmless as he seemed, not with the knowledge he obviously had about demons and the Hellmouth. Feeling off balance in a way he rarely did, Spike fished in his duster and pulled out his cigarettes and lighter.

“Mr. Spike, I like my guests to make themselves at home but I’m going to have to ask you not to smoke in my office.” The smile faded for the first time and a look of mild revulsion replaced it. Without the perpetual smile, the Mayor looked like someone to be taken more seriously. A shrewd businessman at least, perhaps something more. Studying him over the flame of his lighter, Spike took his time lighting the cigarette. “Got something against tobacco companies in particular or just don’t like the smell?” he asked finally. Taking a deep drag, he blew the smoke out just to one side of the Mayor, resisting the urge to provoke him by blowing smoke directly in his face.

The Mayor retreated behind his desk. “I believe we have an obligation to set an example for the young people in our town. Smoking does not set a good example, Mr. Spike.”

“Don’t exactly see myself as a role model.”

The Mayor obviously decided to let the smoking issue go. “I know you’re a busy man, Mr. Spike, so I’ll come straight to the point. As we both know, Sunnydale is not like other towns. As Mayor, I need to be a bit more flexible than most politicians. Mr. Trick helped me out with some of the more esoteric of my responsibilities. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us to assist me with those matters. I would like very much for you to join my team.”

Spike lifted an eyebrow in mock astonishment. “You’re offerin’ me a job?”

“Not a 9 to 5 job, of course. More of a freelance position.”
“For those esoteric responsibilities.”

“Exactly! See, I knew we’d work well together.”

Spike shook his head. “Haven’t said what’s in it for me.” He had no intention of accepting any kind of offer, employment was for humans and minions, not Master Vampires. But he was curious and hoping the Mayor would give him some idea of what he was up to.

“I’m a little disappointed, Mr. Spike. You should know that a good politician never reveals his hand before it’s time.”

“Well, I make it a policy not to go into things blind.”

“Fair enough. I can respect caution in a business associate.” The smile slipped again and Spike caught a glimpse of the shrewd intelligence in the eyes that the Mayor hid so well behind his mask of home-spun joviality. “How about I contact you the next time I’m in need of specialized services and we conduct business on a case-by-case basis?”

Spike gave him a tight smile. “Long as you don’t expect me to drop everything and be at your beck and call, you can always ask.”

“I think you’ll see the benefits of working with me, Mr. Spike.” The Mayor walked around his desk, gesturing towards the door. “Thank you for coming. I’ll have my assistant show you out.”

“You want my help, send your minions to the Court,” Spike warned flatly. “Don’t appreciate being disturbed in my home.”

“I apologize, Mr. Spike. I’ll make sure that my assistants go through the Court in the future.” He paused and added significantly: “I wouldn’t want to cause your Claimed any distress. Xander, isn’t it? He seems like a nice boy.”

Only long years of experience in bluffing opponents kept Spike’s face bland, showing no reaction to the Mayor’s words. The Mayor’s tone had been sincere, nothing that could be pinned down, but the implication that he knew where Spike was vulnerable had been clear. “He’s a human,” Spike responded idly, as if the subject had little meaning to him, then gave the Mayor a hard stare as he finished. “They mostly don’t live long enough to get that attached to.” His own veiled probe at the Mayor’s human weakness didn’t get the reaction he expected as the Mayor looked regretful for a moment.

“Attachments can happen whether planned or not, Mr. Spike. Ten years or fifty, it’s never long enough with our loved ones.”

Spike narrowed his eyes, studying the person across from him. Dropping the hand holding his cigarette to his side where it was hidden from the Mayor, he pinched the glowing end out, extinguishing it and then inhaled deeply, concentrating hard. The Mayor smelled human. Heartbeat, breathing, cologne, mouthwash - all human normal. The faintest hint of incense and herbs in the room, and…

There was something else in the air. A slight bitterness at the back of his throat, an aftertaste to the normal human smells the Mayor was giving off that shouldn’t be there. Spike couldn’t identify what it was he was smelling but he did know that it wasn’t human normal. The Mayor wasn’t as human as he appeared. Half-breed maybe.

The Mayor of Sunnydale wasn’t quite human. Now there was a shocker.
Lifting his scarred eyebrow, he just said: “Take your word for it, mate.” The assistant had appeared at the connecting door in the way all good assistants had of knowing when they were needed. Spike strode off without waiting to be escorted, not looking back. He needed to find out what exactly the Mayor was before dealing with him. Negotiating from ignorance led to surprises and miscalculations. He wondered if either Angelus or the Watcher had any idea of what exactly the Mayor was.
“Xander, these scores are impressive. You should be proud of yourself.” Joyce Summers looked at Xander seriously. “What are you planning on doing with these results?”

Despite the seriousness in her eyes, Mrs. Summers’ smile was warm and Xander felt the grin that had curved his lips every time he thought about his SAT scores starting to form again. He hadn’t been able to stop smiling since the test results had been handed out this morning. He’d taken the test for a validation he knew he shouldn’t need but it still felt good to have done so well. It was a matter of official, numeric record now that Xander Harris wasn’t stupid.

Fighting back the grin, he just shrugged, pretending a diffidence he didn’t actually feel, looking down at the plate on the table between them, considering his choices. “Not much, I just took the test for the hell of it.” Choosing a cookie with a chocolate kiss in the center, he bit into the still-warm, just-from-the-oven goodness, mmm-ing in pleasure at the taste. Mrs. Summers had the best cookie recipes.

Mrs. Summers raised an eyebrow at him in a way that said she wasn’t buying it but didn’t verbally challenge his claim of indifference, just tapping one nail against the test results sheet that Xander had produced from his backpack for her at her insistence. “Even so, with results like this, you should be thinking about colleges.”

“Don’t have the money,” he mumbled around the last of the cookie.

“Have you thought about a scholarship? There are a lot around and they’re meant for people with good test scores and few resources.”

“Well, it’s not just the money. I’ve never really planned on going to college, and recently I’ve been thinking about a career in construction or carpentry and you don’t really need college for those.”

“I don’t want to push you, but you could try it for a year and see if you like it,” Mrs. Summers said slowly. “There’s nothing wrong with working construction - you’ve certainly been a godsend around this house with your skills - but I don’t like the idea of you settling for something because you don’t think you have options.”

“I like working with my hands. I like fixing things and building stuff. I wouldn’t be settling.” It was true. He had more than enough work from his regular customers to keep him busy in his spare time and it was flattering that most of them were willing to wait for him to have the time to do their job, rather than having the work done by someone else. Realistically, he knew that it was because he charged less than an established professional and didn’t mind working with demons, but still, it made him feel good that his customers appreciated him and many of them had become friends.

“All right, Xander, I’ll let it go. It sounds like you’ve already thought it through. I just wanted you to know that there were options open to you.”

Xander smiled at her, once again wishing his own parents had ever shown even a fraction of the interest in his life that Mrs. Summers did. She treated him like a member of the family, like her own kid: praising him, scolding him, and, above all, accepting him. She always brushed off his thanks as unnecessary and it made him wonder if she would ever really understand how much she meant to him. “Check. Options noted.” He snagged one more cookie from the plate and stood up. “How about I get started fixing that shutter.”
Mrs. Summers accepted that as a tacit signal that the conversation was over. “I’ll put the rest of the cookies in a bag for you to take home with you when you’re done, Xander. Does Spike like cookies?”

“If not, I’ll eat them,” he admitted with a grin. “But I promise to let him know I have them.”

She gave him a mock stern look. “I’ll be checking with him when I see him next to make sure you did.”

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The Hellmouth was quiet enough that Xander found himself joking with Spike about demons taking the holiday season off. He and Spike had a mutual, satisfactory agreement that Christmas had been commercialized to the extent it no longer meant anything and they had agreed to ignore it.

Xander had shared with Spike his holiday “tradition” of camping outside to avoid his family’s drunken Christmas fights. Spike offered to start a new holiday tradition for him in which Spike would present him with a gift of the eviscerated body of his least favorite relative every year. Even though he had declined the offer, it probably said bad things about himself that he thought it was sweet of Spike to offer.

In turn, Spike had told him about some of Drusilla’s madder ideas about the holidays: when Moore’s Visit from St. Nicholas became so popular that the familiar phrases of the poem filtered down to the demonic world and Angelus and Darla had woken one Christmas evening to find the lair strewn with dead mice - Drusilla had taken the “not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse” as a guideline and set herself to hunt down every mouse for a block around. Spike had laughed himself sick at the sight because Drusilla had taken the trouble to arrange the tiny corpses into evocative poses. Darla had not been amused. With a reminiscent grin, Spike told Xander: “Took two days to get the last of them out of the lair. ‘Course, didn’t help that I kept sneakin’ ‘em back in after Angelus had thrown them out into the alley. He’d clean them out of one area and I’d be fetching them back inside again and hiding them under his pillow.”

Xander had laughed his head off at the image of Spike as a mischievous kid and Spike added sheepishly, “course, I was just a fledg then.”

Spike had vetoed Xander’s offer to re-enact the Great Mice Caper on Angelus for Christmas this year and they settled on spending the holidays in Los Angeles, doing a repeat of the club-hopping, nocturnal weekend they’d spent the last time they’d gone to Los Angeles. For the four day holiday weekend, Xander and Spike had gotten a luxurious room in an expensive hotel and spent the days sleeping and the nights partying until dawn in both demon and human clubs.

It was great to leave Sunnydale and all its problems and issues behind them and Xander felt like a weight he hadn’t even realized he’d been carrying had slid off his shoulders. Drinking beer, dancing and making out in dim corners of the clubs, before going back to the hotel for hot sweaty sex was just what he’d needed and it was the best Christmas holiday he could ever remember. The night before they returned to Sunnydale, Spike rented them a hot tub suite and thoroughly debauched him in the tub with his willing cooperation, leaving him boneless and sated and sure he was going to drown. As he’d told Spike the next day when his brain was working again: “Just so you know - that’s what I want on my tombstone: ‘Drowned while having incredible sex in a hot tub’.”

Returning to Sunnydale should have been a let-down, but somehow wasn’t. One of his clients invited Spike and Xander to a traditional Z’bat’rhyth birthday party, which fell on the first new moon of January. Z’bat’rhyth didn’t celebrate birthdays individually, or with presents, they simply held a blow-out party once a year to rejoice in all of the births in the community for the previous year.
Xander was excited because it was the first time that Spike had been invited to a gathering of his non-human friends. They had long since accepted that Spike was his lover and had been dealing with Spike as Master of the Hellmouth, but they’d remained wary of associating with him because he was a vampire. The invitation was the first sign that the peaceful demons saw Spike as something more than just a vampire and Master of the Hellmouth.

The party was a blast. Xander knew a number of the people there, not just B’rryn, known locally as Brian Smith, who’d invited them. There was a band, a pot-luck, and an open bar and, best of all, no-one had looked twice at Spike or been upset at his presence. Spike had enjoyed himself as much as Xander, even approving of the music - the band played instruments Xander had never seen before, loudly - and spending the evening dancing and drinking.

As the evening wound down, Xander and Spike ended up sitting snuggled together on one of the couches scattered around the periphery of the room, talking and joking with a small group of die-hard party-goers who seemed to appreciate Spike’s wicked sense of humor. Xander was so proud to finally be able to show off his vampire and ecstatic that some of the disparate parts of his life were finally meshing. There were times when it felt like everything in his life was compartmentalized and needed to be kept rigidly separate, it was a relief to be able to talk to his friends with his boyfriend’s arms wrapped around him and all of them involved in easy conversation.

Cuddled sleepily against Spike in the car on the drive back to the factory that night, Xander found himself wishing drowsily that all the parts of his life could find a way to fit together like they had tonight. It was tiring and nerve-wracking at times trying to keep track of what he could say to one person and how he had to behave around another. Not that he really thought that Buffy would ever be invited to a demon party like tonight’s, but maybe Giles…

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The first day back at school should have been a let-down after the two week holiday break, but his good mood and the sense of a crushing weight gone from his shoulders stayed with him. Rather than being exhausted from all the holiday partying, Xander found he was energized and even his dullest classes seemed better than they had in December. Maybe everyone had been able to avoid the post-holiday blues. It certainly seemed like it when he and Larry had managed to disrupt the entire shop class with their laughing over their respective holiday stories and Mr. Harding didn’t even reprimand them. Instead, he’d declared a ‘no work’ day and they’d all spent the hour telling jokes and goofing off. They’d been told that it was a one-shot and they would be expected to work twice as hard the next day, but it had been fun while it lasted.

Back at his locker after woodshop, Xander heard footsteps coming to a stop behind him and a familiar voice said: “Oz and I are going bowling tonight. Would you like to join us?”

Xander smiled involuntarily. If she wanted to tempt him, Willow couldn’t have picked a better way of doing it. Jesse and Willow and he had gone bowling once a week all through Junior High. Willow had been better than both of them, kicking their butts regularly and gloating good-naturedly about her superiority. Their bowling nights had petered out during their freshman year from a combination of things: the complete un-coolness of bowling had been a big part of it, especially when Jesse’s hopeless crush on Cordelia had him pushing them to change bowling night into movie night; Xander suspected it had been Jesse’s hope of seeing Cordelia at the movies despite her stud-of-the-week accessory. Cordelia Chase wouldn’t enter a bowling alley if it was the only refuge from a tornado.

The smile was still on his face as he turned around to see Willow and Oz, fingers entwined as usual, facing him. Willow looked painfully hopeful and Oz was his usual impassive self. His rift with Willow really did mean he saw far too little of Oz, Xander thought, not for the first time.
“Sounds like fun,” he answered impulsively, surprising himself with his agreement.

Willow’s glowing happiness at his acceptance of the invitation made him feel churlish for not having been willing extend an olive branch before now. Oz looked surprised but pleased and Xander gave him a crooked smile. “I haven’t dusted off my bowling shoes in awhile, so no guarantees on my skills, but I’m in.”

“That’s great!” Willow enthused. “We can meet up right after our last classes, if that’s ok, or we can go later if that’s better for you.”

For a fleeting moment, Xander thought about asking whether they would mind if Spike joined them. It wasn’t so much the thought of Willow’s reaction as Spike’s that squelched the idea almost as soon as he’d thought of it. He couldn’t even wrap his own mind around the image of Spike in bowling shoes, although he did grin at the thought of Spike’s horrified reaction to the idea of a bowling date.

Maybe he’d invite Spike later just for the amusement of seeing Spike’s reaction to being invited to go bowling.

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Surrounded by the familiar sounds and smells of the bowling alley, Xander couldn’t help thinking that the evening was an object lesson in not being able to recapture your past. Jesse had always had a penchant for extreme bowling. If he wasn’t bowling left-handed, despite being right-handed, he was trying to bowl facing backwards, or with the wrong fingers in the holes, just to see if he could.

Tonight, instead of Jesse’s clowning and frequent gutter balls - he’d never accepted that bowling backwards wasn’t his forte - there was Oz, who bowled seriously and with skill. It wasn’t that Oz wasn’t fun, it was just that he was quieter than Jesse had ever been and Xander’s memory of Jesse’s laughing commentary on every aspect of the game and the people around them was so different from Oz’s quiet presence.

Nor was it the same easy friendship with Willow. Willow was anxious and trying too hard. She seemed to be having a hard time remembering that he and Oz were friends, monitoring and directing the conversation like a nervous host trying to get strangers to get along. Xander wanted to tell her to just relax, but didn’t want to actually talk about why this was so difficult for both of them, so let it go. He and Oz communicated silently when it was Willow’s turn to bowl, exchanging understanding glances and both working hard to keep the conversation on neutral subjects.

All in all, it wasn’t a wildly successful evening, but it was a try at a fresh start and one more piece of the separate parts of his life that might eventually fit together. Even if Willow and Spike never got to the point where they liked each other, it would be a relief if he and Oz weren’t forced to be friends without including Willow. She and Oz were pretty inseparable and finding Oz-time not already committed to either Willow or the Dingos was nearly impossible.

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Two days later, helping Giles in the library, Xander was surprised when Giles mentioned his bowling date with Willow and Oz. Giles had co-opted their study period, asking Xander if he would mind helping him catalog the new books that had arrived. Xander had eagerly accepted, always interested in Giles’ new acquisitions, using his pocket knife to slice open the boxes and pull the books out. Seeing the titles, his face fell and Giles laughed.

“Sorry, I neglected to mention that these are for the regular collection,” Giles said in amusement.
“Sneaky, Giles. You are so owing me for this.”

The books ranged from poetry to biographies and they worked in comfortable silence, Xander unpacking and checking the books against the order inventory and Giles handling the far more tedious cataloging process. He was actually glad for the quiet time to mull over whether or not he should talk to Giles about his demon friends. He’d always sort of assumed that Giles knew about the community of peaceful demons living on the Hellmouth, even if not in a lot of detail, but he found himself reluctant to talk about them.

The demon community in town had accepted him and given him their trust. He didn’t want to do anything to violate that trust or risk bringing harm to them. While it would be nice not to have to sensor his conversation to avoid mentioning his friends in any way that could reveal that they weren’t human, it wasn’t worth the risk to them. He was sure Giles wouldn’t do anything to deliberately harm his friends but Giles did tend to see everything as a resource to help him be a better Watcher for his Slayer. In the end, he decided he couldn’t take the risk that Giles might use the knowledge in a way that would be detrimental to his friends in order to help Buffy. That part of his life would just have to stay separate.

“Xander,” Giles’ voice broke the long silence bringing Xander’s thoughts back to the library. “I understand that you went bowling with Willow and Oz the other night.”

“Yeah.” Xander glanced over at him and saw Giles smiling at him.

“I’m pleased that you and Willow have been able to get past your differences. I assure you that I’m continuing to work with her so that she has the proper training.”

“Umm, ok,” Xander wasn’t quite sure what Willow’s magic lessons had to do with a bowling date but the first part of Giles’ comment was what really caught his attention. “It was... awkward,” he admitted, sitting down heavily in the chair next to Giles. “We’re such different people now that maybe it would have been better if we’d done something we’ve never done before, because bowling just emphasized how much things have changed.” He made a vague gesture, not sure how to express how it had felt. “I can’t really say we’re past our differences, but it may have been a start.”

“I wouldn’t expect that everything would be perfectly fine as if nothing had happened,” Giles responded. “But I know how much Willow has wanted to reconcile with you even when she thought it might never be possible. She’s missed you very much.”

“I’ve missed Willow too. Almost losing her kind of cleared that up for me.” He sighed. “I don’t know if we will ever be as close as we once were, but maybe we’re both ready to give it a try.”

The lines at the corners of Giles’ eyes deepened in that way he had of smiling without moving his lips. “I hope things go well for the two of you.”

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“Joyce did what?!”

Spike was outraged and it showed. When he’d arrived home after school, Xander had immediately informed him about Mrs. Summers’ impromptu field trip to watch Buffy at work last night.

“Slayer let her? I’ll kill her. How dare she risk Joyce like that?”

“Calm down. It’s not like that. Buffy was as upset about it as you are. Mrs. Summers didn’t tell her what she was planning. Apparently, she just showed up unannounced and said she wanted to watch Buffy patrol.”
“Not buyin’ it, luv. How would she have known where to find her daughter?” Spike was pacing agitatedly.

“Buffy said she asked where Buffy was going to be patrolling that night, passed it off as idle curiosity.” Xander sighed. “Worst part about the whole thing is that Mrs. Summers found the bodies of two kids who’d been murdered. She was devastated.”

Spike looked at him sharply. “Vampire victims?”

Xander shook his head. “No. Probably not even demon related. There was some kind of symbol on the bodies that Giles says suggests some kind of satanic cult or something like that. As if we don’t have enough problems in this town. What kind of moron would try to raise Satan on the Hellmouth?”

Spike snorted. “Someone too bloody stupid to even know it’s a Hellmouth, that’s who. Satanic rituals tend to go wonky on the Hellmouth. Start pouring goat’s blood around and you’re likely to accidentally summon a wonky demon and get eaten for your pains. Pro’ly explains why there’s so few black magic practitioners in town - they’ve all been eaten.” He looked like the thought of demons munching on witches was cheering him up.

“As charming as that thought is, this one’s not really on either your’s or Buffy’s turf. Not if people did it.”

“Not worried about that, luv. I’m going to have a talk with Joyce. If she wants information about slaying vampires, she could have come to me if the Slayer won’t help her out.”

“Umm…speaking as someone who’s been there and done the stupid thing, be gentle, Spike. Having your world view shaken up can lead you to do incredibly stupid stuff that seemed like a good idea when you thought of it.”

“Rememberin’ spying on vampires in their lair, are we?” Spike asked, eyebrow raised mockingly.

“Yeah. Like I said, it seemed like a good idea at the time I thought of it. It was only when I was actually there that I realized what an idiotic idea it was.”

“Lead to you meetin’ a certain handsome vampire, so it wasn’t a total loss.” Spike leered at him.

“Hmmm, maybe I should do it more often.”

“Not if you want to leave the lair anytime in the near future,” Spike growled. He kissed Xander and headed for the closet. “I’m going over to Joyce’s. Risky enough bein’ the Slayer’s mum without wandering around the Hellmouth at night followin’ her daughter. Can’t believe the stupid bitch didn’t know her mother was following her,” he grumbled, sliding into his duster. “Wanna come, luv?”

“Yeah, but Mrs. Summers isn’t going to be at home for awhile. She’s set up some kind of rally-slash-vigil at City Hall for tonight. Should be starting in half an hour or so. Should we meet her there?”

“City Hall?” Spike looked thoughtful. “Why don’t we wait and meet her after it’s over, pet. We can walk her home and talk to her. She won’t want to talk during her gathering.”

“Good idea. I’m really worried about her, Spike. I’ve never seen her so freaked out, even when you outed yourself and the entire demonic community to her without any warning.”

“Hey!” Spike protested automatically, “that turned out fine.”
“Only because she didn’t actually drop dead of a heart attack at the time,” Xander said gloomily.
Xander was worried about Joyce and Spike agreed. Joyce didn’t seem like the kind of person to waste her time on meaningless rallies or vigils or whatever it was she’d set up at City Hall. Xander hadn’t sounded exactly sure what it was supposed to be, which probably wasn’t his fault. Personally, Spike suspected that candle-lit vigils had evolved from good old-fashioned, torch-wielding mobs which - whatever else you had to say about them - were usually a good sign that the peasants were well and truly pissed off about something. Nowadays, everyone was too civilized to burn the local manor house down in protest, so they just gathered with their candles and held hands and complained about how the world was going to pot. Bloody pointless, as far as Spike was concerned. At least the peasants had had the fleeting satisfaction of seeing their tormentor’s house in flames and the possibility of making off with the lord’s silver in the ruckus.

Spike drove them to within a few blocks of City Hall, parking his car far more discretely than was his normal practice. It wasn’t that he was really worried about trouble but he wanted to keep a bit lower profile than usual when bringing Xander onto the Mayor’s turf. At least until he knew what was going on with The Somewhat-Less-Than-Honorable Mr. Wilkins. The drive over gave Spike a few minutes to think, which he needed. The last couple of weeks, he’d let everything slide, delegating all his responsibilities to his Lieutenants. Having Xander all to himself over the school break had been a taste of what their life should be like. For two entire weeks, Xander had been at his side almost constantly and Spike had loved every minute. It was how they were meant to be, not putting up with daily separations and it was only with great reluctance that he’d let Xander return to school when it started up again.

Joyce’s little party at City Hall had reminded Spike of his unfinished business with the Mayor. Angelus didn’t know anything about the Mayor and that was all the additional information he’d learned since his summons to the Mayor’s office. Now, he cursed himself for relaxing his guard and not following up like he should have. He, and more importantly Xander, were walking onto the Mayor’s turf without sufficient knowledge of even what he was, much less what his agenda was.

Well, there was one thing he could remedy.

“Xander, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

Looking around at the milling crowd of humans, Spike kept Xander close by his side, his strong fingers wrapped around Xander’s wrist in an unmistakable signal to anyone with eyes that Xander was his. Xander had been startled but un-protesting when Spike’s fingers had closed around his wrist firmly just outside City Hall before Spike led him inside, keeping half a step in front, his eyes sweeping the unexpectedly large gathering for signs of danger. Despite Xander’s desire to join his friends near the podium, Spike had kept them firmly on the edges and near the door.

It wasn’t that the crowd of bankers, school teachers and lawyers worried him, but he didn’t want Xander caught in the middle if things turned ugly. And in Spike’s experience, crowds with fire could turn ugly quickly. Even though this lot seemed harmless, crowds could become mobs far too easily.

Typically, Xander had been more intrigued than worried to learn that Sunnydale’s Mayor was not quite human. He seemed to think it was kind of appropriate, in a Hellmouthy way, to have a demon officially in charge of the town. Spike had not been happy that Xander’s main interest after Spike told him about his meeting with the Mayor had been what kind of demon Spike thought the Mayor
was and not Spike’s concern about keeping Xander off the Mayor’s radar. Still, he accepted Spike’s warning to be cautious, given the Mayor’s history of hiring vampires. Knowing that most peaceful demons didn’t associate with vampires, Xander had taken that for the warning sign it was. He’d promised to follow Spike’s lead at City Hall, and told Spike he’d ask Giles to look into the Mayor the next day.

Of course, all that reasonableness had come after Spike had had to dissuade Xander of the ridiculous notion that Xander should go inside to the rally alone while Spike kicked his heels outside the building out of harm’s way and out of the Mayor’s sight.

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The Mayor had spoken briefly, then turned the gathering over to Joyce. Spike would almost have thought that he and Xander had remained unnoticed except for the brief flash of the Mayor’s eyes in their direction at the end of his speech. Spike didn’t like the way the Mayor had deliberately met Spike’s eyes across the room as he ended his brief speech by holding up one of the posters of the murdered kids that they were handing out by the dozens at the rally while cheesily intoning his new motto: “Never again.”  Xander was watching his school friends and missed the brief exchange which was just as well. Spike knew didn’t want to hear Xander accusing him of over-reacting because he’d taken the look as a veiled threat.

Before he could decide what, if anything, to do about it - it really wasn’t the time or the place to kill the Mayor - Spike had been diverted by Joyce stepping to the podium. Even as she thanked the Mayor and prepared to speak, Spike couldn’t help but wonder why no one had gotten worked up like this about deaths in Sunnydale before now. Joyce especially seemed an unlikely person to go into a tailspin over a couple of deaths. After all, the woman had handled dozens of zombies in her bedroom without batting an eye, so why did two bodies in a park bother her enough to lead to this? Spike shrugged, setting it aside. Undoubtedly it was nothing more complicated than the fact that the bodies were two little kids. Joyce was nothing if not a good mother.

Spike eyed the Slayer, who was standing near the front of the crowd listening to her mother. He was wondering whether he should actually speak to the Slayer first about letting her mother go wandering around at night following her on patrol, when Joyce’s words caught his attention.

He listened in amused disbelief as Joyce outed her daughter, saying the town belonged to the monsters and the Slayers, even as he tugged Xander closer to him as Xander tensed and made a half step forward at Joyce’s words. The Slayer looked like a deer in headlights as her mum dissed her in public and Spike couldn’t stop a malicious grin from spreading at her discomfort.

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Sitting in the student lounge talking with Buffy, Willow and Oz about the vigil last night, Xander found himself almost grateful for uninvolved parents. Mrs. Summers was completely freaked out and had said some really hurtful things to Buffy about how she didn’t do any good as the Slayer and Mrs. Rosenberg was viewing the whole thing as a creepy research topic, questioning Willow relentlessly about her knowledge of students who were into the occult, seeking first hand anecdotes to flesh out her statistical data.

Spike and he had ended up simply going home after the rally because Mrs. Summers had been distracted and had actually told them, gently but firmly, that she was too busy and too tired to talk to them tonight. For a wonder, Spike had accepted that, although Xander suspected it was because Spike had so thoroughly enjoyed hearing Mrs. Summers dump on Buffy in public the way she had, even if most of the crowd didn’t realize she was talking about her own daughter and lumping her with the “monsters”.
Willow’s voice, still complaining about her mother, brought his wandering thoughts back to the student lounge.

“I mean, what am I supposed to do? Tell her about Amy and her mother, or Michael and his dabblings? They have enough problems fitting in already. They don’t need to be featured in a Sheila Rosenberg psychology paper on the alienation coping strategy of dabbling in the occult.”

“Amy’s messing with magic?” Buffy asked, surprised. “After what her mother did to her sophomore year? I would have thought she’d stay as far away from magic as possible.”

Willow looked uncomfortable, her eyes flickering nervously to Xander for a brief instant before looking back at Buffy. “She and Michael have been dabbling in stuff but it’s all harmless. Worst thing she’s done is get out of the occasional homework assignment.” She bit her lip anxiously. “Don’t tell Giles, ok? I don’t want Amy to get in trouble.”

Xander watched the growing tension between the other three in puzzlement. Oz had gone stiff, shifting away from Willow slightly, his hand dropping from around her shoulders and Buffy looked like she was on the verge of an angry outburst. “Guys, come on. You can’t possibly think that Amy was involved in killing those kids and now is really not a good time to be outing anyone who’s dabbling in magic, given the way people were talking last night.”

Oz looked at him in surprise. Well, with both eyebrows raised, which was the Oz-equivalent of shocked astonishment. “You’re… ok with this?” he asked, studying Xander intently.

“Well, dabbling in magic on the Hellmouth is probably never a good idea but I’ll take Willow’s word for it that what Amy’s doing in harmless.” Xander didn’t understand what he was missing - why Oz was now looking absolutely dumbfounded and Buffy was on the verge of boiling over.

“What I want to know is how you know about Amy and Michael?” Buffy had stood up and crossed her arms, staring down at Willow with her most intimidating Slayer-glare.

“Amy and I are friends, you know that,” Willow said defensively. “She and Michael do stuff together…” she blushed and clarified hastily: “magical stuff. She told me about it.” Willow ducked her head, avoiding Buffy’s eyes, letting her hair swing forward over her face.

“Look at me, Willow,” Buffy demanded.

“Buffy, back off a little. What’s your problem?” Xander interjected, incredulous at the way Buffy was confronting Willow.

Buffy turned to stare at him in surprise, her mouth opening to say something when they were interrupted by a sudden loud ruckus in the hallway behind them. A voice called out sternly: “Police business, stay back,” and Buffy’s intended words died unsaid.

They all turned to see what was going on, getting to their feet as a growing noise assaulted them - the sound of raised voices and an angry crowd. Worried and curious, the four of them walked quickly towards the sound.

The main hallway was filled way beyond normal. Upset students were muttering protests and insults at a line of police officers preventing them from reaching their lockers. Principal Snyder was standing in the middle of the cleared area around the lockers, smirking openly and thoroughly enjoying the students’ ineffectual anger.

“What’s going on?” Buffy asked. The four of them threaded their way towards the front of the crowd, curious about the cause of the uproar. Police officers were going through the lockers, rifling
through the contents and occasionally pulling items out.

“This is a glorious day for principals everywhere. No pathetic whining about students' rights. Just a long row of lockers and a man with a key.” Snyder clearly meant that literally, a member of the janitorial staff was moving down the line of lockers, methodically opening each of them in turn with a master key. Behind him, came police officers, rifling through the lockers and placing anything unusual onto a wheeled cart: books, someone’s marijuana stash, a voodoo doll that looked suspiciously like Snyder, and other stuff he couldn’t make out.

Amy Madison was near the line of police, incipient panic on her face. “They’re searching the lockers for ‘witch stuff’” she informed them quietly as they arrived beside her, the sarcastic quotes obvious even through her tense nervousness. “My locker’s just about next up. They’ve already taken two kids away for suspicious stuff. They’re going to love what I have in my locker.” She was trying to make light of it but failing miserably.

“But… it’s not illegal to have books on witchcraft in your locker. They can’t even suspend you - it’s a recognized religion. You can claim religious freedom, right?” Willow suggested nervously.

Xander watched as the officers started on the next open locker and began rummaging through the contents quickly. Watching them pull out two books, holding them as if they were poison, he shook his head. “I don’t think Snyder is interested in constitutional rights just now. This is looking an awful lot like how Nazi Germany got started.”

“Miss Madison, come with me.” The Vice Principal had approached them unnoticed, and Amy bit her lip, throwing them a scared glance as she was escorted away.

“What am I going to do?” Willow whispered nervously. “There’s stuff in my locker.”

“What kind of stuff?” Xander asked, keeping his voice low and a wary eye on the search party.

“A spell book and some herbs.”

“Willow, why do you have stuff like that in your locker?” Buffy asked sharply, then shook her head impatiently as the guy with the key opened the lock on Willow’s locker. “Never mind, it’s too late to worry about that. Your locker’s next.”

Willow looked terrified as the janitor opened her locker. The police were already moving in behind him to check the contents. Her hands tightened convulsively around the straps of her backpack and she looked in panic at Oz. “Oh, god, I have stuff in my bag, too. What am I going to do?”

Xander acted on instinct, reaching up casually to slide the straps of her backpack off her shoulders, just as Snyder pointed out Willow to the officers. For one moment, Willow resisted, clinging to the straps, before her hands relaxed and her arms fell to her sides, allowing him to pull the backpack off. She threw him a desperate look over her shoulder and Xander just shook his head at her, melting back into the crowd, taking the backpack with him as a stern looking policewoman planted herself in front of Willow.

Slipping through the crowd, Xander wondered how things had gotten this out of hand so quickly. Sunnydale had the highest death rate in the entire country for a town its size. Multiple murders weren’t even uncommon. Why was one more double murder, no matter how awful, causing this kind of reaction? Students and teachers, hell, the last principal had all been murdered on campus in the last two years and it had never lead to police raids and locker searches. Something weird was going on.

He headed directly for the library. It was the safest place he could think of to stash Willow’s
backpack and he wanted to alert Giles to what was happening.

“Giles?” Xander pushed open the library doors, looking around for the librarian as he entered.

Giles came out of his office, absently holding a book, as always. “What is it, Xander?”

“Giles, the school’s gone crazy. Snyder’s searching lockers and anyone who’s got anything suspicious is being taken away.”

“Suspicious? You mean, like drugs?”

“No, I mean like witch stuff. I’m not sure if they even know what they’re looking for, but Willow and Amy Madison both had spell books in their lockers and they both got hauled into the principal’s office, along with some other kids. Of course, the police apparently threatened Cordelia’s hairspray, so they may not know what they’re looking for.” He held up Willow’s backpack. “I need to stash this in your office. Willow said she has some stuff in it that it’s not a good idea for her to be caught with right now.”

Giles set the book he was carrying down on the counter, looking at Xander sharply. “Willow had a spell book in her locker?”

Xander shrugged. “I guess. But, come on, this is Willow. There’s no way she was involved in killing a couple of kids.”

“That wasn’t my concern.” Giles took the backpack from Xander and opened it.

“Giles! Geez, does the word ‘privacy’ mean anything to you? Maybe you should join Synder.”

Giles had pulled out a spell book and a ziplock bag with a small dried plant in it and his lips tightened as he studied the plant. “Under the circumstances, privacy means a great deal less to me than safety, Xander.”

“Safety? It’s not like you didn’t know she was studying witchcraft. You’ve been working with her. What’s the big?”

If anything, Giles’ stare increased in intensity, boring into Xander as if he was trying to read his mind. “Xander…,” he hesitated and seemed to change what he’d started to say. “Xander, doesn’t it concern you at all that Willow has spell books that I did not lend her?”

Xander just shook his head, puzzled and a little uneasy under Giles’ scrutiny. “You’re teaching her magic, right? Are you sure they aren’t books you loaned her?”

Anger flared in Giles’ eyes and he swore sharply, shocking Xander who didn’t think he’d ever heard Giles use profanity before. Before Giles could say anything further, the library door was pushed open and Giles turned impatiently towards the entrance. “The library is closed. Please come back in an hour,” he snapped, before realizing it wasn’t a student at the door.

Four uniformed police officers entered, the last two carrying stacks of empty cartons. The sight of them broke Xander out of his shocked paralysis at Giles’ behavior and he moved quickly to block their view as Giles instantly swept the two books and the ziplock bag out of sight under the counter.

“Can I help you?”

Under other circumstances, Xander would have smiled at the way Giles drew his mild-mannered, British librarian persona around him like a cloak of invisibility. Unfortunately, today it wasn’t going
to work. The invading bodies just pushed past Giles, ignoring his protests, and began yanking books off shelves without regard for their age or fragility, throwing them into the boxes they’d carried in with them.

Giles tried to block them physically. “Stop! Some of those books are extremely rare. Irreplaceable. You cannot do this.”

“They not only can, they have the legal authority to do so.”

Snyder’s unwelcome voice brought a halt to Giles’ attempts to physically stop the seizure of his library. The principal sauntered into the room, radiating pleasure at Giles’ consternation, his eyes sweeping over the activity in the room with obvious pleasure. “I love the smell of desperate librarian in the morning.”

“Get out! And take your marauders with you,” Giles spat, long past any pretense of civility.

Snyder just smirked at him, reaching into one of the boxes and plucking a book out. He studied the title for a moment before looking back at Giles with his eyebrows raised mockingly. “Mr. Giles, just how is… ‘Blood Rites and Sacrifices’ appropriate material for a public school library? Chess club branching out?”

Giles’ expression hardened and, for a moment, Xander was afraid he was going to physically attack Snyder. The moment passed and Giles closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he sought to calm himself. Xander watched helplessly, not knowing what to do and afraid that doing anything at all might makes things worse. The door slammed open again and he turned and saw Buffy enter, stopping abruptly just inside the door as she saw the police officers.

Snyder was clearly enjoying the moment, his gaze swinging back and forth between Buffy and Giles. “This is just the beginning. You’ll find a number of things changing around here. Fight it, if you want, but just remember, lift a finger against me and you’ll have to answer to MOO.”

Buffy repeated incredulously: “‘Answer to MOO’? Did that sentence just make some sense that I’m not in on?”

“‘Mothers Opposed to the Occult,’ Snyder translated. “A powerful new group.”

“And who came up with that lame name?” Xander had to agree with Buffy on that one, even though it really wasn’t the issue.

“That would be the founder. I believe you call her ‘Mom’.”

He smirked at them one last time, then swept out of the library, leaving the officers to finish packing up any even remotely questionable books. Giles watched them seizing his books helplessly, still distraught over the way the books were being handled. Xander suspected that that was actually the thing that was freaking Giles out the most, not the confiscation. Confiscated books could be returned. Damaged ones were another matter entirely.

“Come on,” he said roughly. “There’s nothing we can do here. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“I agree.” Buffy tugged gently on Giles’ arm, physically turning him away from the sight of his books being manhandled. She shot Xander a look he couldn’t read. “On top of everything else, we’ve got a Willow problem.”

“It’s just a summons to the principal’s office, right? They can’t expel her or anything, can they? It’s not like she had anything illegal in her locker,” Xander asked worriedly.
Giles tore his attention away from the plundering of his library but, if anything, his anger seemed to grow until his whole body was tense with barely-checked rage. The minute they were outside the library, he pinned Buffy with a hard stare. “Buffy, did you know what Willow was doing?” His voice was deadly quiet, bitter knowledge in his eyes.

“No! I swear, Giles. I had no idea.” Buffy looked across Giles at Xander. “Xander, I’m sorry, I didn’t know she was using magic again. I would have told you.”

“What are you guys talking about? Giles has been teaching Willow magic since last summer. Why are you freaking out about it now?” Xander was completely baffled by Giles’ anger, by Buffy’s apology, by the entire situation.

Giles steered them into an empty classroom and closed the door. He looked at Xander with sincere regret. “Xander, I apologize. I promised you that I was monitoring Willow closely and I have obviously failed you.” He held up a hand to stop Xander from answering and continued, his gaze turning to Buffy. “Willow had Lethe’s Bramble in her backpack. It’s an herb used for spells of memory and mind control.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide and she looked at Xander in horror. Xander was beginning to get a creepy feeling about the situation himself as Giles asked him: “Xander, what do you remember about Willow using a truth spell on you?”

Xander stared at him, unable to utter a sound. His gaze swung to Buffy and he saw she was looking at him with the same look Giles had - one of mingled horror and pity. “Willow did a spell on me? When?” he finally managed to ask faintly.

“You don’t remember it at all?”

He shook his head numbly and opened his mouth to say something, anything, but no sound came out. He just kept shaking his head slowly, in utter denial of what he was hearing. It felt like the air was being squeezed from his lungs and his breath started coming in short, hard pants. Willow would not do that to him. She wouldn’t. It wasn’t possible.

There was a roaring in his ears and suddenly he was being pushed into a chair, his head shoved down between his knees.

“Xander, breathe!”

Giles’ sharp order broke through the roaring noise and he began gulping in great lungfuls of air, fighting for control. After a long moment, he raised his head. Buffy and Giles were watching him anxiously but anger was beginning to replace his shock.

“Are you telling me that Willow has done some kind of spell to make me forget things?” He kept his voice steady with an effort.

Giles nodded. “That appears to be what she has done,” he said quietly with tight control, though it was obvious he was still furious. Xander felt something inside of himself turn to ice.

“I want to know exactly what Willow’s done to me and how I get my memory back.”

“Of course. I can fill you in on the basic information, and fortunately, memory spells are usually fairly easy to break.” Giles hesitated, laying a sympathetic hand on Xander’s shoulder. “It’s not something that I can take care of at this moment, Xander.” He made sure Xander was looking at him as he continued. “I’m going to have to find out exactly what Willow has done in order to be sure I use the correct method of reversing the spell. I promise you that this will be my top priority, but…”
his voice died and he looked infinitely regretful. “Xander, I’m going to need my books to do this properly, and I will not endanger you by going about it haphazardly. I’m sorry, but that means it may take a day or so before we can undo what Willow has done.”

Xander nodded grimly. He was surprised when Buffy crouched down next to his chair. “Xander, we’ll fix this, I promise. But Giles is right, we’re going to have to do something about what’s going on here at school first. We’ll get the books back if we have to break into the police station and steal them. Ok?”

“Ok,” he agreed, pleased that his voice came out sounding normal. Sort of. “I guess I don’t really want anyone messing with my mind unless they know what they’re doing. Just answer this: as far as you can tell, how much of my memory did Willow tamper with?”

“Xander, we don’t have any way of really knowing that. However, I haven’t noticed anything different about you recently, except…” Giles took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes tiredly, looking almost as devastated as Xander felt.

“Except your renewed friendship with Willow,” Buffy finished for him. “You and she were pretty much not speaking after she did the truth spell on you and then, all of a sudden, it seemed like you were ok with her again.” She looked stricken. “I’m really sorry,” she said again. “I just thought you weren’t mad at her any more. It never occurred to me that she’d done another spell on you.”

“I’m afraid I came to the same conclusion, Xander. If it helps, the night that you went bowling with her and Oz was the first time I was aware that you and Willow seemed to be friends again. I don’t believe that Willow could have done the spell much before that or we would have seen signs of changed behavior before then. I think we can assume, for now, that Willow’s spell was probably limited to removing your memory of the truth spell she did on you. I apologize, Xander. I thought I was monitoring her too carefully for something like this to happen.”

“So start by telling me about the truth spell,” Xander said harshly. He wanted to know what was missing, what Willow had taken from him, no matter how bad it was. It was his life, his memories, and she had no right to tamper with them.

Buffy sighed. “Do you remember when Angel first came back?”

Xander was relieved that he knew exactly what she was talking about. “Yeah.”

“I thought Spike had killed Angel, and I was trying to get you to tell me what Spike had done with him. Willow used a truth spell, something that forces people to tell the truth whether they want to or not, to get the information out of you.”

“You were understandably furious with her, Xander,” Giles continued when Buffy fell silent. “You barely spoke to her after that until… earlier this week. I’m so sorry. I’ve been monitoring her but obviously not closely enough. I wasn’t aware that she was doing any magic at all.” He looked guilt stricken.

Xander was trying to fit what they were telling him into what he remembered. No matter how hard he searched his brain, he couldn’t find anything wrong. He remembered Angel coming back, remembered that Willow had done a spell to bring Angel back, remembered her and Giles studying magic together and how proud Giles had been of her accomplishment in doing such a tricky spell. Remembered the long breach in their friendship and the slow, gradual healing, culminating in their bowling night, when it had seemed like they had finally gotten back on track, or at least were beginning to. He remembered returning to Sunnydale after he and Spike’s long weekend in Los Angeles and feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from him. Had that been when she’d done the
“Let’s keep things straight, Giles,” he said finally. “Willow’s the one to blame, not you. From what you tell me, first she did a spell to force me to tell her something I apparently didn’t want her to know, then she used a second spell to erase my memory of what she’d done.” His voice was tired and bleak, the ashes of a nearly life-long friendship a bitter taste in his mouth. “I will never forgive her for doing this to me.”

“I don’t know if any of us can, or indeed should, forgive her,” Giles agreed quietly. “Once, we could perhaps excuse her because of youth and inexperience. Twice…” he shook his head, words failing him.

“Twice is too much to forgive,” Buffy finished for him, her own voice hard.

Xander stood up abruptly, feeling the need to do something. Anything. He needed to find an outlet for the anger churning inside him before he exploded. Attacking people physically actually sounded like a good plan, but he forced himself to push his anger down, reining it in tightly for now. He couldn’t afford to lose it until they had reversed what Willow had done. “So, how do we get your books back?” he asked, focusing on the next step.

Get the books back, break the spell, confront Willow. It was a good enough plan to start with.

“Much as I hate to say it, the indirect approach may be best. If Snyder is answering to ‘MOO’,” Buffy’s distaste in saying the acronym was palpable, “we should probably go talk to my mom.”
“I agree, the books need to be our first priority,” Giles said, obviously putting a tight rein on his own anger. “Principal Snyder is taking advantage of this tragedy and the town’s mood to extend his authority but we can do nothing about that until the situation calms down and people begin acting more reasonably. Finding the person or persons responsible for these murders would undoubtedly help considerably in returning things to normal but we cannot wait for that to happen. Those books are irreplaceable and, without them, we cannot immediately undo the spell on Xander, nor can we continue our research into the symbol on the children’s bodies.”

Xander could see Giles visibly steadying as he stopped reacting and began thinking again, settling back into his familiar Watcher/teacher/mentor role. It helped Xander get a grip on his own emotions as well. Giles’ teacher-voice had become a familiar presence in his life over the past year - a calm, adult figure who usually knew what he was talking about had been almost completely absent from Xander’s life before he met Giles. Joyce Summers was a similar presence and Xander hadn’t realized until now how much her emotional tailspin had rattled him. Mrs. Summers usually handled things without losing her cool and seeing her so devastated and bewildered by the murders had been hard.

“So, let’s get to my house already,” Buffy repeated impatiently.

“But Buffy, I would suggest that you talk to your mother by yourself. A delegation - especially one that includes me - may not be the right approach.” Giles cleared his throat, a faint tinge of red coloring his cheeks. “It was apparent last night that your mother was uncomfortable around me. Which is understandable after Ethan’s spell. However, I may not be the best person to persuade her that she is overreacting.”

Buffy eyed him suspiciously but clearly didn’t really want answers about what had gone on between Giles and her mother on Band Candy Night, as Xander privately thought of it. Xander himself preferred to avoid all mention of embarrassing behavior on that night and now put in hastily: “What are you suggesting, Giles?”

“You and I should return to the library, Xander and see if there’s anything we can do to stop these marauders, or at least find out what they intend to do with the books. If they follow normal police procedure, I believe the books will be taken to the police station but we don’t know that for sure since nothing is normal about this situation.”

“Oh,” Xander agreed. He didn’t really care what they did as long as they did something. He was calmer now, his anger under control for the moment but he needed to do something that would at least be a start at fixing what Willow had done to him or he was going to lose it.

He wanted to see Spike so badly it was almost a physical ache. He was tempted to just head home to the factory, abandoning Giles and Buffy to deal with the books and Snyder and MOO. But he couldn’t. It had nothing to do with wanting to help Giles and Buffy, it was fear, plain and simple. He was so angry at Willow that he didn’t trust himself. He needed to be the calm voice of reason when he talked to Spike about what she’d done and he wouldn’t be either calm or reasonable right now.

The worst part of what he was feeling was that he found himself thinking viciously that Spike would kill Willow for doing this and that she deserved it. It had shocked him to learn he was capable of that kind of anger and he hated that he was seriously wondering if he would care if Spike killed Willow. It was only the thought of tarnishing the perfect memory that Spike had given up killing for him and the knowledge that it wouldn’t be right to use Spike as his personal attack dog, turning him loose on people who had angered Xander, that brought him to his senses before he jumped into that particular...
abyss. No matter how temporarily satisfying it might feel, deep down, Xander knew he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he did that.

How could Willow have done this to him?

They left the empty classroom, Buffy heading for the nearest exit and Xander and Giles turning toward the library. The hall was empty and a quick glance at a clock told Xander that it was final period and everyone was probably in classes. The library was quiet as they entered, the police gone. Xander wondered how long they’d been talking in the empty classroom. Obviously for longer than he’d thought, if the police had done their work and were gone already.

Giles looked shell-shocked, staring at the stripped shelves like someone had stolen his children. He moved slowly towards his office and stood frozen in the doorway, shoulders slumped and looking suddenly old. Peering around him, Xander saw that the office shelves had been stripped as well, including Giles’ collection of weird statues and art objects which usually perched on every free surface.

“We’ll get them back, Giles,” he offered, putting a comforting hand on Giles’ shoulder. Giles stirred after a long moment and turned to face him.

“It has been rather a tough day, all around,” he said, forcing a smile. “Hopefully, we’ve seen the worst of it.”

“What do we do now?” Xander asked.

“How are you at computer research?” Giles asked hopefully, glancing at the machine he usually liked to pretend didn’t exist. “We appear to be reduced to what we can find on the internet.” He said it with a faint distaste, like surfing the net was beneath him.

“I’ll give it a shot,” Xander said dubiously. He wasn’t very good at internet research but he knew he was better than Giles who tended to yell at computers in the manner of ugly Americans in foreign countries, as if by raising his voice he could make the machine understand him and do what he wanted. He shied away from the thought that Willow was the computer whiz and they really needed her for this. He couldn’t bear to think about Willow right now.

The two of them shifted the computer from the least accessible corner of Giles’ office to the main table in the middle of the library. Giles busied himself on the telephone while Xander set up the computer, calling the police station and demanding to know where his books were.

The computer was up and running and Xander was connected to the internet and trying to think of what search terms to plug in when he heard the phone slam down.

“What did you find out?” he asked.

“The search at the school was specially authorized by the Mayor’s office. None of the ‘contraband’ seized has been brought to the police station. They suggest we try the Mayor’s office,” Giles said bitterly, clearly outraged that his books had been labeled contraband.

Xander had a sinking feeling that wasn’t good news. “Giles, Spike told me something yesterday that I’ve been meaning to tell you. He says the Mayor isn’t completely human.”

“What do you mean?” Giles looked interested and Xander was glad he’d been able to provide a distraction for the harassed Watcher.

“He sent a summons for Spike to meet with him, said he wanted Spike to work with him but he
wouldn’t say why or what he’d be doing. Spike said the Mayor smelled off, like he wasn’t fully human. He couldn’t pin it down and Angel says he doesn’t know anything about the Mayor. We were wondering if you’d heard anything.”

Giles looked thoughtful. “Not very much. I do know that he’s been the Mayor for quite awhile, several years before my arrival at least. If he had only recently become Mayor, I would be worried that this search was somehow related, but that seems unlikely. I’ve been in town for nearly three years and if the Mayor was trying to seize my library, I assume he would have acted before now. We’ll need to do some research on him,” Giles looked instinctively towards the shelves and his harried expression returned, “at least when the books have been returned, but it probably isn’t important. There are actually many harmless species of demons, as you know. Still, a demonic Mayor on a Hellmouth should be looked into.”

Xander froze for one second, then realized that Giles was just referring to their demon research. They had studied harmless demons, Giles just didn’t emphasize them. He really should talk to Mr. Olsen and some others about whether to tell Giles about his connection to the peaceful demons in town. Turning back to the computer, he said hopefully: “maybe a search for ‘magical symbols’.”

He typed the phrase into the search engine and came up with 26,000 hits. “Great.” Trying various combinations of searches for symbols, sacrifices, and ritual killings didn’t help much. There remained depressingly large numbers of hits. Sighing, he started checking the most promising looking sites.

Over an hour later, Xander was convinced the computer was in league with Snyder. Or maybe the devil. He’d found dozens of articles about murders all over the country, glanced at far too many pictures of animal mutilations, and skimmed countless sites about paganism, Satanism and black magic, all without finding anything useful. He pushed back his chair and rubbed at tired eyes. “And I thought research in books was hard,” he complained.

Giles had been hovering over his shoulder, suggesting different searches and telling him particular sites were useless at regular intervals. Xander knew he was trying to be helpful but Giles was even worse at internet research than Xander, so he wasn’t exactly making it easier.

“They really cleaned this place out, didn’t they,” a quiet voice spoke from the door.

“Hey, Oz.” Xander twisted away from the machine, grateful for the interruption. “Where have you been?”

“I waited outside Snyder’s office for Willow.” Oz hesitated at Xander’s slight flinch, but continued when Xander didn’t say anything. “She and the others were suspended indefinitely and sent home. I walked her home but her mother made it clear I wasn’t welcome.” Oz’s eyes were flickering nervously between Giles and Oz in a way they just didn’t, unless Oz was nervous or upset. Something was bothering Oz, something well beyond being thrown out of the house by Sheila Rosenberg.

“Did you know?” Xander fought to keep his voice steady. He couldn’t stand the thought that Oz had known what Willow had been doing and hadn’t told him.

“Know what?”

Giles put a steadying hand on Xander’s shoulder and answered for him. “Willow appears to have done a memory spell on Xander to remove his memory of the truth spell.”

Xander felt his stomach unclench slightly at the naked shock on Oz’s face. After a long pause, Oz
said hesitantly, “Is that why...?” his voice trailed off but Xander was already nodding.

“Yeah.” He didn’t want to say the words - that Willow had done this so they could be friends again. And it had worked, apparently. It freaked him out that he couldn’t trust his own memories, that what he remembered wasn’t accurate, that the night the three of them went bowling wasn’t the culmination of a long struggle back towards friendship but a lie. Affection and friendship taken from him when he hadn’t been willing to give them freely. It was like taking advantage of someone brain-damaged or an amnesia sufferer - only Willow had caused the damage, then taken advantage of it. How could she have done this to him? he thought again, closing his eyes and struggling to breathe evenly.

During their fruitless internet research, he’d asked Giles to tell him everything he knew about the truth spell and about Willow’s magic. Some of what Giles had been telling him was familiar, but Giles told Xander that he’d stopped teaching Willow magic last summer because of her unwillingness to abide by the limits he set and that they had never resumed their studies, unlike Xander’s memories of on-going study sessions. Giles had told Xander about walking in on Willow doing the truth spell and how devastated Xander had been by Willow’s actions. He’d repeated Xander’s own description of Willow’s black eyes and how Oz had been so troubled after seeing Willow perform the re-souling spell.

Discussing the differences in Giles’ and his own memories had helped Xander try and view the situation in a clinical fashion, like a surgeon examining x-rays of shattered bones just before operating. He needed to know the extent of the damage before they could fix it. As far as Giles could tell, Willow had only removed one memory but she had changed other memories, altering them slightly while leaving their essence intact. Giles had been deeply disturbed by their conversation and the growing evidence that Willow had done something far more extensive than just removing one memory. Apparently, altering memories meant both removing the old one and replacing it with a different one. Giles had grown quieter as they turned up more examples, his eyes worried and angry, even as he kept up a brave face, reassuring Xander that it would be relatively easily to reverse what she had done, as soon as he knew exactly how she had done it. “Which, unfortunately, means we are going to have to know exactly what Willow has done in order to reverse the effects,” he’d told Xander and Xander hadn’t been able to repress his fear that Willow might not tell them what she’d done, leaving them trying to reverse the spell blindly. He wouldn’t put it past the Willow he was just learning about, the one ruthless enough to tamper with someone’s mind for her own purposes.

Xander had had to fight for control as Giles talked, focusing desperately on the useless web sites he kept mechanically opening and skimming, forcing himself to concentrate on the computer and not on the sickness building inside him as Giles came up with more examples of things that he remembered differently than Xander did.

Willow had apparently sought out and removed all the recent memories of Xander’s anger and distrust over her use of magic. He remembered the re-souling and portal-opening spells Willow had done, but he remembered them without the negative associations Giles told him he’d had at the time. Instead of proud, apparently Giles had been furious with Willow because the portal spell could have destroyed the world, which was a shock to hear about for what was essentially the first time. Willow had kept her interference to a narrow focus, she hadn’t attempted to mess with his memories of their long estrangement because of Jesse’s death, but he had no memory of his own anger and disgust at her using a truth spell on him. It wasn’t difficult to reconstruct how he must have felt because it was what he was feeling now.

“Is there anything I can do?” Oz was looking at him with worried eyes, and Xander realized that he’d zoned out for a minute. He shook his head and managed a tight smile.

“How are you on the internet? I apparently suck,” he said, as lightly as he could manage, given the
tumour in his head. He couldn’t deal with sympathy now, he needed to concentrate or he would fall apart, which wouldn’t be of any use to anyone.

“I’m ok but Wil…” Oz bit off what he had started to say. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok.” Xander got up and let Oz take his seat in front of the computer.

Oz looked at him and seemed to recognize that Xander couldn’t deal right now. In his accepting way, he just asked: “What are you looking for?”

“We are trying to find any reference to the symbol Buffy saw on the children’s bodies. With luck, that might lead us to the people responsible,” Giles filled him in, giving Oz a grateful look as Xander stepped back, leaning against the bookshelf and wrapping his arms around himself, feeling like he was going to fly apart without that support.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Oz began checking Xander’s search history to see what they’d already tried while Xander stared into space and tried not to think about a shy, red-haired girl he’d met in kindergarten and loved like she was his sister.

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“Evenin’, Joyce.”

Joyce looked startled to see him at the door and, for a moment, Spike thought she wasn’t going to let him in. After a long hesitation, she opened the door further and stepped back to let him inside. “Spike, I’m pretty busy right now,” she began, a little stiffly.

“Just want to talk to you for a bit,” Spike answered easily, stepping inside. “Worried about you, Joyce.”

She relaxed a little and gave him a half-smile, much smaller than her usual smile, but didn’t lead him into the living room or kitchen like she usually did. She stayed firmly in the foyer, not even closing the door behind him. “I’m fine, Spike. Just very busy.”

Looking over her shoulder into the dining room, Spike frowned. The usually neat room was filled with posters of the dead kids, the table cluttered with open phone books and pads of paper. “Can see that, just wonderin’ if you know what you’re doing?”

“I’m getting the town stirred up to fight back, Spike. You of all people should know that this town needs to defend itself against, well, against things like you.”

Spike was rocked, although he kept his face impassive and didn’t let the flash of hurt show. Joyce had never called him a thing before. He was sure she’d never thought about him that way, either. He cocked his head, studying her, trying to read what she was thinking. “Didn’t use to lump me with other demons, Joyce. What’s changed?”

“I’ve had my eyes opened, Spike,” Joyce told him levelly, meeting his gaze squarely but without her usual warmth. “I can’t believe I’ve let myself be one of the silent majority in this town for so long. No more. I’m sorry, Spike, but you’re no longer welcome in this house. I think you should leave.”

“Bit racist, innit? Saying all demons are the same?” His voice was light and indifferent, hiding the fact that her words had struck home. After Xander, Joyce was the person he was closest to in town and she was throwing him out for no good reason. Joyce knew he didn’t kill people and she knew why. There weren’t many people he’d trusted with that information but he’d given it to her freely, as a gift. And he’d never been one for the kiddies for the most part, that had been Angelus’ and Dru’s
thing. He’d always preferred a victim who could fight back.

“It’s been brought to my attention that it really is us against them in this town,” she replied without a flicker of regret that she was so clearly classifying him as a ‘them’.

Spike almost said something spiteful about her daughter. Slayers were barely human, more than a bit of demon taint to them. But it wouldn’t do any good. Although part of him wanted to verbally flay Joyce for what she’d said, to make her hurt as much as she’d just hurt him, he couldn’t do it. He was sure that she would come to her senses soon and be truly sorry for what she’d said. No sense in burning bridges he might want to let her rebuild someday.

But he wasn’t going to grovel for her friendship either.

He turned without another word and walked out of the one house in town that had truly welcomed him inside, hearing the door close firmly behind him. Not a slam, but with a strong note of finality.

“Spike? Don’t take it personally, she’s just upset.” It said something for his agitated state that he hadn’t seen or heard the Slayer, who emerged from the shadows near the door where she had clearly heard at least part of what her mother had said.

Spike was astonished that the Slayer wasn’t crowing that Joyce had just practically thrown Spike out of the house. “What’s it to you? You’ve never liked me having an invite anyway,” he snapped, hating the fact that the Slayer was looking at him with sympathy. He made a move to stalk past her but she stepped into his path, crossing her arms and doing her immovable object impression.

“You’re right. I hate it that you have an open invitation to my house. I don’t like you and I don’t trust you. If my mother was in her right mind, I’d be throwing a party right now. But I heard what she said and that’s not my mom. Crazy as I think it is, she likes you and when she’s herself again, she’s going to regret talking to you like that.” She smiled, almost self-mockingly. “Don’t get me wrong, I hope she does come to her senses about you and we can un-invite you, and then I will throw that party. But I want her to make that decision when she’s not so upset she’s not thinking clearly. And I don’t want you to make things worse for her because you’re hurt.”

“I’m not hurt,” Spike denied instantly, glaring at her. “What do I care what a middle-aged housewife thinks of me?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Fine, deny it all you want. Just... give her a couple of days, ok? I know she wouldn’t want you and Xander to disappear from her life. She’s just... not herself right now.”

She sighed and looked worryingly back at the house. Spike was still astounded that the Slayer had taken the time to reassure him and it eased some of the hurt of Joyce’s rejection to know that even her daughter thought it was out of character and something she’d regret. He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, wondering why the Slayer was still shifting from foot to foot like she had something to say that she couldn’t quite bring herself to talk about.

“Somethin’ on your mind?”

“A lot’s been going on recently,” she hedged. “The whole town seems to be going crazy over those kids. I mean, it’s tragic but why it’s got everyone so worked up...”

Spike shrugged. “Seems to me their parents are to blame, when all’s said and done. Almost more than the murderers. Someone should talk to them.” Maybe he should volunteer. He could really use a good spot of violence about now.

Buffy glanced at him sharply. “What do you mean?”
“What kind of parents let kids that age wander around the Hellmouth late at night unsupervised?” he asked and suddenly remembered his original grievance that had led him to seek out Joyce tonight. “Speaking of which…”

She cut him off sharply with an upraised hand, her brows coming together sharply in thought. “Their parents…” she said slowly and looked at him with a spark of excitement and comprehension in her eyes. “Come on, we have to talk to Giles.”

“We?” The Slayer was inviting him to go see her Watcher with her?

“You should come, Spike. Xander…” She seemed about to say more, then shook her head. “Xander’s there with Giles.”

That was enough, he didn’t care about what the Slayer was hiding from him. Xander was there and that was reason enough to go. “Time’s wasting, Slayer.” Without waiting for her, he set off towards the school with rapid strides, hearing her lighter footsteps behind him hurrying to catch up.

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Xander looked up when the library doors burst open and was overwhelmingly glad to see Spike entering. He crossed the room in a rush, far too quickly for subtlety, and flung his arms around Spike, clinging hard to the familiar strong body and sighing in relief as Spike’s arms closed around him. Everything felt better with Spike there, even though nothing had actually changed, and some of his tight-wound nerves relaxed slightly.

“Bad day, luv?” Spike asked quietly.

“The worst.” He could feel the tension practically thrumming through Spike’s own body and looked at him worriedly. “Are you ok?” Usually, Spike didn’t hold things in, he got his anger and frustration out and then it was done, put behind him in that demonic way of his. The only time he bottled things up usually had to do with Xander and he realized that Buffy must have told Spike what Willow had done.

It wasn’t that he was going to lie to Spike and not tell him, he’d promised… Xander gasped as he realized he’d found a memory that didn’t make sense. Spike had been angry with him about something. Angry because Xander hadn’t told him something and Xander had promised not to hide things from Spike any longer. Try as hard as he could, Xander couldn’t remember what Spike had been mad about or what Xander hadn’t told him.

It was his first tangible proof that his memories really had been altered, that Willow really had done this to him. He hadn’t really doubted it, but a small part of him had hoped it was all a big misunderstanding, some unforeseen side effect from Ethan’s spell, or something unknown that had made everyone else think his memories had been altered. Somehow, finding a gap in his memories himself made it all too real. He was vaguely aware of Buffy questioning Giles and Oz about the murdered kids, but he could only cling to Spike, a rock in a world gone insane as he fought the knowledge that Willow had really done this to him, played with his mind in a way no one had a right to. Taking his memories like a thief in the night and replacing them with cheap substitutes.

The voices behind him quieted down and he could hear Spike murmuring comfortingly to him, his arms enfolding Xander in a safe haven, his lips pressing gentle kisses against Xander’s cheek and neck.

“Sorry,” he said, lifting his head and making himself loosen his too tight grip on Spike. “I’m ok now.”
Spike studied him intently. “Want to talk about it, luv?”

Xander shook his head quickly. “Later, Spike. I promise. I just can’t right now.” He was still way too close to losing it entirely and Spike seemed to recognize that, settling for a kiss and pulling Xander firmly into his side, one arm around him possessively as they faced the room together.

“Slayer filled you in?” Spike asked them.

“Yes, we’re running a search for the children’s identities now.”

Xander looked at Spike, who shrugged and told him: “Slayer realized that no one knows who the kids are, or who their parents are.”

Xander’s brow furrowed. “That can’t be right. I’m sure…” but he was coming up blank and for a moment he panicked, thinking Willow was responsible for that too, then he realized that everyone else was shaking their heads.

“It never came up. Ever.” Oz said flatly, looking up from the monitor with a reassuring smile, like he knew what Xander had been thinking.

“Ah, we’re getting something now,” Giles exclaimed in satisfaction, peering at the monitor over Oz’s shoulder.

Curious, Xander moved closer, as Giles began to read the text.

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Ten minutes later, they had found five separate accounts of the same two dead kids, the oldest dating back to Germany in the 1600’s, the scanned copy of the wood engraving blurry but recognizable as their two victims. About halfway through, Xander noticed that the suddenly cooperative internet was being fed to the computer from a remote source. His jaw tightened as he realized that Buffy, Giles and Oz must have quietly decided to bring Willow in on this from home while he’d been talking to Spike and not paying attention.

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have the right to tell them they couldn’t associate with Willow and there was no arguing that it was at least a minor crisis and she was better than all of them put together at internet research. Witness how fast she’d come up with the right answers when he and Oz hadn’t found the information in nearly two hours of looking. Still, he couldn’t help feeling hurt that they were going to continue working with Willow even after this latest stunt she’d pulled. Business as usual for the Slayerettes, he thought, more than a little bitterly, leaning into Spike’s embrace and drawing comfort from his solid presence.

He watched silently, not contributing anything, as Giles expounded on his theory that a demon was responsible for everything that was happening, something about demons stirring up darker emotions and causing humans to destroy each other.

As much as he’d like it to grab at the proffered straw, he didn’t think the demon explained Willow’s actions. And he probably couldn’t blame it for his own urge to have Spike kill Willow. Some of the darker emotions and actions they chose couldn’t be blamed on others, people had to accept responsibility for the darkness within themselves and what they did with it.

Suddenly exhausted and wanting nothing more than to go home, Xander forced himself to listen to Giles, who was wrapping up his explanation about needing to make the demon show itself in its true form to negate its effect on the town.

“There’s a book that has the spell I need. It has to do with lifting a veil and letting people see reality. Revealing the demon’s true nature negates its effect on people.” Giles looked around in frustration at
the empty shelves. “I’ll just have to see if I can remember the spell.”

Xander hesitated for a long moment, then volunteered reluctantly: “I may be able to find you a copy of the book, Giles. Which one do you need?”

Giles looked at him in surprise. “Freidhan’s Compendium. You know someone who has a copy?”

“Maybe, let me make a call.” He retreated into Giles’ office, closing the door firmly behind him. He’d undoubtedly have to deal with Giles’ questions later but he wasn’t going to out his demon friends more than he had to, especially to people he wasn’t sure were going to remain his friends after tonight.

Five minutes later, he stepped out of the office tucking his cell phone away. “I found a copy of the book, Giles. It’ll take me maybe half an hour to get there and back.” Several of his demon friends had private libraries of books similar to Giles’. His third call had hit pay dirt and Henry Jamison, a half-Lrtock demon he’d done some work for, had agreed to lend him the book.

Giles looked at him sharply, obviously curious, but let it go for now when he saw Xander’s carefully blank expression. “Excellent. I should have the supplies needed for the spell at my house. I suggest we meet back here with the book and the spell ingredients as soon as possible.”

“I’ll go with you, pet,” Spike began just as the library doors burst open and Michael staggered through them, clutching one arm like it was broken, tears and black eyeliner and blood running down his battered face. Spike stepped in front of Xander protectively as Michael gasped out: “Please, help me. I was attacked!”

Everyone shot to their feet, chairs scraping loudly across the floor. “Who attacked you?” Buffy demanded. Xander had an awful feeling that the minor crisis had just become a serious one.

“My dad and his friends,” Michael answered, bewildered shock in his voice. “They’re taking people out of their homes. They’re talking about a trial down at City Hall.” He looked stricken as he added: “They’ve got Amy.”

“Right, that tears it,” Spike said. “We’ve got a mob now.” His eyes narrowed as he thought rapidly and he began snapping out orders. “Slayer, call Angelus and tell him to get his enormous arse down to City Hall. He’s always been good with mobs. You meet him there and keep an eye on things until the rest of us get there. Watcher, you and Wolf-boy get the stuff you need for your spell, then bring it to City Hall. The demon will be right in the middle of things, egging it on. Xander and I will meet you there with the book.” He glanced briefly, indifferently, at Michael. “You do whatever you want.”

“Michael, stay in my office and hide until we get back,” Giles told him hastily.

Michael nodded jerkily and started for the office. He stopped after two steps and looked back at them. “Tell Willow to get out of her house!” he said desperately.

“Oz…”

“I’ll get Willow,” Oz said flatly. Giles nodded.

“Quite right. Get her out of her house and somewhere safe until this is over. Things have obviously gotten completely out of hand.”

Xander couldn’t argue with that but, no matter how logical their actions were, it still hurt that Giles and Oz were so concerned with Willow’s safety. He signaled Spike and left without another word.
Anger and hurt fought inside him and he wondered if he’d ever be able to go back to the library again.

Which was being melodramatic, he acknowledged bitterly. Giles would help him undo the spell regardless and he wasn’t too proud to take that help, even if Giles continued to support Willow. Sure, they’d said that she’d gone too far, but it hadn’t taken long for them to contact her and ask for her help. Ok, he could see enemies teaming up to stop a catastrophe, but this seemed more like a convenience - just getting information a little faster. Although, Michael would undoubtedly say it hadn’t been fast enough, he thought guiltily.

He told himself firmly to get over it already. This was a crisis. Of course, Oz didn’t want his girlfriend beaten up like Michael had been, no one deserved that.

Belatedly realizing that he and Spike were outside the school and Spike was looking to him for directions, Xander set his emotional turmoil aside for now. “This way,” he told Spike, turning left towards Mr. Jamison’s small suburban house.

Spike tightened strong fingers around his forearm, holding him in place for a moment. “Xander, what’s wrong?”

Sudden tears sprung to his eyes at the worry and sympathy in Spike’s voice and Xander looked away, struggling for control. After a long moment, he looked back and met Spike’s concerned blue eyes. “Tomorrow, Spike, ok? I just can’t…” against his will, his voice broke and he cleared his throat. “I can’t talk about it yet. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Spike corrected gently. “Let me take you home, pet. The Slayer and the Watcher can handle this.”

“Giles needs the book, Spike. Sunnydale’s got enough problems, we can’t let a demon make things worse like this.” When Spike opened his mouth to argue, Xander just looked at him. “Mrs. Summers is in the middle of this. She’ll hate herself if she gets involved with a vigilante mob that’s hurting people.”

There was a flicker of something Xander couldn’t read in Spike’s eyes, before the vampire nodded reluctantly. “Don’t know when it became my business to clean up after humans,” he grumbled, but Xander knew it was for show.

“Come on, let’s get the book and get this over with. Who knows, maybe you can beat the demon up or something,” he suggested.

There was going to have to be a lot of talking tomorrow, he thought. Something was bothering Spike and it was obvious his vampire wasn’t ready to talk either.

Xander was beginning to think he’d stumbled into the wrong movie. Half familiar faces of parents and teachers were twisted with anger and unfocused hatred, holding signs and yelling outside City Hall. Adding a grotesque note that might have been humorous under other circumstances, they were all adorned with large red buttons reading “MOO”. For one half-hysterical second, Xander almost burst out in completely inappropriate laughter at the sight.

There had been a surreal quality to the night, ever since Giles told them they needed to go into battle against Hansel and Gretel. Ok, he hadn’t put it like that, but Xander had found himself at one point wondering rather wildly if they were going to find themselves chopping down a beanstalk before the
night was through. Seeing Michael’s battered face had ended any idea that this whole thing was someone’s twisted idea of a joke but hadn’t done anything to make the day seem less bizarre.

Michael’s dad was an ordinary guy, he worked as the manager of a grocery store and told lame jokes when they were short-staffed and he came out of his office to help bag groceries and re-stock shelves. He wasn’t someone who beat people up, much less his own son. Michael’s makeup and goth style embarrassed his dad and his father’s loud criticisms about how real men should behave were a source of humiliation and frustration for Michael, but that was it. How could a demon make normal people behave like this?

And why wasn’t he affected? As far as Xander could tell, neither he, Buffy, nor Giles were acting any differently than normal. Granted, he couldn’t really trust his own assessment of what was normal for him right now - Xander felt a fresh wave of anger at Willow battering at his control at the thought - but none of them felt like joining the crowd of people and waving torches around.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that they were familiar with demons, or maybe it was just that the demon was concentrating its efforts on the adult population and not the students. Aside from a few jerks who had taken advantage of the situation and the temporary adult blindness, the students at school hadn’t seemed to be affected beyond showing slightly stepped up versions of the typical harassment of anyone seen as different and vulnerable.

Clutching the book he’d fetched for Giles tightly, Xander stayed close by Spike’s side as they looked for the others. Stupid not to have set up a specific meeting spot, but then who could have anticipated this kind of crowd here. He and Spike were circling the building and doing their best to stay inconspicuous. Xander had never seen Spike so cautious.

“Do you think the Mayor has something to do with this?” he asked quietly. The Mayor wasn’t anywhere in sight, but then neither was anything else that was obviously a demon.

Spike shook his head, his eyes never leaving the crowd. He’d been scanning them warily from the moment he and Xander had arrived, keeping both of them to the shadows and hadn’t once let go of Xander’s wrist, strong fingers holding almost tightly enough to hurt, keeping Xander close to his side. “Mayor’s been around a while. This is somethin’ new. Happened too fast, blowin’ up out of nowhere, for it to be the Mayor’s doing.”

His head jerked around as he caught a glimpse of something in the crowd and he pulled Xander over towards the shadows surrounding a small island of bushes. Xander jumped when Angel stepped out of the pool of darkness outside the reach of the streetlights and only stubborn pride kept him from retreating behind Spike. He knew that Angel was back to his annoying, but mostly helpful, self but it would be a long time, if ever, before he fully trusted the older vampire.

“Spike.”

“Angelus.”

Like Spike, Angel’s eyes were constantly moving, scanning the crowd with the nervous intentness of a gazelle watching a hungry pride of lions. And wasn’t that an analogy he’d never thought he’d use for vampires. “Buffy’s checking the building, trying to see what’s happening inside. She’ll be back in a minute.”

“She’s back,” Buffy’s voice announced quietly. “There’s people inside, in addition to the ones out here but I can’t see what they’re doing. Everyone’s talking about some kind of a trial and I don’t like the sound of what they’re saying.” Spike and Xander nodded, they’d heard the talk as well. Her eyes were worried. “I haven’t seen Amy, so I’m guessing she’s inside, if Michael was right about her
being brought here. Giles better get here fast or we’ll have to start without him.”

“Why don’t we just pretend to be one of them and walk straight in? We can pick up a couple of buttons and blend in,” Xander suggested.

Spike tightened his grip on Xander’s wrist, keeping him firmly at his side. “No, luv. It's not safe.”

“They may not like you and Angel because you’re strangers, but I can go in alone. I know a lot of these people.”

“No!” The fiercely whispered order came from both Spike and Angel.

“Spike, I know these people,” Xander repeated. “They’re upset and acting kind of crazy but they wouldn’t hurt me.” Even as he said it, he remembered Michael’s battered face uneasily. But they thought Michael was a witch, he reminded himself. He was just plain, ordinary Xander, who did handyman jobs on the weekend. They had no reason to attack him.

“They’re not your friends and neighbors, Xander. They’re a mob. They aren’t thinking for themselves anymore. Rules don’t apply right now.” Spike’s voice held a century’s worth of experience with darker human emotions.

“He’s right,” Angel said quietly. “Mobs aren’t predictable, Xander. No one is safe from them - not friends, spouses, not even children.”

Xander looked around again and reluctantly conceded the point. He might recognize most of the people there but that didn’t mean any of them would be safe from the crowd. The mood was growing uglier by the minute.

“We can’t wait for Giles much longer,” Buffy said impatiently. “I don’t like the sound of this trial they’re talking about. We need to get Amy out of there before someone gets hurt.”

“Spike and I could draw them off,” Angel suggested. “Show ourselves in game face and run. Chances are, everyone out here will chase us. That’ll leave you two and Giles to do the spell.”

“Or we could take the half-wits on, ya great poof,” Spike snapped. “Not playin’ hide ’n seek with a mob. Not more than 30 of ’em, we can handle them.”

“No!” Buffy interjected. “They’re just normal people. What’s going on isn’t their fault.” She glared at Spike, emphasizing her point.

“They’ve got Willow.” Oz’s voice was grim as he and Giles appeared from around the edge of the clump of bushes. “Her room was trashed and she’s missing.”

Giles was holding a large carryall. “Were you able to get the book? I believe I remember the incantation but…”

Xander held it up and Giles snatched it from him, trading the book for the bag which Xander took quietly.

“There’s a delivery entrance around the back,” Buffy told them. “Let’s get inside and find out what’s going on.

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They’d spent a few frantic moments in an empty office, mixing the ingredients Giles had brought
while Giles reviewed the spell he would have to incant. The whole time, they had been uneasily aware of the rising volume of sound coming from down the hall, muffled sounds of protest and rage spurring them on. Giles had just closed the book and Oz was rapidly shaking the flask to mix the ingredients when a scream split the air.

“Willow!”

Oz was out the door before the rest could move, the rest of them following closely behind. It had taken only seconds to disable the four guards at the door, Buffy, Angel and Spike dropping them to the floor, either unconscious or moaning in pain before Buffy kicked the door in.

Bursting into the room behind Buffy, Spike and Angel, Xander couldn’t believe his eyes. It was a scene out of a nightmare: torch-lit faces twisted with fear and hatred, enjoying the suffering they were inflicting. Seeing Willow and Amy tied to stakes with huge ropes wrapped around them might have been almost comical except it was so horribly real.

Books were piled around the wooden stakes and the books were already catching fire, flames licking greedily towards the two girls who were screaming in terror. Willow was pleading with her mother and Mrs. Summers, begging them to come to their senses. The two women simply watched with hard, uncaring faces as the flames moved closer and Willow’s voice broke off in a fit of hard, dry coughs as the smoke rose around her, half obscuring her form.

Amy’s face was as hard and remote as those of the watching crowds, yelling something about showing them a witch. She threw her head back and began chanting something about the goddess Hecate and Xander was horrified to see her eyes glowing red before she was engulfed in a storm of power, energy crackling around her in a visible display of power. It was only seconds, in which everyone in the room - mob and rescuers alike - stood frozen, before the ropes went slack around the empty stake and dropped straight down to the pile of books. Disbelieving, Xander saw a rat crawl out of the coils of rope and begin scuttling away from the flames.

There was the sound of smashing glass, snapping Xander out of his paralysis. Buffy had had the presence of mind to go for the fire hose and was playing it over the crowd and the fire, soaking Willow and dousing the flames closest to her and using it to keep the crowd away from all of them. Xander moved on instinct, shoving through the crowd, hearing Giles begin the German chant he’d been practicing as Spike and Angel took up position in front of Giles, defending him from the crowd.

“Xander!”

Ignoring Spike’s furious yell, Xander had made it through the crowd and was scrambling up the still smoldering pile of books. Ignoring the heat and the clouds of smoke, he threw himself across the pile, aiming for the scrap of fur and tail running across the floor towards the far wall. It was with a feeling of astonishment that he felt his hand close around the rat, and he rolled, struggling to get clear of the books, feeling embers burning holes in his shirt as he tumbled down the pile, his entire concentration on the squirming rat in his hands, desperate not to squash it by accident.

He clambered to his feet at the far side of the pile and turned quickly to face the rest of the room. Spike was glaring at him, even as he decked a large man who was trying to bash Spike’s head in with a torch. Spike easily avoided the wild swings of the torch, the flames coming heart-stoppingly close to him as he ducked away from the lethal flames. Xander slapped at the few embers burning through his shirt and watched the crowd warily, wondering what the hell he was going to do with the rat if he had to fight the mob who were still milling restlessly, looking furious that their plans had been interrupted. Buffy put the last of the bonfire out and turned the hose off, letting it drop and moving up to stand with Spike and Angel, ready for trouble. He could hear Willow sobbing in relief but Xander couldn’t bring himself even to look at her, much less make move to help her.
Xander jumped and almost squeezed the life out of the rat formerly known as Amy as two children stepped out of the scattering crowd. Two familiar children, their faces echoed in the posters scattered liberally around the room. Two supposed to be dead kids, whose deaths had started all this horror.

The room went quiet and the girl said plaintively to Mrs. Summers: “You have to protect us.”

Giles began his chant again and threw the bottle of ingredients down at their feet, the bottle shattering and releasing a cloud of acrid smoke into the already smoky air. The two children turned and hugged each other and suddenly their bodies seemed to blur, melding together and moving, growing. Xander watched, stunned, as the form morphed, growing taller and stretching towards the ceiling, until it solidified into a 9-foot tall demon with enormous tusks. Staring like an idiot, frozen in place, he was vaguely aware of the crowd beginning to scream and run for the doors, Giles having to jump out of the way to avoid being trampled in the rush.

“Now that’s more like it!”

Spike’s voice was gleeful and he launched himself at the demon, crossing the space in a heartbeat, Buffy and Angel a bare step behind.

It was only later, thinking back on it, that Xander realized he’d simply stood there against the far wall, watching the fight without moving, clinging to the rat, completely useless.

He was peripherally aware of Oz and Giles untying Willow, of Joyce Summers and Sheila Rosenberg apologizing to her over and over again, dazed and bewildered by their own actions. He watched Spike, Angel, and Buffy pulverize the demon, not even flinching when Spike decapitated it.

Seeing everyone not actively engaged in the fight surrounding and comforting Willow confirmed his fears that Willow was going to get away with it again. They were going to forgive her. Swept up by the horror of seeing her nearly burned alive, they were going to forget what she’d done. They were choosing Willow over him and the pain clawed at him, tearing into his heart. He dropped his eyes and looked down at the rat clutched in both hands, letting himself see nothing but grey fur and a twitching nose. The cold black eyes looking up at him were too much like other black eyes he’d heard described and Xander closed his own, shutting off his emotions, feeling the tiny claws scrabbling at his palms and ignoring everything else.

Gentle hands closed around his own, and Spike’s voice said quietly: “I’ve got it, Xander.”

He looked up numbly after a long moment, seeing the worry in Spike’s blue eyes but couldn’t make himself move. Everything seemed distant, like it wasn’t connected to him at all. “Xander, let me have it. Promise, I’ll keep it safe.”

The rat, he realized dully. Spike was trying to get him to release his grip on the Amy-rat. Hoarsely, surprised his voice worked at all, he said: “we need something to put it in.”

“Got the Watcher’s bag, luv. I’ll be careful.” Spike’s voice was gentle, soothing, and Xander opened his hands and let Spike take the rat from him. Behind Spike, he could see Buffy with her arms around Willow and Giles beginning to salvage books from the pile of the floor. He closed his eyes against the room, leaning into Spike’s chest, feeling tired and empty.

“Let’s get you home, luv.”

He nodded and Spike steered him towards the door, one arm wrapped tightly around Xander as Xander let himself be lead out of the room that stank of smoke and betrayal. He didn’t lift his head or look at any of them as they left.
Chapter 26

Xander slept restlessly, waking time and again from bad dreams. Nightmares of losing his identity completely, of Willow doing spell after spell on him, of magic crawling over his skin and inside his head, stripping him of everything that made him Xander, had him jerking awake, breath coming in harsh gasps in the quiet dark of their apartment, feeling Spike’s arms tightening around him and his voice murmuring reassurances.

Finally giving up on sleep entirely, he eased his way out from Spike’s entangling arms and slipped out of the bed, trying not to wake Spike. Spike slept lightly but he was used to Xander’s movements and usually didn’t wake fully if Xander left the bed to go to the bathroom, or whatever. Sliding into his robe and padding barefoot into the kitchen, Xander closed the door softly behind him and crossed the dark kitchen to the cupboard. He turned on the stove light, using the dim glow to see as he made himself a cup of cocoa.

Sitting at the counter, sipping the rich warmth of the hot chocolate, he tried to let the comforting taste and the peaceful silence settle his nerves but his thoughts wouldn’t cooperate. The worst part of what Willow had done to him was that he hadn’t even known she’d done something. He didn’t trust himself anymore, didn’t trust his memories, didn’t even know who he was: Xander, or some Willow-ized version of Xander.

Coming to a decision, Xander got a pad of paper and a pen from the alcove where he kept his homework supplies. Settling down at the kitchen table, he began writing.

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Spike woke abruptly, some internal alarm telling him that Xander had been gone far longer than an ordinary nighttime errand. He’d long since learned to sleep through Xander’s movements around the apartment but now, something felt off. The sheets where Xander had lain had cooled, no longer holding the warmth of Xander’s body, and that told him Xander had been gone for a good long time, far longer than it took to use the toilet or get a midnight snack.

Light shone dimly through the crack under the kitchen door and Spike threw back the covers and crossed the room to see what was happening. Xander had obviously been deeply troubled last night but he’d been exhausted and Spike had put him straight to bed. At the time, he’d thought that talking about whatever was bothering his boy could wait ‘til morning but now he wondered if that hadn’t been a mistake.

Pushing the kitchen door open silently, Spike saw Xander hunched over a pad of paper at the kitchen table, writing furiously in the dim light from the stove lamp. He’d written a dozen or more pages already and Spike’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. There was no way Xander had gotten up to do a bit of homework in the middle of the bloody night, not given how exhausted he’d been.

Studying his boy in the dim light, Spike saw the tension in the way he held himself, the white-knuckled grip on the pen he was using. He was concentrating so hard on his writing that he didn’t notice Spike standing there, which was unusual for Xander. Whatever his boy was doing, he had an air of it being of life-or-death importance.

“Xander.” He said it quietly but Xander still jumped, gasping in shock. Seeing Xander’s face as it turned up to look at him, Spike’s worry increased. Xander’s eyes were shadowed, dark circles of exhaustion under them, the laughter completely gone from the troubled brown eyes.
“Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Nighttime, pet. Usually up and about now,” Spike reminded him and was rewarded by the faintest hint of a smile, which didn’t come near to reaching Xander’s eyes.

“What’s wrong, luv?”

Xander’s gaze dropped to the pages in front of him, his hands nervously smoothing them, straightening the edges and folding them in half with mathematical precision. “Spike, I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything, luv. You know that.”

“I’m going to put these in the desk. I need you to ask me every night if I’ve read them.” Haunted eyes looked up at him, like he was a lifeline for a drowning man. “Will you do that until I tell you to stop? Every night?”

“What’s this about, Xander?” Spike studied him. The promise was nothing, easily done, but he wasn’t going to give it without having more information. He stepped forward, holding out one hand for the papers. “What’s in them?”

Xander didn’t answer. He buried his face in his hands but didn’t move to prevent Spike from quietly sliding the papers off the table and beginning to quickly read through them.

If anything, the papers increased Spike’s puzzlement. Xander had hastily summarized a number of events from his life: his friend’s death, his estrangement from the redhead, that he loved Spike - Spike smiled involuntarily, despite his uneasiness, when he read that section. Although he knew Xander loved him, it was nice to see it in black and white: “I love Spike and trust him completely. He’s the most important person in my life. I live with him and we’re lovers.”

There was more of the same: mentions of his demon friends and the truth spell the witch had done on him.

“Xander,” Spike crouched down beside his boy, “what’s going on, luv? Talk to me.”

Xander lifted his head and looked at Spike and Spike was struck by the bewildered hurt in his eyes; like a wounded animal who couldn’t comprehend why someone was hurting it. “Willow did another spell on me,” he said finally. “A memory spell, so I wouldn’t remember the truth spell she did. I found out about it yesterday, by accident.”

Rage tore through Spike as he grasped what Xander was saying.

That anyone would dare do that to Xander, much less his so-called friend. She would learn what it meant to touch a Master Vampire’s Claimed. She would pay for every moment’s pain she had caused his boy. Spike shook with the force of his anger. It was all he could do not to howl his fury into the night sky, not to leave his Claimed’s side to exact revenge this very moment.

Spike came back to himself after a moment, a little surprised to find he was still crouched, unmoving, beside Xander. He forced himself not to show any reaction. Xander was shivering slightly as he sat on the kitchen chair huddled in his bathrobe, although the apartment was kept fairly warm at night. He didn’t need Spike’s anger and vengeance threats now.

Standing, he tugged Xander gently up from his chair, pulling him against Spike’s own cool body, holding him tightly as Xander clung desperately to him, crooning softly in Xander’s ear, not moving until the tremors shaking Xander’s whole body gradually faded into stillness.
“Let’s get you back to bed, luv,” he said quietly and Xander nodded.

Grimacing, Spike noticed the pages in his hand, now crumpled into a tight ball inside his fist. Unnoticed, he set them back down on the table. Xander wouldn’t need to check his memories if the witch was dead, he thought grimly.

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Spike held Xander through the remainder of the night, sitting watchful in their bed, his strong arms enfolding Xander in a secure haven as his Claimed at long last fell into troubled sleep. Through the early morning hours, he soothed his boy when he moved restlessly, as dreams continued to plague his sleep, and thought hard about what Xander had said and what he was going to do about it.

When Xander had promised to tell him about things like this, he’d promised Xander he wouldn’t kill any of his friends unless it was a matter of saving Xander’s life and he struggled with that as the hours ticked away towards dawn. Weighing his promise against the need to avenge his Claimed.

It didn’t help that he knew that, even now, Xander wouldn’t want Spike to kill the witch. Much less have her death take the days it deserved to. Xander also wouldn’t be happy if Spike kept him out of school, but the thought of his Claimed being anywhere near the witch when Spike wasn’t there to protect him, made Spike’s skin crawl and his demon rage.

He was no closer to a solution when he felt the dawn approaching and heard the distant sounds of the vampires of the Court returning from their nightly outings. Their bottom lines were irreconcilable and mutually exclusive: the witch needed to be killed and Xander wouldn’t let Spike kill her.

Spike sighed. He and Xander were going to have to talk about it, which went against his instincts which were screaming for punitive action. Fortunately, Xander wasn’t going anywhere near the school until the witch was taken care of, so they would find some way around the impasse.

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“What do we do now?”

Xander’s voice was unlike his usually groggy state first thing in the morning. He’d been awake for some time and Spike had continued to hold him without letting on he knew Xander was awake, not pressing him to talk until he was ready.

“We start by you telling me exactly what happened.”

Spike listened carefully as Xander explained how the Watcher had figured out that his memories had been altered. The extent of what the witch had done, based on Xander and Giles comparing memories. The initial reaction of the Slayer and the wolf - which pleased Spike - and finally, Xander’s bitter conclusion that the others were going to forgive Willow.

Spike made a mental note to add them all to the kill-on-sight list if that were true.

For now, he concentrated on not reacting, on keeping his anger so firmly controlled that his body remained relaxed and his arms only tightened comfortably around his Claimed. Xander needed Spike calm, not raging out of control over the wrongs Xander already knew had been done to him. As soon as Xander didn’t need him anymore, he was finding the largest, toughest demon around and he was tearing it to pieces with his bare hands.

When Xander finally ran out of words, Spike considered his reply carefully. “What do you want to happen, luv?” It was obvious that Xander felt completely out of control right now, he needed to get
that feeling back.

“I want this to have never happened,” Xander answered after a long silence. “I want Willow punished. I want Giles and Oz not to forgive her. And I want my memories back, no matter what they are.”

“Watcher’s got that last one under control, from what you tell me,” Spike answered reassuringly. The Watcher had better. He’d helped create this mess in the first place. Supposed to be supervising the witch, wasn’t he?

And that was a truly annoying thought. Spike knew enough about magic and about the Watcher to know that Giles would need to consult with the witch about what she’d done. He couldn’t kill her for practical reasons, not until the spell reversal was finished.

He wondered if Xander would buy that she’d been accidentally torn to pieces by wild dogs immediately after the spell was reversed. Probably not, more’s the pity.

“He says that memory spells are pretty easy to reverse.” Xander sounded like he was trying to convince himself. “He couldn’t do it yesterday because all his books were taken in the raid on the school.”

“He was right. Don’t like someone mucking about using magic on you and I’m not letting them do it half-cocked.”

“Yeah, I didn’t like that idea either.” Xander sighed and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He kissed Spike and stood up. “Thanks, Spike. I’d better get ready.”

Spike was so caught off guard for one moment, that Xander had gotten several steps towards the bathroom before Spike shot to his feet.

“You’re not goin’ to school today, luv,” he said flatly.

“Why not?” Unbelievably, Xander looked surprised. A little relieved, but mostly surprised.

“Xander, you don’t know if your friends are going to stand by you and you’re making reminder lists so you can check if the witch tampers with you again. You are not going to school.”

Xander wrapped his arms around himself. “I don’t want them to think I’m scared,” he muttered, like he was trying to convince himself.

Spike crossed the floor in one quick stride and put his arms around his boy. “Not about being scared, luv. It’s about not being able to trust the people around you.”

There was a long silence. “I have to know, Spike,” he said finally, leaning against Spike as if he could gather strength from him. “I have to know what they are going to do about this or if they are just going to sweep it under the rug. And I need to know how soon Giles can break the spell.”

Spike growled. He couldn’t stop himself. The thought of anyone doing more magic on Xander infuriated him and filled him with dread. It hadn’t escaped his notice, once he’d realized why Xander had written those reminders last night, that Xander was afraid someone would tamper with the memory of his relationship with Spike. Given how they all felt, in varying degrees, about their relationship, that was a reasonable fear. Witch probably had it in mind and just hadn’t figured out how to cover her tracks yet.

“No one’s doing magic on you without me there.” He thought for a moment. “We’ll go together, luv.
Call the Watcher and tell him we’re meeting him after school. He can explain himself to us both.

Xander, if they don’t back you, you aren’t ever going back to that school. It won’t be safe.”

He could see from Xander’s sorrowful nod that Xander was less worried about his safety and more thinking that school would be unbearable if his friends turned against him. He hugged Xander hard.

“Get you a tutor, luv. Home schoolin’ they call it now. You’ll graduate just fine. Probably with more education than if you stayed at that school.” His contempt for the American education system hadn’t abated in the slightest.

He hadn’t thought of it before, but now that he had, he liked the idea. A lot. Xander at home all day, a tutor who would discreetly leave whenever Spike told him to. Spike found himself smiling as he pictured the arrangement. Of course, it meant finding someone he could trust to spend hours every day with his Claimed, but Spike would be right there, so it shouldn’t be that difficult. He should have thought of this last summer, it was a bloody brilliant idea.

“Spike?”

“Yeah, luv?” He answered absently, still working out the details of the tutoring arrangement.

“I don’t want them to choose me because they’re scared of you.” Xander’s voice was very quiet but determined.

“What do you mean?”

“I need to know what they say without you looming over my shoulder threatening them.” Xander smiled at him. “You intimidate without saying a word, Spike. You know you do.”

Spike couldn’t deny it. Didn’t want to. He’d worked hard to make his mere presence threatening. Very useful for a Master Vampire.

“If they choose me, I don’t want to worry about whether it was only because they were afraid of you.”

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In the end, they compromised on Xander going to school after lunch. Spike would meet him at the library, using the tunnels, immediately after Xander’s last class, waiting to show himself until Xander had had a chance to confront his friends alone first.

It was obvious that Spike approved of the ambush tactics and that was the only reason he’d agreed to the plan. It wasn’t mentioned that Xander knew that Spike would be lurking in the tunnel entrance for a long time before the appointed meeting time. While it was clear that Spike understood Xander’s need to confront them on his own, it was equally clear that Spike hated the idea.

It had been weirdly comforting knowing that Spike would kill anyone Xander asked him to, without hesitation or remorse. Comforting and nerve-racking, because Xander wasn’t entirely sure he could be trusted not to ask it of Spike.

Several hours later, having showered and walked to school, Xander acknowledged to himself that it had probably been a mistake not to follow Spike’s original plan. He’d been thinking vaguely that he could talk to Giles, Buffy and Oz separately, but he hadn’t seen any of them. He didn’t have Buffy or Oz in either of his last two classes, and any idea of actually learning something was a joke, he couldn’t concentrate at all, his thoughts unable to stop worrying about the coming meeting with Giles and worrying about the memory-restoring spell.
When he was summoned out of his last class at the start of the period, Xander almost panicked. He seriously considered leaving the school grounds instead and waiting for Spike just off campus. He didn’t want to hear Giles explain how Willow was sorry, how she wouldn’t do it again, how he would keep a close eye on her in the future. He knew Willow was really good at research, especially in Giles’ weakest area - computers - and that it had been very helpful to Buffy and Giles to have her working with them. It didn’t help that Xander had spent over an hour yesterday demonstrating to Giles that he was pretty near useless on a computer and no replacement for Willow. He knew that Willow was Buffy’s best friend and Oz’s girlfriend. It was just that he’d thought they were his friends too. Not so much Buffy, although he’d thought they had at least arrived at mutual respect, but Oz and Giles were his closest friends at school and he really didn’t want to hear that they were going to choose Willow over him. He’d seen enough last night to know which way that particular wind was blowing.

It was only the thought that Giles might be ready to break Willow’s spell that got his feet moving toward the library at all.

Pushing the door open with reluctant slowness, Xander froze on the threshold and almost retreated when he realized the entire group was there: Giles, Oz, Buffy, and Willow. His eyes skittered away from the sight of Willow sitting at the table, dropping to the floor as his emotions threatened to get completely out of control.

Giles had obviously been watching the door and, before Xander could slip away, he called out: “There you are, Xander. Good, we can get started.”

“Started on what?” Willow asked. “You never said what the emergency was. Is it Amy?” Xander could hear the slight nervousness underlying her tone, the anxious edge to her question and he made himself stop studying the linoleum. Now that he was in for it, he wasn’t going to play the nervous supplicant. He was the wronged person here. If they were going to let Willow get away with this, they were going to do it to his face.

He stopped hesitating by the door and walked forward, his steps as firm as he could manage. Chin up, he looked at them all, concealing his hurt and anger behind a hard mask. “I assume he meant getting started on fixing the memory spell that you did on me,” he said coldly, going directly into attack mode. He wasn’t going to play nice about this and pretend nothing major had happened.

If he wasn’t quite able to look directly into her face yet, well, that was his problem and nobody else’s business.

“Memory spell?” Willow repeated faintly.

“We know, Willow, ” Giles said. “You have apparently learned nothing from our sessions since the last time you abused your abilities.”

At Giles’ scathing tone, Xander’s eyes shot to his face. Giles was angry. Actually, he was livid, not even attempting to hide his fury. Confused, Xander looked at Buffy and Oz, who were both staring in Willow’s direction like they didn’t recognize her.

For the first time, he took in the positions around the table. Oz wasn’t sitting next to Willow, which was almost unheard of. He was at the end of the table, well separated from Willow who was sitting alone on one of the long sides of the table. Giles and Buffy were also seated across from her.

They weren’t supporting her. They were confronting her.

Xander felt the hand that had been constricting his breathing and his heart since yesterday loosen and
he took a deep, steadying breath. Maybe… maybe he had been wrong yesterday. Maybe they were just focused on the moment. Giles, especially, had never believed in kicking someone when they were down, all that British public school upbringing a part of his nature. Xander had to admit, it was hard to think of how someone could be more down than a person who had just had a near miss with burning to death. Maybe they had just been reacting to their relief at saving her from that.

“Sessions?” he asked, clearing his throat before he could get the words out.

“Didn’t I tell you about that yesterday?” Giles furrowed his brow for a moment, then shook his head. “Sorry. After the truth spell, I spent considerable time” - that was definitely a shot at Willow from the look Giles gave her as he said it - “attempting to teach Willow the ethics required of magic users and the peril of ignoring those ethics. Sadly, it appears my efforts were completely in vain. Once again, Willow, you have willfully misused your power for your own ends. Quite apart from the moral repugnance of your actions, you have again risked inflicting permanent harm on someone you claim to care about.”

“Willow, how could you do this?” Buffy’s anger and disgust showed clearly in her question, though her voice stayed flat and even.

“I didn’t mean any harm,” Willow insisted. “I didn’t. I just wanted Xander and me to be friends again. I’ve missed him.”

“So you invaded his mind.” Oz’s quiet condemnation wasn’t a question and Willow’s tear-filled eyes went from him to Xander.

“Xander, you said that you couldn’t forget what it felt like to have me do the truth spell on you. All I wanted was to help you forget that so we could be friends again. It wasn’t to hurt you. You were hurting because of what I’d done and I just wanted to help. I wanted us to be friends again.”

“And your idea of helping me is to do the same thing again? Only this time, you made sure I didn’t know about it. Who the hell do you think you are? You have no right to do that to someone. You don’t get to decide what’s ok for me to remember or whether or not we’re friends. You haven’t learned anything, except to hide your tracks better.” He stared at her bitterly. “I don’t buy it, Willow. You knew I wouldn’t let you do that to me or you would have asked for permission. You did it for yourself, not for me. You’re no better than a murderer who burns the house down on top of their victims. You were just trying to erase the memory of your crime, not make my life better. Don’t you ever claim this was for me.”

Willow was silenced by the raw fury in his voice, the anger in his eyes. She dropped her gaze to her hands, fiddling with them nervously in her lap. Once or twice, she opened her mouth as if she was about to say something, but each time she closed it again without saying anything.

Giles broke the silence. “I assume that the person assisting you in learning black magics was Amy?”

Giles lifted his gaze to the rat sitting in a cage on the bookshelf behind them.

Xander had had a panicked moment this morning before Spike told him he’d dropped the bag holding the rat next to Giles on the way out of the room at City Hall with a terse instruction for Giles to deal with the rat himself. “Not takin’ care of a bloody rat, luv,” he’d told Xander, which was fair, Xander hadn’t known what to do with it either.

“The one you refused to identify so she wouldn’t get in trouble?” Giles continued. For such a mild-sounding reproof, Giles managed to convey the clear message that he blamed Amy’s current predicament squarely on Willow’s silence.
Willow bit her lip, and nodded, her eyes fleeing guiltily from the cage holding the rat.

Giles stood and crossed the room to stand looking down into the small cage he’d dug up somewhere, Xander thought it was probably the same cage he’d put the zombie cat in a few months ago. Amy-rat looked unhappy, crouched in a corner and eyeing them warily and Giles shook his head and sighed.

“Amy will be turned over to a Devonshire coven that I am familiar with,” he informed them quietly. “A member is flying here as we speak and they will take charge of returning her to human form.”

“Really?” Willow breathed, curiosity and speculation in her eyes. “They can fly?”

Giles sent a withering look in her direction. “British Airways is rather good at that sort of thing,” he said caustically.

Xander’s jaw tightened at Willow’s reaction. She wasn’t going to give up magic. Not for him. Not for anyone. Two seconds after learning they knew what she’d done, she couldn’t hide her first reaction of eager interest. Seeing Buffy and Oz watching Willow with grim faces, he was grateful that they weren’t making excuses for her any more.

Willow flushed with anger and embarrassment at Giles’ biting words. “Giles, I can de-rat her. Amy and I have been working together and I’m familiar with the kinds of spells she does. I think I can figure out how to reverse the spell.”

“Yes, I gather that you and Amy have been experimenting. I understand that she’s been dabbling in mind-control spells for some time now.” Giles folded his arms and glared pointedly at Willow from his position by Amy’s cage.

“What? No!” Willow looked shocked. “She hasn’t been doing anything like that.”

“Hasn’t she? Buffy gave me to understand that you told her that Amy has been avoiding homework assignments through the use of magic.” Willow faltered under Giles’ accusing glare. “How would you describe making a teacher believe a student has turned in non-existent homework? Or did I misunderstand the situation?” he finished coldly.

“But…” Willow couldn’t finish. “I... I never thought about it as mind-control, it was just…”

“Just tampering with another person’s mind so that they believed reality to be different than it was,” Giles finished for her.

Willow bowed her head, color burning in her cheeks and didn’t say anything else to defend Amy’s actions.

Giles waited a long moment for his point to sink in before returning to the subject of Amy. “As for Amy, was it your intent to leave the idiotic child in a cage until you stumble across the right solution?” he asked sarcastically, waiting, brows raised inquiringly but Willow had no answer. “Just how long do you think it would take you? Days? Weeks, perhaps? Would you honestly leave a person you consider a friend in this situation for that length of time, just to satisfy your own ego that you can reverse the spell of someone who has been practicing magic for years longer than yourself?” Again, he waited for an answer that wasn’t forthcoming.

“She’s a human being,” he finished, his voice ice-cold. “She’s not a magic experiment for you to play with. Amy will be turned over to the coven. They have been practicing magic for decades longer than you have been alive, Willow, and have a far greater chance of succeeding in reversing the spell. You will tell them everything you know about what she has been dabbling in to assist them.”
Willow nodded and Giles continued: “We can only hope that they will be able to teach Amy something about the unbelievable stupidity of turning oneself into an animal. She seems to have had no plan for turning herself back into a human.”

“She didn’t want to be burned to death,” Willow muttered.

“I understand that. But it is hardly the kind of spell that even a seasoned magic user will come up with out of thin air. Amy has obviously practiced that spell for some time. Which means she either intended to use it on herself or, more likely given the difficulty in reversing that spell once performed on oneself, on someone else.” Giles pinned Willow with a hard stare. “Were you aware that she was practicing animal transformation spells?”

“No,” Willow said quickly. “We did other things, smaller things, stuff that wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Like memory and mind-control spells,” Giles finished sarcastically and Willow flushed, looking away from him nervously.

“Willow,” Buffy said, having sat silently throughout Giles’ scathing condemnation. “I don’t understand how you could have lied about all of this. Lied to me. You said you weren’t doing any magic.”

“I know and I’m really sorry. I didn’t think you’d understand.”

Buffy’s lips tightened. “Good call. I don’t. So explain it to me.”

Willow looked helplessly around the circle of hostile eyes. “I’m good at magic. It’s like it comes naturally to me. It feels right to work spells, like it’s what I was meant to do. But everyone kept telling me I was wrong and I had to stop.” She looked at Xander, her eyes pleading. “I know I was wrong. I shouldn’t have done the truth spell on you. But that didn’t mean I should stop doing any magic at all. And Amy knew all these spells and I was learning so much from her…” her voice trailed off.

“It won’t happen again,” she finished, looking at them all earnestly. “But I can help Buffy with the spells I’ve learned. I’m good. Giles, you can test me and I can show you what I can do.”

“Willow, how can I trust someone who would do a spell like that on a friend?” Buffy asked, crossing her arms and leaning slightly away from Willow, her whole body signaling rejection of the offer Willow had just made. “I can’t do my job if I can’t trust the person who’s backing me up.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you!” Willow exclaimed.

“But you did hurt Xander,” Oz said quietly, his face unreadable.

Willow’s head jerked around to face him. “Oz…”

Oz shook his head. “Willow, Xander is my friend. I told you the last time that if you ever did something like that again, we were through. I love you, but I can’t be with someone who treats people like you do.” He pushed his chair back and stood, sorrow visible in every line of his tightly controlled body. He stopped for one moment near where Xander still leaned against the bookcase and looked up at him. Xander nodded, hoping his gratitude showed in his eyes.

There was a flicker of something on Oz’s face that Xander couldn’t quite read and he nodded to Xander, before walking out of the library without looking back, Willow’s sobbing cry following him out the door.
“Oz!”

“And then there were two,” Giles murmured, so quietly Xander barely heard him. He seemed to be speaking almost to himself. “You see, Willow, there are consequences.” Taking his glasses off, he polished them for a long moment. “Xander may never forgive you and, offhand, I can’t think of a reason he should. You and Oz may never be together again, Buffy…”

“Buffy may never trust you again.” The Slayer spoke for herself, her harsh words overriding Giles’.

“Buffy!”

“Willow, if you can do something like that to Xander, how can I trust you not to do it to me? I’m sorry, but right now it creeps me out to even be around you.” She jumped to her feet, beginning to pace restlessly around the room. “You’ve been my best friend since I moved here but right now I feel like I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“Was it worth it, Willow?” Giles asked harshly. “Was it worth using magic for your own gains when you lose all your friends as a result?”

Willow bowed her head, tears falling unchecked into her lap but any sympathy Xander might once have felt for her was long dead.

“Like to hear the answer to that,” Spike’s voice cut in from the top of the stairs, startling them all as they jerked around to face him. “The only reason you’re still alive is because of Xander. Even after everything you’ve done to him, he’s not willing to let me kill you. After sitting up with him all night, holding him through his nightmares about what you did, I don’t need much of an excuse to kill you. Love for you to give me one.”

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Glaring at the witch, Spike couldn’t decide if he wished she had burned last night. It would have been extremely satisfying. Unlike vampires, humans burned slowly, leaving them in excruciating agony for a long time. But it would have lacked the hands-on vengeance he wanted so badly.

Listening to the conversation from the upper levels, standing quietly in the stacks, Spike had heard every one of the witch’s excuses and justifications. She didn’t understand and she never would. The only thing that balanced his fury at her arrogance and self-centered view was that the others were not letting her get away with it.

The witch was a lost cause, too deeply caught up in the intoxication of power, reveling in what she could do with the power magic gave her, to come back from the dark place she was in. She didn’t even know it herself. She’d sold herself on her excuses, long before she’d tried to sell them to anyone else. Stupid bint couldn’t even see what she was doing to herself, much less how her actions affected anyone else.

“Xander loves me,” she answered him defiantly, latching on to the one part of what he’d said that justified her actions. “He hates not being friends with me, I know it. Why else would he have helped rescue me?” she asked triumphantly.

“He didn’t do it for you, you half-wit.” Spike’s glare intensified. How dare she use Xander’s compassion to justify her actions? “He did it for Joyce. And because that’s who he is. Xander wouldn’t leave anyone, even someone he hates, to burn to death. He’s not like you and me,” he added pointedly pleased when color burned in her face and she momentarily was lost for words.

“Loved.”
Xander’s voice was harsh in the momentary silence, the sound of it stopping Willow before she could gather her wits enough for a heated response to Spike. The echo of the single word seemed to fill the room as they all turned to face him.

“I loved you, Willow. Past tense. I wouldn’t be friends with you now if you were the last person left on earth.” Xander’s voice rose as his stare bored into Willow. “Friends trust each other. They don’t invade each other’s minds and plant ideas and memories that they want there. They don’t coerce people into being friends by lies, by misusing power they happen to have.”

Spike watched Willow’s face crumple, fresh tears falling from her eyes, and was surprised to feel a momentary flash of sympathy. He could only imagine the pain of losing Xander, she was experiencing it first hand. She knew what she had done and there was no trace of forgiveness or of his ever relenting in Xander’s eyes.

Good. She deserved every bit of pain that her own actions had brought down on her head.

“I will never forgive you for this, Willow.”

Xander stepped past her, ignoring her as if she had ceased to exist, crossing the room to stand by Spike, putting his arms around Spike and leaning into him.

“Love you, Xander,” Spike whispered into his ear, for Xander’s ears only. “Proud of you.”

Lifting his head to face the room, Spike felt Xander moving, turning in the circle of his arms so that he was facing the others as well. Spike’s eyes met the Watcher’s and he was surprised and pleased by the approval he saw there. Approval for his boy. His eyes held the Watcher’s in a long, measuring stare.

“What’s being done about reversing the spell?” His gaze dropped briefly to the witch and his voice slid silkily into naked menace. “Need any help persuading someone to tell us exactly what she did?”
Willow had been quiet and cooperative as Giles questioned her, explaining the spells she had used. Buffy had walked out before the questioning had even started, saying she needed to patrol, although it had sounded more like an excuse to leave than a real concern. She’d left abruptly without a word or a glance at Willow and Willow’s tearful eyes had watched her go, before she’d bowed her head over her clasped hands. Giles had given her a moment to collect herself, then begun interrogating her relentlessly about every spell she and Amy had done, especially the memory spell and what Willow knew about Amy changing herself into a rat.

Xander and Spike remained through it all, listening silently to the questions and answers. Neither of them knew much about magic, so most of the details were meaningless to them but Xander needed to hear it and Spike wasn’t about to leave him alone to face something like this. At one point, Xander had thought Giles was going to blow a gasket when he realized exactly what Willow had been doing. She’d taken the basic memory spells that Amy had taught her and tinkered with them, changing them until they were almost something entirely different. Amy had used the spells for short term, straight-forward gain: having teachers remember receiving A-quality homework assignments from her when she hadn’t turned anything in at all. She didn’t need the spells to last longer than it took to register the grade and hand the assignments back to the class. It was a rare teacher who would worry about an assignment already read, graded, and given back to the student, so Amy had worked with temporary spells, lasting about a week before wearing off on their own.

Willow had wanted something permanent and a spell that would cover multiple memories. For that, she had boosted the power of Amy’s basic spells and given them a broader reach. Apparently, memory spells operated largely based on the will of the person wielding the spell. The witch concentrated on what they wanted the subject to know or believe as they worked the spell. Amy had done her spells with a simple incantation and her will alone. Willow had added herbs, such as the Lethe’s Bramble Giles had found in her backpack, to augment the original spells.

From Giles’ reaction, this was not a good thing. Xander had listened silently up until then while Giles questioned Willow, not able to bring himself to look directly at Willow, concentrating instead on the sound of her voice, grateful for Spike’s silent support as they stood side-by-side, shoulders brushing, listening to Willow’s explanations.

Willow’s voice was so familiar, even now, Xander thought numbly. So much hadn’t changed at all: her excitement in learning, her pride in mastering a new subject, the intellectual confidence she had always had that came from being the smartest person in the room most of the time, the slight hint of condescension she’d never been able to completely hide for anyone who couldn’t make the logic leaps that she could.

Willow’s intellectual arrogance had always been balanced and checked by her shyness. The stereotypical science nerd, ostracized socially but the one everyone in their class had always turned to for answers, even while they made fun of her behind her back. He and Jesse had always been her shelter against the world, just like she had been theirs.

Willow and he hadn’t been close like that in a long time, but Xander could still only barely comprehend the idea that she would not only betray him like this but that she’d spent weeks planning it in advance. Listening to Willow getting caught up in explaining the spells she’d worked, Xander felt sick, wondering if it had really all been just an intellectual exercise to Willow. Had intellectual curiosity over whether to add one piece or two of Lethe’s Bramble to the mix blinded her to the
emotional consequences, the immorality, of what she was doing? Had she forgotten it wasn’t simply a math problem - negative thoughts removed + permanence = friendship restored - but Xander’s life she was messing with?

Giles’ growing agitation was alarming and Xander broke his long silence, asking Giles what it meant that Willow had changed the spells. He didn’t really care why it mattered from a magic point of view but he was worried that it could mean that reversing the spell would be more difficult.

Giles kept his eyes on Willow as he answered bluntly: “It’s the magical equivalent of mixing two unknown chemicals together and hoping they don’t explode. It’s an incredibly rash thing to have attempted.”

Willow bristled. “I was careful, Giles. I know what I’m doing. There wasn’t any risk.” Seeming to remember she was talking about spells that she’d used to manipulate Xander, she stopped abruptly without finishing what she’d started to say. At least she hadn’t actually been tactless enough to say that her spell had worked exactly as she had intended as proof of how careful she’d been, Xander thought bitterly. Spike growled dangerously and Willow hastily changed the subject, asking Giles if he had any more questions.

Xander’s resentment burned as Giles continued to ask probing questions and he listened to Willow talk about tampering with his memory like it was nothing more than a lab experiment. She sounded like she’d completely forgotten that she was talking about manipulating someone against their will. He was more convinced than ever that Willow didn’t really understand - or worse, didn’t care - that what she’d done was wrong.

He was relieved when Giles finally said he thought he had all the information he needed. Xander wanted nothing more than to go home, to not have to listen to Willow any more. Maybe Spike had been right about not coming back to school for awhile.

“Willow, I suggest you go home and think long and hard about what you have done.” Giles closed the notebook he’d been taking notes in with unnecessary force. “You will report here to the library at noon tomorrow in case the coven has any questions before they start work on Amy.”

Willow nodded, and Xander’s lips tightened at the longing sideways glance she sent in the direction of the cage. Nothing Giles had said was sinking in at all.

Willow pushed her chair back and snuck a look at Xander from behind the sweep of her hair. She sighed when he refused to look in her direction, staring stonily at the wall on the opposite side of the room. Her shoulders slumping slightly, she turned to leave.

Spike’s long immobility had been a predator’s deception; disarming his prey until she’d forgotten his existence. Without the slightest warning, he was suddenly in motion, slamming Willow up against the bookshelf and pinning her there effortlessly. She made a terrified sound, struggling instinctively to free herself for one panicked second before she went motionless in the face of the yellow-eyed demon glaring at her.

“Hurt my Claimed again and you won’t live long enough to regret it,” he snarled. Willow stared at him mutely, wide-eyed and terrified. Spike tightened his grip until she was gasping for air. “Xander’s the reason you’re still alive, so you better start praying he lives a long and happy life. Anything happens to him and I’m coming for you. And if you ever do another spell on him, I’ll kill you regardless of what Xander wants. You don’t get another chance.” He shook her until she was gasping for air, her hands coming up to claw futilely at his iron grip. “Are we clear?”

Spike waited until Willow nodded, holding her for a long moment as if contemplating whether or not
to actually tighten his grip and end her life, then opened his hand contemptuously and let her fall. She slid down the bookshelf to the floor, her trembling legs unable to hold her up and Spike stood over her, glaring down at her as she huddled on the floor, gasping for breath.

Willow looked wildly at Xander and Giles, neither of whom had moved as Spike menaced her. Xander looked at her directly for a moment, meeting her stunned eyes with a blank stare before looking away again, refusing to acknowledge her fright in any way.

Giles cleared his throat, pulling his glasses off slowly and beginning to polish them with the handkerchief he took from his pocket. “I rather hope you take that threat seriously, Willow. Master Vampires are not known for their tolerance of people who harm their Claimed humans. To be quite honest, you’re lucky to still be alive.”

Willow pushed herself up, using the bookshelf to brace herself as she climbed slowly to her feet, her breath still coming in ragged gasps. Her face white, eyes resentful, she left the library without a word, casting one wary glance back at Spike as she reached the doors.

Xander released a long relieved breath and letting himself slump down, the tension that had helped keep him upright throughout the long, emotional confrontation deserting him suddenly. He stepped up behind Spike who was still glaring after Willow and slid his arms around Spike’s waist. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Spike turned within his arms, his own arms moving around Xander. Their lips met for a long moment, both ignoring Giles’ sudden fit of coughing. Unhurriedly, Spike finally lifted his head. “So, Watcher, are you ready to reverse the spell?”

“If it is alright with you, Xander, I would rather wait until tomorrow. We’re all tired and the representative from the coven will be here by then. Although I can perform magic, I am well aware of the fact that I am an amateur.” His brows drew together thoughtfully. “Willow has tampered with the original spell, altering it considerably. I need to be sure I have taken all of her changes into account in attempting to reverse what she has done.”

“You can still do it, right?” Xander asked anxiously.

Giles smiled reassuringly. “I believe so. However, I would prefer to have a second opinion before going ahead. Is that alright?”

“Yeah. Makes sense.” He’d rather have it over with but double-checking seemed like a good idea when it was his brain they were going to be messing with.

Giles looked thoughtfully towards the door that had closed behind Willow. “There is something else you should know.” His expression was stern, almost harsh as he looked back at them. “It’s true that I summoned the coven for Amy but that is only part of the reason. The coven was also informed that two amateurs were abusing their powers. The representative will be assessing the situation and determining what action needs to be taken.”

When Xander was left speechless, Spike asked: “What can they do?”

“They are a very old and powerful coven. This will not be the first time they have had to step in to prevent someone from misusing power.”

“Didn’t answer my question, Watcher.”

Giles inclined his head, accepting the rebuke. “They can bind a witch’s powers and, if necessary, hold them to account.”
“What do you mean: ‘hold them to account’?” Xander asked slowly.

“If they decide it is necessary, they will take Willow and Amy back to England with them, willingly or not.” Giles smiled slightly at Xander’s uncertain look and said: “They abhor violence, Xander, and avoid it as best they can, but they feel a strong responsibility towards the world and do not stand idly by when another practitioner is abusing their powers.”

Xander couldn’t help feeling relieved that Willow might be gone, at least for awhile. It would be hard to see her around school and he wasn’t sure he could hide the fear and revulsion he felt when he thought about her. Plus, he really didn’t want to have to worry about what Willow was doing behind his back. On the other hand, from what Giles had just said, he wasn’t sure the coven sounded a whole lot better than Willow. Was Giles fighting fire with fire? Did that analogy even work for this situation - he was having trouble remembering if fighting fire with fire was a good or bad thing.

“Come on, luv. Let’s get you home,” Spike said. “We’ll call in the morning, Watcher.”

Not waiting for a response, Spike urged Xander out of the library, his arm around Xander’s waist, holding him close. Xander didn’t protest. The confrontation with Willow had been exhausting. The spell could wait until tomorrow. In fact, thinking could pretty much take a hike for the time being.

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The woman from the coven was old and frail looking, the wrinkled skin on her throat like crumpled tissue paper. White hair was braided and wrapped neatly around her head in a coronet. The hand gripping the cane had the prominent knuckles of arthritis. Her eyes were the only part of her that didn’t look ancient, Xander thought, as he gingerly took her hand, worried that his own, much larger hand would accidentally crush the small fingers. Her eyes were the eyes of a much younger person, sparkling with mischief and bright with curiosity as she studied him in turn.

When he’d called the school that morning, Giles had suggested Xander skip school today, saying the spell wouldn’t be ready until late that afternoon in any case. Giles told him and Spike to come to the library immediately after school to meet the woman from the coven, telling him that they would most likely be ready to break Willow’s memory spell by then.

Xander had gratefully accepted the suggestion, knowing he really wasn’t ready to face Willow again and pleased at Giles’ automatic inclusion of Spike in the invitation. Now, facing the woman the coven had sent to deal with their problems, he was curious in turn, wondering how her meeting with Willow had gone. He’d already seen that Amy-rat was still in her cage.

“So you are the young man Mr. Giles has been telling me about.” Her voice quavered a little, but was surprisingly strong for someone who looked as old as she did.

“I guess. Xander Harris,” he introduced himself.

“I’m sorry,” Giles interjected, sticking his head out from his office. “Xander, this is Margaret Apsford-Burns. Maggie, allow me to introduce Xander and Spike.”

Xander looked at Giles, puzzled by the hint of mischief in his voice as he introduced Spike. The elderly woman looked with interest at Spike, who stared back at her challengingly without offering his hand. “You the one who’s going to be messing with my boy?”

“I thought you might prefer it if I did the spell, William, given that I have been practicing magic since Mr. Giles here was in nappies.”

Xander looked at her with fresh interest. She obviously knew who Spike was and wasn’t even
slightly intimidated. Not to mention the slight emphasis with which she used Spike’s human name somehow made her sound like a school teacher instructing a particularly backwards student, not a tone most people dared take with Spike. He could see Spike reassessing her as well, head cocked to one side as he studied her thoughtfully.

“Know who I am, do you? Good. Saves me from going through the whole boring litany of just how many members of your family I will hunt down and how slowly I will kill them, if you bollocks up the spell, Maggie.”

“Spike!” Xander hissed, digging a warning elbow into the vampire’s side. That was just rude and being rude to the person who was going to be mucking around with Xander’s brain seemed like a bad idea in general.

“What?” Spike’s eyes were entirely too innocent. “Just making sure we’re all clear on where we stand.”

Mrs. Whosis-whatsis - oh hell, Xander was thinking of her as Maggie, too - just grinned in a way that made her look startlingly youthful for one second. “Don’t worry, William. Your boy won’t be harmed. I met with Miss Rosenberg this afternoon. She has a great deal of potential but is hardly capable at this stage of casting a spell that I cannot undo.”

“You met with Willow?” Xander asked, wondering how that had gone.

“Yes. She has decided to return to England with me,” she announced calmly, as if it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

“Bloody good thing,” Spike exclaimed, obviously torn between relief that the threat to Xander would be gone and disappointment that he wouldn’t have an excuse to kill her. Xander couldn’t blame him since he was similarly torn about how he felt about Willow.

“How did you convince her?” Xander was curious and a little apprehensive. Willow hadn’t seemed very receptive yesterday to the idea that she had done anything seriously wrong and for her to just decide to go to England with someone who wanted to show her the error of her ways seemed very out of character.

Maggie smiled complacently. “It wasn’t difficult,” she said demurely, although the gleam in her eyes as she slid a sideways glance at Giles was full of wicked amusement. “Just a tried and true means of persuasion.”

Giles looked suddenly flustered and more than a little embarrassed and Xander looked between the two of them, puzzled. “Care to let me in on how you convinced her?” he asked.

“Nothing to worry about,” Giles answered quickly. Seeming to realize that Xander wasn’t going to let it drop and Maggie wasn’t going to help him, he stalled, taking his glasses off and fishing his handkerchief out of his pocket. Concentrating intently on the complex task of polishing the lenses, he continued with careful casualness: “Maggie did a spell to convince her.”

Xander frowned, not liking the sound of that. “You mean you used magic to make her think she wanted to go?” he asked. That didn’t sound any better than what Willow had done.

“No.” Maggie answered, with a firm directness that Xander really wanted to believe. “You misunderstand.” She sat down, hooking her cane over the edge of the table and looked up at him, all amusement gone from her face. “Xander, I won’t try to tell you that we never use magic that affects a person’s mind. A great deal of magic does exactly that, to a greater or lesser degree. When, for
example, we ‘lean’ against a bureaucrat to produce a special visa for a student with no passport, or arrange for a parent to believe that she has known for weeks, instead of hours, that her daughter has been given a special opportunity to study abroad, we are indeed interfering with people’s mental autonomy.” She met Xander’s eyes steadily, her own eyes wide and fathomless, the eyes of a being with depths of power that were awesome and terrifying. “We do our very best to keep our interference to a minimum and only tamper when necessary. In my judgment, this situation was grave enough to warrant the tampering.”

“What did you do?” Xander asked slowly, somewhat shaken by his sudden realization that this little old lady might just be the most powerful person he would ever meet.

“Very little, as a matter of fact. I assure you that Willow is choosing to accompany me of her own free will.” With a slight smile for Xander’s skepticism, she explained: “It is almost universal, Xander, for new practitioners of magic to be enamored with their own power. Working magic can be a heady experience. Many, like Willow, are unable to resist the lure of learning a new spell, regardless of whether they trust the source of that spell or not.” She looked at Xander, her eyes serene and unreadable.

“Willow did the spell on herself. I taught her a mirror spell and she tried it without taking the time to gain a proper understanding of what the spell would actually do.” She inclined her head, her gaze sliding briefly towards Giles again. “A common and very useful failing among young magic users, who are often too impatient and arrogant to be careful. The spell I taught her causes a person to look deeply into their own…” she hesitated fractionally, spreading her hands in an all-encompassing gesture, “soul, for lack of a more precise word. To look inside one’s self without self-deception and without our own preconceived notions of who we are. It can be very illuminating, and very humbling, to see ourselves without the careful delusions most of us maintain about who we really are.”

She regarded Xander calmly. “Willow didn’t like what she saw.” She paused as if to let that sink in. “She’s not a bad child, despite her recent actions, but she has taken the first steps down a path that could lead her to a very dark place and the mirror spell has forced her to see that without the comforting justifications she has been using to rationalize her actions to herself. It will be a difficult struggle for her to reverse what she has done to herself, to cleanse her soul of the taint from her actions. We will work with her to try and show her, and her friend, the dangers inherent in what they have been doing.”

Xander studied her, thinking about what she had said. Giles obviously trusted her and Spike had been unusually silent, standing watchful and wary by Xander’s side, which meant that Spike thought she was powerful and a potential threat. Maggie talked calmly, but not casually, of using magic to get what she wanted, but Xander thought he understood the distinction she was making between her use of magic and Willow’s. Getting permission to take a rat out of the country probably took weeks. Nudging a customs official with magic to make it happen didn’t seem so bad, not when it was an emergency situation.

Maybe that was the difference between Maggie and Willow: the difference between using magic when necessary for a greater good as opposed to using it selfishly, to make your own life easier.

“Ok,” he said slowly, knowing he probably didn’t have a say in this anyway. “Do you keep her until she’s better? How do you know that she’s really getting it and not just pretending to?”

“Willow has already taken the first and hardest step - admitting she has a problem. I’m sorry I can’t be more reassuring, but only time will tell if the remorse she is feeling right now is enough to overcome the temptations inherent in magic. Unfortunately, Willow is more than an idle dabbler. She
has the potential to become a very powerful witch some day. As such, simply telling her to stop using magic is not the solution and binding her powers will only work in the short term. She must learn to understand and, more importantly, to respect her power. I can assure you that we will work with her for as long as necessary.”

She picked up her cane, and pushed herself to her feet in a clear signal that the conversation was over. “Now,” she said briskly. “I understand there is a memory spell you wish me to remove.”

Spike hesitated for a bare second in the doorway, then collected himself and continued on into the small diner, his walk becoming a cocky saunter. He arrived at the table and looked down at the occupant, who was sitting with her hands clasped nervously, looking up at him.

“Joyce,” he said, with a hint of mockery in his tone. “Thought I was meetin’ Xander.”

Breaking the memory spell had been anti-climactic. The old lady had burned a small pot of herbs, recited something briefly in a language Spike hadn’t recognized and suddenly Xander had gasped and staggered on his feet for a second. Spike, who’d been banished to watch the spell from outside the office, had nearly torn the door off its hinges getting to his Claimed’s side. He’d held Xander as his boy clung to him, face buried in Spike’s neck, absorbing the impact of the rush of returned and changed memories.

When Xander had finally lifted his head, he had been dry-eyed and grim. Spike and the Watcher had both done their best to insure that Xander already knew most of what Willow had altered and removed, but it was obviously a shock to actually regain the true memories. Xander had shaken it off quickly, though, thanking the old lady and asking her about the rat. Apparently, she’d decided to take the rat back to England in animal form, shielded by a glamour rather than using magic to cover taking two minors out of the country.

Good riddance to both of them, to Spike’s way of thinking. Having the witch out of the country meant she wouldn’t be a danger to Xander any more and Spike wouldn’t have to have it constantly rubbed in his face that he had let her go without taking his rightful vengeance on her.

Xander had asked Spike if he could have a little time alone, suggesting they meet in an hour to celebrate. Should have known his boy was up to something, Spike thought belatedly, staring at Joyce sitting there nervously. Xander never sent him away like that.

“Don’t blame Xander, I put him up to this.” Joyce met his brittle gaze unflinchingly, her own eyes apologetic. “I was afraid you wouldn’t agree to see me if you knew it was me.” Before Spike could respond, Joyce took a deep breath and plunged on. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am, Spike. What I said to you was uncalled for and unforgivable, but I’m selfishly hoping that you will be able to forgive me.”

Something inside Spike, a tight, frozen knot that he had steadfastly refused to acknowledge, unclenched at her words. He shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “Not to worry, Joyce, no harm done.”

Joyce’s eyes were warm and kind as they held his. “Spike, I know better than that. I hurt you. I hope you know that you are welcome in our home at any time.”

“It was the demon,” he said dismissively. “You weren’t yourself.”

“I wish it were that simple,” Joyce said thoughtfully, her brows drawing together. “But none of you
were affected, so I’m afraid I can’t let the demon take all the blame, much as I’d like to.” She smiled ruefuly. “Spike, I don’t think of you as ‘just’ a demon, or ‘just’ a vampire. I honestly don’t know why I acted that way. I’ve been thinking about it since then and I don’t think of you as anything but a friend. Whatever the demon did to the town, to me, that caused us all to behave like bigoted morons, what I said is not what I really feel inside. I hope you can believe that.”

The frozen knot was barely a memory, banished by the sincerity of Joyce’s words. She’d clearly thought about it, examining her motives and not finding a nugget of truth behind her actions as Spike had secretly feared she would. She hadn’t come to her senses and remembered that Spike wasn’t human and therefore wasn’t someone she could be friends with.

He slid into the booth across from her and looked around the diner idly. “Second time I ever talked to Xander was in here, at this very table.” He took a moment to admire Xander’s strategy in getting him and Joyce to meet at this diner. Undoubtedly, he had told Joyce which booth to sit at too. His boy could be downright sneaky when he put his mind to it. “He was scared but curious. First time I ever talked to a human without thinking of them as prey.” Joyce just watched him, listening intently and waiting patiently for him to get to the point. “Ended up giving him recommendations for books to read about vampires.” He shook his head at the memory of that odd little encounter. “Not many humans can accept vampires for what we are. Most see only the obvious. Your daughter is the Slayer and that means you have to worry most nights about whether she’s going to come home again.” He smiled slightly. “Don’t beat yourself up, Joyce. Demon had a lot to work with.”

He was pleased when the worry faded from Joyce’s face at his words. By the time their coffee and hot wings arrived, they were talking easily again and Joyce had invited him over to celebrate Buffy’s birthday the following week.

Spike wondered if he should accept just to see the look on the Slayer’s face. It felt good to talk with Joyce again, the breach healed and already being forgotten. He’d have to thank his boy properly for setting this up.
Chapter 28

Xander looked up from the telly as Spike came in. “How did it go?” he asked, reaching for the remote and twisting around to face Spike.

“Well all right.” Spike shrugged, going for casual. He hadn’t told Xander what Joyce had said to him when she had all but thrown him out of her house, much less how much her rejection had hurt. Xander had obviously figured out there was a problem, or else Joyce had told him, but there was no need to rehash the specifics. The problem was fixed now, time to move on. “We’re invited to Buffy’s birthday party,” he added with a grin, still not sure if it had been a bizarre joke on Joyce’s part or meant as a genuine peace offering.

Xander groaned theatrically. “I thought you said it went all right? That sounds like she wants to torture you.”

“Depends on your point of view, luv.” Spike swung himself over the back of the couch to settle next to Xander. “Way I see it, she’s begging for forgiveness by letting me torture her daughter.”

“Ok, that has possibilities.” Xander turned sideways to face him, still studying his expression. “You ok?”

“Yeah.”

More than ok, he was great. Everything had settled back into place and some things were much better than they had been before all the recent turmoil. The witch was gone, halfway to London by now, and Xander’s nervous tension had left with her. The rest of the little group had backed Xander up, which had surprised and pleased Spike and done wonders for Xander’s battered emotions. His friends had come through for him, not letting the witch get away with hurting him a second time. It made Spike feel a great deal safer about letting Xander continue to attend school. And Joyce and he were friends again and she had confirmed how much their friendship meant to her. Unlife was looking pretty good right now.

The only downside was that, with the witch gone, Spike would never be able to convince Xander that tutoring at home was in his best interests. Sighing to himself, Spike tucked the idea away for now. Persuading Xander to give up school entirely so he could be home during the long days just wasn’t in the cards right now.

Xander was smiling at him, still turned sideways on the couch to face him, and Spike had a feeling his expression was as sappy as he was actually feeling. He needed to do something about that.

Leaning forward, he closed the gap between them, kissing Xander gently; a kiss which deepened rapidly as Spike slid both hands into Xander’s hair, pulling him closer as Xander’s mouth opened eagerly under his.

For a long moment, Spike was content to just kiss his Claimed, mouths sliding against each other, tongues dueling, teeth nibbling, letting the tastes and sensations fill him, arousal building slowly as their mouths devoured each other until kissing wasn’t enough. Wasn’t nearly enough.

Spike moved forward, unfolding as he did until he was kneeling on the couch, his lips never losing contact with Xander’s. Gently, he pushed Xander backwards onto the couch until Xander was stretched flat underneath him, Spike settling on top of him. Xander’s arms closed around him, hands beginning to move frantically, yanking at Spike’s shirt until it pulled free from his pants and
Xander’s warm hands swept underneath the fabric, caressing the length of Spike’s back.

Resting between Xander’s legs, cradled in the human warmth wrapped around him, Spike felt loved like he never had with any other lover. This was far more than just sex, Xander’s touch was loving and curiously tender, as if Spike was something fragile and to be cherished. It made Spike feel almost humble sometimes knowing he had the love and loyalty of this amazing human. Without a word being said, Xander knew. He knew how much the rift with Joyce had hurt Spike and he was silently rejoicing with Spike that it had been healed, all without saying a word, letting his hands and kisses speak for him.

Which was quite possibly the most arousing thing Spike had ever known.

Tender lovemaking completely out the window, Spike found he was rocking hard into Xander, their erections pressed together, the heat scalding despite two layers of denim separating them. Xander gasped and bucked up into him, meeting him thrust for thrust as their cocks rubbed together. Xander’s hands slid down his back and cupped Spike’s ass, trying to pull Spike even closer and Spike knew just how he felt. He wanted more: more friction, more heat, more pressure.

His hips drove down into Xander’s over and over, pushing Xander deeply into the cushions, his cock jerking wildly in its fabric prison, throbbing, on the edge of release. God, no one but Xander had ever been able to make him cum in his pants like a randy teenager but Spike was already so close to the edge he couldn’t bring himself to stop.

Tearing himself free of Xander’s mouth, Spike heard himself moaning, his hips jerking roughly against Xander’s, Xander’s harsh panting in his ear sending him over the edge in a roar of pleasure, his cock pulsing in his jeans as orgasm tore through him. Xander let out a wailing cry, his own hips bucking up into Spike as he came hard, flooding the room with the smells of semen and sweat and arousal.

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Hours later, still joined together, his spent cock resting deep inside Xander’s heated channel, Spike forced himself to pull free before vampire stamina insisted on another round. Xander was exhausted, cum-stained and beyond sated and not up for anything more. Smugly pleased, his ears still ringing from Xander’s scream as Spike brought him to the peak for the third time that night, Spike slid gently out of his lover.

He yanked the damp, stained sheets out from underneath them and snagged the comforter off the floor from where it had been kicked to the ground some time back. Pulling it up over them, he cradled Xander in his arms as his boy slid deeper into unconsciousness.

“Thank you, luv,” Spike whispered into the dark curls.

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Leaning with deliberate casualness against the doorjamb, Spike watched his Sire fuss around the mansion’s living room. Angelus had been reading by the light of the fire when Spike arrived and now he moved around the room, switching on a lamp and setting the book he’d been reading down on the table, like a host with an unexpected guest, rather than a Sire greeting his Childe. The room was more Spartan than when Angelus had been setting up his Court here. It was furnished like a monk’s cell now, everything plain and severe, with no concession to even ordinary comfort. The stark lines were probably something designers would drool over but Spike had never cared for the
stripped down, minimalist look. He shook his head in disapproval. The state of Angelus’ lair was just one more indication that all was not well with his Sire.

It was one thing to live however and wherever when you had to, but a lair was supposed to be a haven. The lairs of Master Vampires were usually adorned with plush rugs, overstuffed cushions and an overall luxury that would put sultans to shame. Time was, Angelus had been no different, taking the finest materials humans could produce as nothing more than his due. Really no point in having immortality if it wasn’t comfortable. When it had been the four of them, those early years after Spike was turned, their lairs had held the luxurious loot of a continent: silks and satins, jewels and furs, nothing that wasn’t the finest quality to be had. All stolen, of course, and nothing they hadn’t abandoned time and again as they moved on, knowing they would pick up more at their next stopping place. Angelus had loved luxury like a cat back then and, like a cat, had viewed it as his birthright.

Other, more pressing matters, had distracted Spike from noticing what was happening with his Sire recently - the slow retreat from everything until Angelus spent days at a time brooding all alone in his empty lair. Vampires weren’t meant to be solitary hermits, it wasn’t in their nature. Days after the fight with the demon at City Hall, Spike suddenly found himself thinking about the way Angelus had thrown himself into the fight with a joyful savagery, a passion that Spike hadn’t seen since his Sire returned from Acathla’s hell dimension.

You could say a lot about Angelus, and Spike had said most of it at one time or another, but his Sire had revealed in being a demon. Whether draining terrified victims, causing mayhem for the sheer joy of it, rutting like an animal with Darla, or seducing his victims with a combination of fear and desire, Angelus had been a Master Vampire at his manipulative, treacherous best a century ago. The soul had changed most of that for Angelus, causing him to view once cherished memories as nightmares of recrimination and guilt, but Spike had seen a glimpse of that passion for eternal life in his Sire as the three of them had fought against the larger, stronger demon.

Thinking back on it, it made him realize how diminished his Sire had seemed lately. Like someone who’d lost all sense of who they were and what their purpose in life, or in this case unlife, was. Spike knew something of how Angelus had spent the better part of the past century, the one in this dimension: a hairsbreadth from madness, feeding off vermin and living like a transient human, lost in guilt after being cursed with his return of his soul. Neither human nor truly vampire, unable to live as either. Angelus had told Spike, one long, boring evening last year, how one glimpse of the “shining, golden perfection” of the Slayer had snapped him out of the long nightmare and convinced him that his purpose in living as a souled vampire was to help the Slayer. It had made Spike want to heave, hearing his Sire rave about how the Powers had returned his soul so that he could help the Slayer fight evil. He hadn’t called Angelus on it at the time since he had been trying to reconnect with his Sire but, in Spike’s opinion, it had been nothing more than a prime example of Angelus thinking with his dick and not his brain. The Powers had arranged the massacre of a gypsy tribe, who in turn cursed a vampire with a soul in revenge, all so that the vampire could help one particular Slayer 100 years later? Bollocks.

Angelus’ faith in that theory had been sorely tried by the fact that doing a mattress dance with that same Slayer had caused him to lose the soul again. To top it off, he’d learned that his return from another dimension hadn’t been an intervention from the Powers, but the result of a teenager with delusions of grandeur working a spell. Not being able to be around the Slayer without worrying about his libido putting his soul at risk, Angelus had slowly retreated into isolation and depression. Recently, Angelus had seemed… deflated somehow, a little lost and uncertain in a way Angelus just wasn’t.
The upshot of this line of thinking was that Spike had stopped by for a long overdue talk with his Sire. Angelus couldn’t do much to help the Slayer, because helping her meant being around her and even Angelus had realized that was a bad idea. It meant he was spending far too much time alone in the mansion, brooding over past sins and how life had done him wrong. Angelus wasn’t interested in his former pursuits, the soul saw to that, but it seemed like he had no purpose at all anymore and that had begun to worry Spike. A vampire who didn’t enjoy unlife was just asking for final death. It was all too easy for even a Master Vampire to be killed when they didn’t want to live more than everyone around them: a moment’s carelessness meant a stake through the heart by something with a bit more drive. In hindsight, now that he’d begun thinking about it, Spike had even wondered if Angelus wasn’t just waiting to greet the dawn one fine morning. Bloody idiot was probably just too righteous to actively try to kill himself but a vampire who let himself get morbid and weak was certainly a passive way of doing it.

His Sire could be a pompous blowhard at times but he was still Spike’s Sire. Brooding over his meaningless unlife wasn’t doing anything for anybody, least of all Angelus, and Spike figured his Sire was long overdue for a good ass kicking to remind him he was a vampire. Even Angelus’ former hobby of killing all vampires was better than this morbid do-nothing shite. Spike didn’t have a lot of use for most other vampires and didn’t really care if Angelus wanted to thin the herd a bit. Anything was better than his Sire sitting around the mansion and feeling sorry for himself. He needed to snap Angelus out of his self-indulgent funk before it turned actively self-destructive.

“Spending way too much time sitting on your arse, Angelus. You need to get out more.”

Admittedly, subtle had never really been his strong suit.

Angelus glared half-heartedly, going stiff with resentment at the comment. “Not your business, Spike.”

“Then who’s is it?” Spike asked, reasonably enough, he thought. If you couldn’t interfere in your family’s affairs then what was the point in having family. “You’ve been moping around ever since you learned there wasn’t some great mythic purpose in you bein’ brought back. You’re just a demon like the rest of us and that’s not good enough for you, is it? The great Angelus has to be a bit more larger-than-life than the rest of us, don’t he?”

Angelus growled, his eyes flaring gold and he stepped towards Spike. “Shut up, Spike.”

“Or what? You’ll go pouting to the Slayer? The Angelus I know would have had me flat on the floor by now.” Spike still leaned against the doorjamb in a deliberately annoying show of disrespect but his whole body was tense with readiness, waiting for Angelus to snap under his prodding.

Angelus shifted to demon features. Finally! “You’re about to find out just how much Angelus is still in me, boy,” he growled waringly.

“Think you can take me, you pathetic poser?” Spike asked mockingly.

Angelus sprang with a roar and Spike’s casual stance vanished. Snarling, he leapt forward to meet Angelus, ducking underneath his Sire’s enraged rush, twisting to avoid the reaching arms and spinning to kick his Sire from behind. His booted foot landed squarely on Angelus’ ass, more by luck than actual design, and the kick propelled Angelus forward until he smashed into the wall.

Angelus turned in a flash, rage suffusing his features and Spike bounced on his toes, waiting for Angelus to rush him again. “That the best you got, soul-boy?” he taunted.
Angelus descended on him with a flurry of blows and Spike danced backwards, ducking and weaving, trying to stay out of Angelus’ reach. His Sire was taller and heavier, if he let Angelus close on him, the fight would be over. Fortunately, he’d provoked Angelus enough that his Sire was operating on pure rage. Angelus never had fought at his best when fury clouded his judgment.

Spike vaulted over the couch and grabbed the fireplace poker, bringing it whistling around to smash into Angelus’ side as his Sire followed him, catching the older vampire in mid-air. The force of the blow dropped Angelus to the floor and Spike pounced, landing on top of Angelus and using the poker to pin him down, bringing it down flat across Angelus’ neck. It wouldn’t cut off necessary oxygen like it would for a human but, with enough pressure, it could actually sever Angelus’ neck, which would be troublesome for his Sire, to say the least.

Leaning his full weight on the metal, Spike waited for Angelus’ struggles to still, glaring down into his Sire’s eyes. When the rage cooled somewhat and Angelus was glaring back at him with nothing more than ordinary anger and hurt pride, Spike judged he was ready to listen.

“You want to be more?” he asked. “Then make yourself more, you pathetic wanker. Stop sitting around waiting for Lady Destiny to arrive at your door and lead you to what she has planned for you. Grab the bitch by the throat and shake her until she gives you what you want.” Spike had never been one for believing in destiny but Angelus seemed to have fallen into that trap. Must be the bloody soul talking.

Angelus just stared up at him silently. Speechless, by god. Good, he must finally be getting through that thick skull. He continued a bit more calmly.

“Slayer’s not the answer to your problems, mate. Find yourself some other goal because she isn’t going to be around for more than an eye-blink anyway. You’re immortal, you moron. Slayer’s not only mortal, she’s got the shelf-life of a head of lettuce. If she’s your only reason for existing, then stake yourself now and get it over with.”

Judging his moment, Spike released the pressure and rolled away quickly, before Angelus could retaliate. He bounced to his feet, moving well out of range, but Angelus just slowly climbed to his feet and didn’t make a move to attack again.

“If you really think you have some great destiny waiting for you, then do something about it. Get up off your ass and fight evil, if that’s what you think your destiny is. Make your unlife count for something. Anything’s better than sitting around here feelin’ sorry for yourself.”

Not giving his Sire a chance to say anything, Spike dropped the poker and spun in a swirl of black leather, heading for the door. He kept a wary ear out for movement from Angelus but heard nothing. Stopping briefly at the door, he looked back. Angelus hadn’t moved, standing uncertainly by the fireplace and looking thoughtful.

“Rumor has it there’s a Naarvahl tribe setting up a den near the day care center on King Street.” Naarvahls were disgusting. Small and vicious, they preyed on the weak and they did it messily. The kind of thing that was sure to attract unwanted attention even from Sunnydale’s severely inadequate police force. “Figured I’d clean it out before they got dug in. Join me?”

For a long moment, he thought Angelus wasn’t going to answer. Then Angelus lifted his head and there was something in his eyes that Spike hadn’t seen in far too long. “Sounds like a plan.”

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Much later, heading home, tired and bloody and nursing dozens of small bites, Spike grinned. It had
been a good fight and Angelus had seemed almost like his old self as they had combined forces to destroy the nest. He hadn’t even scolded Spike for smashing the wretched things against the walls of their nest with a bit more force than strictly necessary to kill them. Like he’d figured, Angelus just needed a reminder that raising hell was fun. So long as it was in a good cause, Angelus could cut loose all he wanted without the bloody soul making him feel guilty.

He’d even agreed to meet Spike for drinks the next night. Spike figured he could easily convince Angelus to patrol the Hellmouth on his own. Slayer didn’t have a monopoly on patrolling for evil after all. Maybe Angelus could find his “destiny” as a champion against evil.

That would probably suit his Sire’s enormous ego to a ‘t’.

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“I’ll kill you for that!”

“For that? Then what were you trying to kill me for before?” The Slayer shot back, her voice filled with mock bafflement.

Spike had added the playground where the bodies of the two “kids” had been found to the list of places in his territory he kept an eye on. He wasn’t really expecting problems there but demons were all for reflected glory, worse than bloody humans about that sort of thing, and he felt it prudent to keep a watchful eye on the place for awhile to make sure no one got any ideas. Judging from the exchange he was overhearing, the Slayer had apparently added it to her patrols as well. Hearing the sounds of battle, Spike detoured towards the playground equipment to watch.

The Slayer was generally worth watching in a fight. She’d improved over the course of the past year and had developed some nice moves and Spike had always appreciated a good fight.

He stopped in the bushes near the small playground and watched in appreciation as the Slayer tossed a vampire onto the merry-go-round. Pity, looked like the fight was almost over, he’d missed the good parts.

Spike shook his head in exasperation as the Slayer held off the death blow to deliver one more quip. Never would learn, that one. Far as she knew, there was no-one around to impress with her wit except her soon-to-be-dust victim, who wasn’t exactly going to be telling anyone about the clever puns his killer had made before he’d been dispatched to final death.

Spike shrugged to himself. Show was over and time for him to be moving on. He tended to avoid the Slayer when their paths crossed at night, their mutual antagonism was good for a laugh but he got enough of that seeing her around Xander. He didn’t need to seek her out for more. Then, too, being seen in casual conversation with the Slayer would raise questions he didn’t particularly want to answer. His Court had long accepted that he and the Slayer had worked out a deal to go their separate ways. Any vampire inclined to question the arrangement had been dusted and it was simply an accepted fact now that the Slayer was useful in keeping the annoying fledglings under control. Her habit of patrolling the graveyards meant she didn’t interfere much with the members of the Court, who weren’t the ones creating the fledges in any case. Still, it wasn’t something he wanted to rub in the face of his Court if it could be avoided.

His thoughts broke off and his eyes narrowed as the vampire’s imminent death unexpectedly became a lot less imminent. The Slayer suddenly seemed dizzy, dropping her guard and stumbling back a wavering step. The vampire seized the advantage, pushing up from his vulnerable position on the merry-go-round and grabbing her with both hands. To Spike’s surprise, the Slayer was sent flying through the air, landing heavily on a picnic table with an audible cry of pain. She tumbled to the
Spike continued to watch in astonishment as the vampire leapt on top of the Slayer, who’d managed
to cling to her stake and was holding it up between them defensively. The vampire grabbed her
hands in both of his, grinning down at her as he forced the stake around until the business end was
pointing at the Slayer. The vampire leaned forward, pressing the stake down towards the Slayer’s
heart.

Spike didn’t realize he’d begun to move until he had crossed half the distance between himself and
the pair so intent on their struggle they didn’t see him approaching. Unbelievably, he watched as the
stake pressed against the Slayer’s chest above her heart, as she struggled desperately to halt the
downward movement.

“Let me know if I’m not doing this right,” the vampire said mockingly, leaning even further over
until his face was only inches from that of the desperate Slayer, who was fighting to keep the stake
from penetrating her heart, making little gasping cries as she struggled.

Spike’s hands closed on the vampire’s arms and he tore the other vampire off the Slayer, throwing
him halfway across the playground.

“Well, since you asked: One - always remember to guard your flank.” Spike snatched the stake out
of the Slayer’s hands and sprinted to meet the other vampire, who was recovering from his shock at
the unexpected attack and springing back to his feet.

“Two - don’t chit chat with your victim unless your kill is certain.” Spike spun in a swirl of black
leather, bringing one leg up and around and sweeping the other vampire off his feet again.

“Three - what kind of a moron uses a stake on a Slayer? Waste of the best blood you’ll never taste,”
he informed the explosion of ash as he brought the borrowed stake down in the center of the
vampire’s chest.

Spike rose to his feet in one easy motion, turning to face the Slayer who was still staggering upright,
looking dizzy and shaken.

“What the hell are you playing at, Slayer?” he asked furiously. “You develop some sort of death
wish recently? Should’ve been able to take that prat down without breaking a sweat.”

“I was regrouping,” Buffy said defensively.

Spike snorted. “If you’d regrouped any further, you would’ve been lunch. Gonna give me a bad
reputation if anyone finds out I’m out saving the Slayer from vampires.”

“I had it under control,” she insisted, but her eyes said she knew the truth. Death had been a
heartbeat away and it was obvious she still felt the chill. She was rubbing at the trickle of blood on
her chest where the stake had broken the skin. She looked white and sick, her eyes locked on the pile
of ash that had so nearly been her own death. She dragged her gaze away from it and looked at
Spike, the fear now under control but the confidence that was so much a part of all successful Slayers
was at a low ebb. “Thanks, Spike,” she said quietly, her voice just a little shaky. “I got a little dizzy, I
think I may be coming down with something.”

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, then Buffy shook herself all over, like a dog shedding
water. Steadier now, she took a deep breath. “I think I’m done patrolling for the night.”

“Good idea.”
She turned and headed off slowly, pulling a new stake and clutching it like a lifeline as she walked off. Spike watched her for a moment, then swore quietly to himself. Slayers were a target for the entirety of their short, violent lives; way too many demons were willing to line up to be killed for a chance at the glory of taking out a Slayer. Sooner or later, one of them always got lucky. Tonight, with the Slayer off her game and shaken by her brush with mortality, she was easy pickings for anyone who saw her. If the Slayer got herself killed, Joyce would never forgive him for letting her walk home alone in this state.

He ran to catch up with her, slowing to walk beside her. Buffy shot him a startled look and he shrugged. “Told Joyce I’d stop by,” he lied.

Buffy nodded, accepting the fiction the way Spike pretended not to notice her carefully hidden relief. They walked to the Slayer’s house in silence but it was an annoyingly comfortable one.
“Master Spike, there is something that may need looking into.”

Spike lifted an inquiring brow. “What?” Jose remained his most reliable lieutenant and his instincts were good. If he thought something was odd, it almost always was.

Jose had been waiting for him when Spike had come down to the factory after Xander had gone to sleep. He’d approached Spike casually, his manner telling Spike it wasn’t anything Jose regarded as a threat, just something he felt should be brought to Spike’s attention.

“Are you familiar with the Sunnydale Arms on Prescott Lane?”

“The old rooming house?” Spike asked, after searching his memory. “Been abandoned for decades. Not even fledges are stupid enough to lair there - too far out and no tunnel access.”

“Three humans are staying there now.” Jose shrugged. “Ordinarily, I would assume it was human business - criminals hiding out or something similar - but the humans were seen buying blood.”

Spike narrowed his eyes at that bit of information. Humans rarely bought blood and most of the time when they did, it meant trouble of one sort or another. Sure sometimes it was something disgusting like someone dusting off an old family recipe for blood pudding, but it wouldn’t hurt to check it out. “Take a couple of the boys and have a look. See if there’s anythin’ I need to know about.” Spike ordered quietly.

“At once, Master Spike.” Jose ducked his head courteously and turned to go, signaling to two other vampires to follow him.

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“My coordination is shot, my strength is gone, and last night I got a bad case of the dizzies and almost let a vamp stake me.”

Buffy’s worried tones carried clearly through the library doors and Xander hesitated, thinking that maybe he should come back later.

“I’m sure it’ll sort itself out.” Giles’ voice was full of hearty reassurance and Xander frowned, wondering why it sounded so false.

“You’re not getting the big picture here, Giles. I… I have no strength. I have no coordination. I throw knives like…”

“Like a girl?”

Xander was listening shamelessly now, the door cracked opened so he didn’t miss anything. Buffy tended to clam up about anything that made her feel vulnerable and this sounded like a biggie. What really surprised him though was Giles’ reaction which seemed way too calm for a Watcher being told his Slayer had lost her powers.

“Like I’m not the Slayer,” Buffy said desperately. “Giles, what’s happening to me?”

“As you yourself have said, Buffy. It’s most likely nothing more than that you are coming down with a bad flu bug. Just take it easy for the next couple of days until you are yourself again.”
Well, that made sense. Xander remembered Spike having to take Buffy down last year before she would agree to not patrol while she was sick. If it was just the flu, of course Giles wasn’t particularly worried. He was quietly easing the door closed, intending to leave, when Buffy spoke again, sounding lost.

“What if this is some kind of sign that my calling is a wrong number? If I’m not the Slayer, what am I? Giles, I can’t just be a normal girl anymore. I’ve seen too much.”

Forgetting his good intentions, ok, his desire not to be caught eavesdropping, Xander reversed direction, pushing the door open hard. “Hey, on behalf of normal people everywhere, thanks for the vote of confidence,” he snapped.

Buffy turned to glare at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked crossly.

“It means that some of us manage to contribute even if we’re just boring, normal guys with no special talents. If you think that you’re worthless unless you have super-powered strength and speed, well, then you probably are.”

“Xander…”

“No, Giles. As a member of the worthless ‘normals’ she’s so afraid of becoming, I’m kind of offended. You should be too. You’re just an ordinary guy and you manage to fight evil most days of the week. I’ve managed to stay alive and even help out some and I’m just a normal guy. Without us normal guys, super-powered Buffy here would be dead - remember the zombies?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Buffy actually looked kind of embarrassed.

“I hope not but it’s what you said.” Xander softened, knowing he was over-reacting, but she’d hit a sore spot. He worried sometimes that Spike would get bored with his ordinary, human lover and move on. As the lover who came after the gorgeous, insane vampire seer lover, he admittedly had some issues about being just normal.

“I thought you were the one who was always complaining about not getting to be a normal girl?” he asked. “Maybe this is a ‘careful what you wish for’ thing.”

He’d really meant that to come out cheerful but somehow it didn’t. Buffy just looked more depressed, slumping miserably in her chair.

Giles intervened, thank god, because Xander was coming up empty on nice things to say. “Buffy, I assure you, given time we’ll get to the bottom of, of whatever’s causing this… anomaly. In any case, we should wait a few days and see what develops. It is still most likely just a bad flu bug.”

“If you want, we could research this afternoon and see if we can find anything,” Xander offered. Giles was probably right and whatever was happening was just some sort of fluke but he could see that Buffy was wigging out.

A research session would be a good chance to try and hook Oz back into things as well. Oz had pulled one of his vanishing acts after Willow left town and hadn’t been seen at school for several days. He was back now but even quieter than usual, spending most of his time hiding out in the music rooms.

“Thanks, guys.” Buffy looked a little brighter.

“Let’s meet back here after our last classes and see if we can find anything.” That would given him time to track Oz down and persuade him to join them.
Jose had returned just before dawn with a report. The humans at the Sunnydale Arms were holding a vampire prisoner and doing some very odd work on the place - bricking up doors and windows. Jose had also reported with faint distaste that the vampire appeared to have no control at all: screaming and kicking at the walls at regular intervals. The situation was odd enough that Spike had gone to check it out for himself immediately after sunset.

Xander was at school researching whatever had caused the Slayer’s dizzy spell last night. He’d called and told Spike he would be home late. Apparently, the Slayer had something more seriously wrong than a brief spot of dizziness. Her Slayer abilities were gone and she was freaking out over it.

Spike had cheerfully told Xander not to work too hard on solving the problem, which made Xander laugh. After hanging up, Spike decided to head out as soon as the sun was down to find out what was going on at the Sunnydale Arms. Something about the timing of the Slayer’s problems and these humans holding a vampire prisoner had him on edge. Seemed a bit too much of a coincidence.

Prowling around the run-down boarding house, Spike’s suspicions went into high gear. The two humans inside were complaining about the living conditions and the noise their prisoner was making. They were both clearly terrified of their vampire prisoner, despite the fact that Spike could hear chains rattling every time the vampire began one of its frequent, noisy struggles. He heard them mention feeding the vampire and the vampire yelling for pills.

These were not people out for a lark, or a game of torture the vampire, such as humans in the know occasionally played. These people were deadly serious about whatever it was they were doing.

Fading into the shadows, Spike decided to stop by Angelus’ place. His Sire had been patrolling fairly regularly on his own recently and might have heard something.

Angelus hadn’t heard anything and insisted on visiting the boarding house to see for himself. Spike went along, puzzled enough by the situation that he didn’t mind taking another look.

The third human was there this time and was clearly in charge of the other two. Spike and Angel overheard him telling the other two that everything was in order and that “the Slayer’s preparation is nearly complete.”

Angelus growled at that and Spike yanked him away from the window before he gave their position away. Retreating some distance from the boarding house, Spike filled Angel in on the Slayer’s current weakness and that no one knew what was causing it.

“I’ll lay you money those are Council members,” Angelus said, glaring in the direction of the boarding house. “Nothing else makes any sense.”

“Yeah,” Spike agreed. “Probably they’re the reason the Slayer isn’t feeling herself.”

“Giles must be in on it.”

That surprised Spike, given the Watcher’s obvious affection for his charge. Thinking it over, he realized that Angelus was probably right. Who else could be “preparing” the Slayer? “If the Watcher’s involved,” he said slowly, “can’t believe he means her to come to harm.”

“Maybe not deliberately, but I don’t like the smell of this.”
Spike couldn’t disagree. This whole set-up felt wrong, underhanded and sly. Not really what he’d come to expect from Rupert.

“I’m going to talk to Giles about what’s going on,” Angelus announced.

Spike rolled his eyes. “Brilliant. Great plan. Let’s send the person who spent hours torturing him to tell the Watcher he’s not doing his job properly. While you’re at it, why don’t you criticize his love life as well. He’s sure to appreciate it since you’re the one screwed that up for him in truly spectacular fashion.”

Angelus looked guilt-stricken at the reminder and sullen, which meant he agreed but was too stubborn to admit it. Mostly to keep Angelus’ big feet out of it, Spike finished with a sigh. “I’ll go talk to the Watcher and find out the skinny. You keep an eye on our friends here until I get back.”

Not waiting for Angelus’ agreement, his Sire was still touchy about taking orders from him but tended to do what he said as long as he didn’t have to admit he was doing it, Spike headed for the Watcher’s apartment. It was late enough that the human must have headed home by now.

The Watcher swung the apartment door open, looking startled to see Spike. “Hello, Spike,” he greeted cautiously. Spike was amused that the Watcher didn’t invite him in. Still too cautious to give a vampire an invite it seemed.

“Watcher,” Spike nodded coolly. “Want to tell me what the bloody hell you’re playin’ at?”

“I… I don’t know what you mean, Spike.” The Watcher would never make a poker player, his eyes shifted away nervously as he answered.

“Sunnydale Arms mean anythin’ to you?” Spike asked pointedly.

“The… the old rooming house?” Giles sighed, giving up the game when Spike just stared at him with cold eyes. “How did you find out?”

“Some of the boys reported something was up. I do keep an eye on things in my territory, you know.” Spike found it irritating that the Watcher had obviously not considered the little plot would draw attention.

“Ah. Of course.” Spike was surprised when the Watcher pushed the door all the way open. “Come in, Spike.” Eyebrows raised, Spike stepped inside, waiting as the Watcher closed the door behind him and gestured for Spike to follow him into the living room area. He sat down heavily on the couch, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes, looking immensely troubled. “It’s nothing that should concern you,” he said. “It will all be over in a couple more days.”

Spike remained standing. “What will be over?” he asked pointedly.

“It’s called the Cruciamentum. It’s a test for the Slayer. It is given to every Slayer who reaches her 18th birthday.”

Spike listened in disbelief as the Watcher outlined the test: rendering the Slayer powerless and locking them in with a vampire. If the Slayer lived, she passed the test.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” was his only comment when Giles finished.

“Sometimes I wonder.” The Watcher rested his head in his hands, looking unutterably weary. “It’s
traditional, the Council has been conducting the test for centuries."

“The rack was a tradition for centuries, doesn’t stop you humans from getting pissy when you find a vampire still using one.” Spike knew that from personal experience. Angelus and Darla had found one in a castle outside Budapest, dusted it off and played with it for two weeks before the locals found out. They’d had to leave town hastily to avoid the humans who took issue with Angelus’ toy. “What percentage of Slayers generally survive this test?” he asked curiously.

“About half,” Giles answered, almost inaudibly.

Spike cocked his head. Something was off here. “Slayers have a short life span anyway. Who cares if they’re up to snuff or not? They’re tested every time they go up against a vampire. If they live, they pass. If not, you get a new Slayer, hopefully a better one,” he commented, thinking out loud. Their own people putting their lives doubly at risk made no sense at all.

“In matters of tradition and protocol, I must answer to the Council” Giles responded rather defensively. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Love a good Nuremberg defense as much as the next bloke,” Spike began, enjoying the Watcher’s flinch at the comparison. Fishing out a cigarette, he lit up, taking a long drag as the pieces suddenly clicked together in his head in a way that made all too much sense.

“Let me guess, the real purpose of the test is to eliminate Slayers who are getting a bit independent and maybe just a little less manageable, now they’re adults.”

Giles looked up sharply. “Of course not!”

“Don’t kid yourself, Watcher. Otherwise you’re just setting up an unequal fight: weakening the Slayer then pitting her against an opponent who can kill her on a good day. If you were truly testing her mettle, you’d tell her what was going on, give her a fighting chance. This way, you send the Slayer into battle off balance and unready. Don’t see how anyone would think that’s a fair test.”

The Watcher looked sick, as if he’d never questioned the rationale behind the test before. Probably hadn’t. Members of secret societies always thought that, once they were in, they were all the way in. Never thought about the possibility of there being layers of membership and agendas they were never told about.

Idiots.

More than a minute passed in silence. The Watcher appeared lost in thought, ignoring Spike as he stood smoking in the middle of the apartment, something Spike was sure the Watcher would have had plenty to say about under other circumstances. Finally, the Watcher seemed to come to a decision and he looked at Spike with grim, determined eyes.

“Would you be willing to do me a favor, Spike?”

Angelus had not been thrilled when Spike had returned to the boarding house and told him what was going on.

“Spike, we have to kill him. Buffy won’t be able to handle him without her Slayer abilities.”

“Sadly enough, I agree with you. Normally, I’m pretty much a live and let unlive kind of vampire, but this git has conspicuous written all over him. We need to take him out before half the town is
Spike wasn’t about to admit that he’d made a deal with the Watcher to kill the Council’s vampire. He had a reputation after all. He’d already decided to take this vampire out from the moment he’d seen him earlier. It was the principle of the thing. Humans shouldn’t use vampires for their own purposes and, as he’d said to Angelus, this vampire was just too conspicuous to leave running around.

Spike wondered idly what idiot had turned the vampire. Admittedly, it was something he might have done himself once upon a time. Not as a childe, no, this thing would never make a childe - too out of control, too over-the-top insane to ever learn obedience. Still, before he’d been responsible for a territory, he might have thought it a laugh to turn this thing and sit back and watch the mayhem. With a nostalgic smile for the wild young vampire he’d been, Spike forced himself back to business.

The Watcher had given Spike one of his beautiful heavy-duty crossbows for the job, asking him to take the vampire out from a distance and to avoid the Council members guarding him, if possible. He’d taken the weapon without protest, even though he had no intention of using it - the Watcher clearly wasn’t thinking when he gave it to Spike. Yes, the weapon was capable of powering straight through the walls of the old boarding house - it had been designed to punch through a coat of armor, after all - but there was no way to aim it properly unless he could see the target.

Spike caressed the smooth-grained finish of the weapon as he crouched silently outside the old boarding house with Angelus. He’d known from the moment the Watcher handed it to him that the Watcher was not getting the weapon back. It practically sang of death. Beautiful weapons that man had, Spike thought, not for the first time. ‘Sides, the Watcher owed him for helping to clean up this little mess.

The Watcher had taken himself off to confess to the Slayer, loading up a bag of weapons and planning on guarding the Slayer’s house overnight in case the Council decided to come for the Slayer once things started to go wrong.

Returning to the boarding house, he and Angelus had settled in, waiting for things to quiet down a bit. One of the humans was off on some errand, leaving two inside. The vampire inside finally quieted down and one of the remaining humans settled onto a cot for a nap.

Nodding their readiness to each other, Angelus and Spike separated, approaching the front and rear doors simultaneously. Angelus’ quiet whistle signaled he was in position and Spike lifted his booted foot, slamming it into the door.

The old lock gave way easily, dry wood splintering under the force of his kick and Spike stepped through, hearing Angelus entering from the rear in another noisy crash of snapping wood. Spike was closer to the imprisoned vampire and he moved swiftly towards the area where all the kicking and screaming had been coming from. A heavily fortified door caught his eye and he forced it open, revealing a vampire in a… Spike blinked. In a straightjacket, chained to the reinforced wall of what had once been a good size closet.

“Well, isn’t this nice.” The vampire’s eyes were cloudy with drugs, but even that couldn’t dim the mad intensity of his stare. Dru’s insanity had mostly been a soft-focused retreat from an unbearable world, into a place where stars and dolls talked to her with the wisdom of sages. But some nights, her eyes had glittered with this same mad hatred of everything. Those had been the nights when nothing but bloody mayhem would satisfy her, when she gave free rein to the violence and chaos surging inside, and they had killed over and over again until she was finally appeased through exhaustion.

Spike had fully intended to simply stake the mad vampire immediately but now he found he was strangely reluctant to do so. Throwing a quick glance around the room, he spied an ax leaning
against the wall and stepped over to it. From the sounds, Angelus had taken down the human in the kitchen and was now - arguing? with the second human. Spike shook his head, grinning to himself. They each had their own form of insanity.

Two quick sweeps with the ax freed the huge vampire, who immediately began tearing his way out of the straightjacket. Spike stepped back, leaving him to it and pulled a stake from a pocket inside his duster. When the vampire was free, letting the rags of the straightjacket fall to the ground, Spike tossed the stake to him.

“If you kill me, well, you’ll still have to go through my Sire,” he said. “But at least you’ll be one step closer to free.”

“We’re playing your games now?” the vampire asked, moving forward and kicking the remnants of the straightjacket to one side.

“You could say that.”

“Who are you?”

“Just someone who enjoys throwing a spanner into the works,” Spike answered flippantly.

The vampire grinned toothily at him, beginning to circle him cautiously, testing him, surprising Spike who had expected this guy to be a bit more of the lunge immediately type of fighter. He grinned wolfishly back at the larger vampire, shifting his own position cautiously. The other vampire was much bigger than Spike, he’d need to be careful about getting within his reach.

Spike feinted, then spun in the opposite direction, bringing his leg around in a vicious kick that caught the larger vampire in the side. To his surprise, the other vampire absorbed the blow, hardly moving at all under the force of it. Spike followed the kick with a punch, then ducked as the other vampire swung back at him.

“Spike, what are you doing?” Angelus spoke from the doorway and Spike used the distraction to spin away from vampire.

“Bit busy, Angelus. Have a seat,” he snapped, not taking his eyes off the vampire, who was also ignoring Angelus after the first startled jerk.

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Piss off. You take care of the humans?” Spike ducked a massive haymaker and spun away again, launching a 2-footed kick at the vampire. It landed solidly, sending him sprawling and he clung to Spike’s legs as he went down, almost bringing Spike down with him. Spike swore and kicked free, stumbling back ungracefully and losing the chance to follow through while the other was still down.

“They’re tied up in the kitchen,” Angelus answered impatiently. “Do you need some help?”

Spike snarled. “Need you to stop talking while I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Fine. Just hurry up.” Angelus settled against the wall in a huff.

Angelus out of his hair, Spike let himself get caught up in the familiar rhythm of parry, attack, dodge, retreat. The other vampire was significantly bigger and stronger than Spike but not as quick or agile. Spike would bet he didn’t have a lot of stamina, either.

Twice the other vampire sent Spike crashing into the wall but both times Spike was able to roll to his
feet before he could follow through. In turn, Spike kept him moving, raining blow after blow down on his bigger opponent, blows that staggered the other vampire even if they didn’t knock him off his feet. The end of the fight came unexpectedly.

The vampire suddenly screamed in agony and clutched at his head, ignoring Spike, who stopped in mid-attack, staring in astonishment. Tearing at his hair and moaning, the vampire staggered away blindly, heading towards the closet where he’d been kept prisoner.

“What the…?”

“Spike, are you through yet?”

“Guess so,” he answered absently, watching as the other vampire fumbled for a bottle of pills, tearing open the lid and swallowing the entire bottle.

There was a twang and the distinct whirring sound of a crossbow bolt splitting the air and the vampire was looking down in surprise at the bolt that had buried itself in his heart.

Spike turned around. “That’s my crossbow,” he objected mildly hearing the explosion of dust behind him.

Angelus tossed it to him. “Then don’t leave it sitting around. Let’s get out of here.”

“What was all that talk I heard back there? You and the human,” Spike asked curiously as they left.

“That was Quentin Travers,” Angelus answered, not hiding his disgust. “He and I had a few words about this test of his.”

“Did you? How did that go?”

“Hypocritical, opinionated, self-righteous old fart. Didn’t see anything wrong with what he was doing. Kept going on about how I was a vampire and it was none of my business.”

“Imagine that.” Spike was amused by Angelus’ outrage. “A member of the Watcher’s Council not approving of vampires.”
Chapter 30

Xander mumbled sleepily as Spike slid under the covers shortly before dawn. Long used to Spike’s early morning returns, he didn’t wake up, just stirred and shifted position as Spike wrapped himself around the living warmth of his lover.

Sighing happily, Spike snuggled close. Xander’s warm body in their bed was a never ending source of pleasure. Even if they didn’t have sex nearly as often as Spike had been used to or would like - human stamina simply wasn’t up to vampire standards, plus Xander’s foolish insistence on leading a normal, high school life cut seriously into their hours together - his boy’s mere presence in the bed, even unconscious, gave warmth and a sense of home to the lair.

Spike didn’t let himself fall asleep as he lay there listening to the comforting sound of Xander’s heartbeat. He waited patiently, sensing the approaching daylight from behind the light-proof blinds and hearing the small movements as the last of the vampires settled in for the day on the floors above and below, waiting for Xander’s normal waking time so they could talk.

“Giles did what?”

Spike sighed. He’d already explained once but Xander still looked like he couldn’t believe his ears. “You heard me, pet.” He took a long drink of the beer he’d snagged when he’d realized this needed to be an awake and out of bed conversation.

“But we spent all that time researching what was wrong,” Xander protested. “And Giles kept saying it was just the flu.”

“He lied. Says he was under orders from the Council,” Spike shrugged. “Not excusin’ him, luv, because he was an idiot for not taking two minutes to think about what he was getting himself involved in. But tests are part of most occupations and some of ’em are dangerous. Watcher just got followin’ the party line and didn’t think about what he was actually doin’.”

Xander looked at him curiously. “You don’t have a problem with him lying to Buffy like that?”

Spike cocked one eyebrow at him. “If he’d put you in danger, you can believe I’d’ve had more than words with him. As it is,” he shrugged again. “He pulled out of it before anything went seriously wrong so I’m not fussing. Just thought you should know what happened before you saw him or the Slayer again. Bound to be a sore point between them, no sense in you getting in the middle by mistake because you don’t know what’s happening.”

“Thanks,” Xander said wryly. “I appreciate the heads up.”

“Less I can persuade you to join me,” Spike shot him an ever-hopeful lecherous look, “I’m going to sleep.”

Xander shook his head. “No, I’ll go to school.” He kissed Spike absently and headed for the bathroom as Spike padded barefoot back to the bedroom.

“What do you mean ‘you’ve been fired’?”
Xander looked quickly at Buffy, who was studying her folded hands with every appearance of interest, then at Oz, who looked as surprised as Oz ever did. When Giles had asked them all to stop by the library after school, this hadn’t been what he’d been expecting.

Xander had avoided the library all day, still not sure what he thought about Giles lying to them, about him actively helping with a test that could easily have gotten Buffy killed. Yeah, he could appreciate the need for skills testing, but there was a difference between a pop quiz in math and your Watcher arranging it so you lost your Slayer powers so you could prove you were good enough to kill a vampire using only normal human strength even while you were freaking out because everything you thought you knew about yourself was suddenly wrong.

How had Giles arranged for Buffy to lose her powers anyway? Spike hadn’t known and Xander wasn’t sure he wanted to ask. Part of him couldn’t help thinking the whole thing was a bit too much like what Willow had done to him. It made him uncomfortable to think about the parallels and he’d been worried about what he would do if Buffy was angry with Giles and wanting his support against Giles. It would be pretty damn hypocritical of him to say everything was ok and he would stand by Giles no matter what, especially when it didn’t seem like Giles had really had any better motives than Willow.

So, he’d reluctantly trailed into the library, thinking Giles wanted to explain what had happened and hoping he’d hear something that would make the whole episode sit better. Instead, Giles had dropped a completely different bombshell on them. Well, on him and Oz, Buffy obviously had already heard it.

“I’m afraid the Council is less than happy with my performance as Buffy’s Watcher, particularly when Mr. Travers found himself on the receiving end of a lecture from Angel on the topic of Slayer tests.”

Buffy’s lips twitched slightly, obviously pleased that Angel had gotten in the Council’s face in her defense. Xander hadn’t heard about that from Spike, just about the half-baked test the Council had been trying to run.

“The Council will be sending another Watcher to take my place. However, I wanted to assure you all that I am not going anywhere. Xander, I am hoping you will still continue your demon studies with me. Oz, you have been of tremendous help in a number of ways and I want you to know you are always welcome in the library, whether at the full moon or any other time.”

Oz nodded, looking pleased but troubled, not saying anything.

Xander was still stuck on the whole being fired part of the conversation. “Can’t we do something about it? Buffy? Do you want another Watcher?” Xander couldn’t believe she did but she wasn’t saying anything.

“Of course not,” Buffy said quietly. “The Council didn’t give me a choice.”

“I’m afraid that, traditionally, Slayers are not given any input into who their Watcher is,” Giles told him.

“That bites.”

“Big time,” Buffy agreed. “The only good news is that Giles invalidated the test by telling me about it and then Angel killed their test vampire, and apparently they don’t have a spare handy.” She smiled, obviously pleased that the test had fizzled before it got anywhere.
“They can’t find a vampire on the Hellmouth?” Xander asked disbelievingly, temporarily sidetracked.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Giles said. “They were not appreciative of the fact that I disclosed their presence to two Master Vampires. I’m not sure if they are more upset by the fact that they believe I put their lives in danger or because I exposed Council secrets to vampires.” His eyes gleamed with malicious amusement for a moment, although he seemed to be trying to hide it. “In any case, they felt I was a poor influence on the Slayer.”

Buffy made a disgusted sound at that idea and Xander could tell that everything was good between her and Giles. Which meant he didn’t have to choose sides, and if Buffy was ok with whatever Giles had actually done, Xander probably didn’t have any right to take issue with it. Which was an incredible relief. Having lost Willow, he really couldn’t bear to lose Giles as well.

“In the meantime, I suggest we all just carry on normally,” Giles suggested.

Buffy stood up. “Well, I’m off patrol for another night, so I think I’m going to go home.”

“Want a lift?” Oz offered quietly.

“Thanks, Oz.”

They left together, and Xander lingered behind. “Giles?”

“Yes, Xander?”

“Are you ok?”

Giles gave him a quick smile. “I’m fine, Xander. Being fired is rather a blow to one’s ego but I’m proud that it was because I tried to stop something that I should never have become involved with at all. My biggest regret is that I ever agreed to cooperate with the test to begin with.” The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes but that was hardly surprising. “Please thank Spike for me, will you?”

“For killing the vampire?”

“Among other things.” Giles answered enigmatically. He had a feeling Giles wouldn’t explain even if he asked, so he let it go. “See you tomorrow, Giles.”

“Good night, Xander.”

Xander looked back once as he walked out the doors. Giles stood in the center of the room, gazing up at the upper stacks, looking tired and a little lost. Xander looked away quickly, letting the door close quietly behind him.

Strange that Giles should look like he was carrying the weight of the world now, when he’d just been relieved of his responsibilities.

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Despite his misgivings, nothing really changed over the course of the next week or so. Buffy got her powers back and went back to patrolling regularly. She and Xander and Oz were spending more time together lately. Buffy and Oz were both still missing Willow but they couldn’t seem to talk about her to each other. With Xander there, they had an excuse not to talk about her and the three of them were getting along well. He and Oz had been friends for a long time, and Buffy seemed to be adapting to their humor, poking fun at their off-the-wall debates about science fiction trivia, and
dragging them to school events. Buffy and he spent some time studying together and she even joined him in some of his demon study sessions with Giles. Xander kind of thought it was to help Giles through his initial shock over not being officially her Watcher anymore, but no new Watcher had shown up, so it was easy for them to ignore Giles’ firing. Buffy still checked with Giles for patrol assignments, although he frankly admitted he had less information for her now that he wasn’t officially her Watcher anymore. Apparently he’d gotten a fair bit of his information through Council sources which were all refusing to help him now.

Weirdly, Spike and Buffy met on patrol once or twice and occasionally fought side by side. Spike glossed over it, saying it was just a coincidence, the Slayer horning in on a good fight, but Xander was glad that they were getting to the point where they hardly even insulted each other any more, except sort of automatically - like two siblings who liked each other but were so used to bickering they couldn’t help themselves.

It was a bit of a shock in all this quiet getting along when the letter arrived.

It came nearly a month after Willow had left, sent to him in care of Giles who handed it to Xander without a word. Staring at the envelope with its familiar handwriting, aware of Giles’ sympathetic gaze, Xander realized that Willow didn’t know his address. She’d never even asked. Why that should cause such mixed feelings after all this time, he had no idea.

Leaving the library abruptly, he’d seriously considered just throwing the letter out without reading it. Unable to make up his mind, he’d stuffed it into the back of his locker and spent the next several days trying to pretend it didn’t exist. He’d finally opened it after reminding himself that Willow was going to be back someday and it would probably be a good thing to have some idea of who Willow was now.

Reading the letter hadn’t answered the question and it rattled him badly. The eight pages in Willow’s familiar handwriting hadn’t asked for forgiveness, or tried to explain or justify what she had done. Instead, Willow had written about the English countryside and how different their cool, misty spring was from California. She’d written about the members of the coven, awe and respect in every word for how such powerful people could be so down-to-earth and ordinary; how they’d returned Amy to human form and the two of them were now studying magic together. She’d written about how much she was learning and how much she missed everyone in Sunnydale. And she’d written about Jesse, how she’d been thinking about him and how much she missed him: his laughter and his solid presence in their lives, his desperate, hopeless pursuit of Cordelia sophomore year, forever forsaking his status as Vice President of the ‘We hate Cordelia’ club they’d briefly formed in second grade after a particularly devastating exchange in which Cordelia had successfully humiliated all three of them in front of the entire class.

Reading the letter, Xander had found himself smiling, remembering that afternoon at Jesse’s house. Willow had proposed the club, nominated the two of them as officers - taking the presidency for herself because neither of them would take it - and drafted a motto and a mission statement before Xander and Jesse had even realized what was happening. They’d never met formally as a club, it had been a private joke between them for years, their shield against Queen C.

In those few pages, Willow talked more about Jesse than she had since he died and something inside Xander - a tight knot he hadn’t even been aware was there - melted. All of his problems with Willow had started with Jesse’s death; a long and twisted road that had led to places neither of them could have foreseen when Xander lost himself in his grief and Willow buried her own grief in denial.

Even after re-reading the letter three times, Xander still wasn’t sure how Willow had managed to convey that she understood that what she’d done was too big for an apology, that a casual “I’m
“sorry” wouldn’t mean anything. It wasn’t even that she was ignoring it, it was almost as if she was simply trying to re-open communications between them before they could even begin to talk about what had happened.

Xander hadn’t known what to do, but he desperately needed to talk to someone about the letter. Somehow, Oz was the logical candidate. Xander was sure he would be better than either Buffy or Spike at being honest about Willow. Oz loved her but he also saw her with clearer eyes than either Buffy or Spike.

He’d tracked Oz down in the music rooms, as usual. He knocked quietly and Oz looked up and smiled, waving him in. Xander opened the door and took a seat, not saying anything. Oz started playing again, something quiet and sad, as a lot of his music was these days. Xander sat and listened, letting the notes wash over him, enjoying Oz’s quiet, undemanding presence.

“I heard from Willow,” he said finally, after sitting silently for a long time. Oz was great that way. He could wait forever until you were ready to speak.

“Me too.” Oz stopped playing but his hands still caressed the guitar, as if he was drawing strength from it. “Sounds like things are going well.”

“It surprised me. I didn’t think anything could ever make me forgive her but it was like hearing from the Willow of two years ago.” Xander rested his chin on his folded arms. “It wasn’t so much what she said, it was more the way she said it.”

Oz seemed to get what he was trying to say. “I think the coven has been good for her.”

“Did you get a chance to meet Maggie Whatshername, from the coven?”

Oz shook his head. “She was this really great old lady. She said she got Willow to agree to go to England by doing something that made Willow look at herself and really see herself.” Xander had thought about that a lot over the past few weeks. It sounded like a cool, but really scary spell. He wasn’t sure he’d want one done on himself.

“For the first time, I think maybe there’s hope.”

Oz was quiet for a long time. “I miss her. All the time.” The quiet declaration didn’t surprise Xander. He didn’t talk about her much these days, but it was like Oz couldn’t get over Willow not being there, like her absence had left a wound that was refusing to heal.

Oz turned his head and looked at Xander. “If she’s found a way back to the person she used to be, I still want to be with her.”

“If she’s Willow again, maybe she and I could learn to be friends again.” Xander was surprised to find he meant it.

They sat in the room for a long time, lost in thought, as Oz’s hands plucked soft, random chords on the guitar.

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“Mr. Spike, there’s a rather troubling situation developing that I thought you might be willing to help me with.”
“PTA giving you lip?” Spike asked flippantly. The summons to the Mayor’s office - and despite the polite request of the nervous human minion who’d presented himself at Court as per their agreement, it had been a summons - had been a surprise. Enough time had passed without a word from the Mayor that Spike had thought the Mayor had decided that Spike wasn’t going to be useful to him. Given that the Mayor had found Trick useful, Spike wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or insulted by that judgment, but he’d pretty much forgotten about the Mayor entirely.

Hopefully, he wasn’t about to regret that oversight.

“No, I have a very good working relationship with the school board,” the Mayor answered with that weird genial sincerity of his. “This is more an under-the-table sort of problem. Something that needs unofficial handling.”

“What might that be?” Spike shoved his hands in his pockets and concentrated on looking bored, not wanting to give away exactly how curious he really was.

The Mayor rested his elbows on the desk, bringing his steepled fingers to his pursed lips. “I have it on rather good authority that the Sisterhood of Jhe is in town and are hoping to open the Hellmouth.”

“Never heard of them.” Despite his casual answer, Spike tensed. Anything that wanted to open the Hellmouth was bad news on an apocalyptic scale.

“That’s not surprising - they’re a rather obscure cult. They exist solely to bring about the world’s destruction. Very single minded about it.” The Mayor shook his head disapprovingly. “In any case, I have plans for this coming year and don’t really want the Hellmouth opened just now. I was hoping you could help me with that.” He smiled brightly at Spike.

Spike lifted his scarred eyebrow, staring at the Mayor challengingly. “What’s in it for me?”

“Really, Mr. Spike, on this occasion, I think our interests coincide. You’re friends with a number of the children at the school. If the Hellmouth opens, it does so in the middle of that library those children spend so much time in. It could get rather messy.” He let a beat go pass before adding pointedly: “It would be a shame if any of those children, particularly one of the less… unusual of them, were hurt. Even killed.” The pleasant smile suddenly seemed very shark-like.

Spike worked hard to control his reaction to the oblique threat to Xander. Although it was clear the Mayor had a lot of information about Spike and Xander and the group at the school, still it would be an amateur’s mistake to confirm anything by letting himself react. “Plans for this year?” he countered.

“This and that,” the Mayor replied evasively. “Being Master of the Hellmouth doesn’t mean much if the town doesn’t exist anymore, Mr. Spike.”

“Neither does being Mayor.”

“You see? Common interests. Which is why I was hoping you would see what you could do about these demons.” The Mayor’s toothy grin was back. “After all, as Master of the Hellmouth, they do fall within your jurisdiction.”

“What do you know about them?”

The Mayor pressed the call button. “Alan has a complete file for you.” He rose to his feet, extending a hand, which Spike ignored. “I appreciate it, Mr. Spike. I just knew you were the right man - so to speak - for the job. The Sisterhood has quite the reputation, they are a feisty bunch I understand, but I’m sure you’re more than up to the challenge.”
Somehow Spike found himself ushered out of the office, a thin file of papers pressed into his hand by the flunky in the outer office.

Great, he’d just accepted an assignment from the Mayor.
Chapter 31

Spike leaned tiredly against the cave wall, letting the ax he was carrying drop to his side. “Bloody, fucking hell,” he complained. “These bitches don’t know when to quit.”

Across the dimly lit cave, Angelus was holding up his own section of wall. “They weren’t so tough,” he disagreed, despite the blood dripping down his thigh.

He and Angelus had gone to the cave indicated in the Mayor’s information and found three demons, all females with grey skin, red eyes, pointed ears and multiple horns on their foreheads. They hadn’t seemed like anything special but they were amazing fighters: tough and strong and vicious. Spike swore, looking down at the tattered sleeve of his duster where one of the demons had shredded the leather with her claws, the long nails slicing through the leather like paper, digging into his upper arm and leaving four long tears that were still oozing blood.

He straightened up, kicking at the demon’s corpse for the disrespect to his beloved coat and looked at his Sire. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” He badly needed blood to help heal the injuries which were throbbing painfully. Angelus clearly needed some as well - he was limping heavily, one of the demons had torn his thigh open even as Angelus had buried a knife in her chest.

“You said there were more of these?” Angelus asked.

“Yeah. Supposed to be about a dozen running around.” After a pause, Spike said grudgingly. “This was the only place I knew they were holed up. I’ll see if the Watcher knows anything. Be embarrassing if these bitches got the Hellmouth open while we’re still running around lookin’ for them.”

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Xander stretched and considered his options, finally deciding on shade over sun. He crossed the courtyard to the enormous old tree that he frequently ate lunch under and stretched out in the dappled shade under its branches, taking a break from the increasingly scary research they’d been for most of the day.

Spike had given him a packet of information to pass on to Giles and asked him to see if Giles knew anything about a group of demons called the Sisterhood of Jhe. Giles had flipped through the information the Mayor had given Spike, then gone through it all again more slowly, looking very disturbed. He’d immediately begun pulling out his own books and had quickly found several alarming references to the Sisterhood that corroborated the Mayor’s information.

Sitting down heavily, Giles had looked at Xander bleakly. “Would you mind finding Buffy and bringing her here immediately?” he’d asked.

Xander knew Spike was worried about these demons as well, so he simply nodded, not asking any questions, and hurried out. Buffy was at her locker and willingly followed Xander back to the library, where the librarian filled her in on the Sisterhood and their plan to open the Hellmouth.

They spent most of the day in the library, Oz joining them, reading through the books Giles pulled, finding numerous references to the Sisterhood, although there wasn’t a lot of detail to most of them. Giles had spent over an hour on the phone in his office, emerging frustrated and angry to tell them that the Council was refusing to take his calls, and most of his other sources wouldn’t talk to him. “Idiots,” he snarled. “As if I would call them for anything less than an apocalypse.”
Buffy looked up from a delightful account of how the Sisterhood liked to celebrate their victories by eating the bodies of their opponents. “It’s apocalypse bad?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so. Opening the Hellmouth will unleash untold numbers of demons on earth. Eventually, they will overwhelm humanity and rule the earth.”

“I’m voting no, personally,” Buffy said grimly, opening another book with uncharacteristic dedication. “Really not wanting to see what would happen if the Hellmouth opens.”

By mid-afternoon, Xander was tired and the print was swimming until he could barely read it. He arbitrarily proclaimed it was time for a break, Buffy agreeing eagerly. She and Giles had gone off to spar, and Oz had gone to the music rooms, but Xander just wanted to go outside for awhile. So here he was, stretched out under a tree, enjoying the light breeze tossing the leaves and shifting the sunshine-and-shade patterns on the grass.

Days like this, when the weather was perfect: warm and sunny, with a slight breeze moving the air, he sometimes ached for the fact that Spike would never be able to sit outside with him, lazy and content in the warm sunlight, enjoying the pleasure to be had in daylight.

“I’m sorry, all right? It was an accident.”

Hearing the nervous, stammering voice near by, Xander rolled lazily onto his side to see what was happening. Jonathan Levinson was backing away from Jack O’Toole, who was looking dangerous and seriously pissed off. Of course, Jack almost always looked like that. Sitting up, Xander saw that Jonathan had apparently tripped over Jack, spilling his soda on Jack’s leather jacket. He sighed. Jack was the school psychotic. All high schools seemed to have one, just like they had a Princess, a Slut and a Junkie - kids that seemed born to fill those roles. Jonathan was one of the few people who had actually been lower on the totem pole than Xander for much of their mutual school years, before last year when Xander had managed to slip out of the Hopeless Loser group by virtue of being viewed as borderline psychotic for much of last year. He was just grateful that this year he’d managed to achieve the status of acceptably cool outsider.

He hadn’t realized that he’d rolled to his feet and was approaching the confrontation until he heard himself speak. “Jack, how’s that whole psycho serial killer image working out for you? You don’t find it’s a little 80’s and tired?”

Ok, he knew that was like waving a red flag in front of a bull but jeez, Jonathan was like three feet tall. He was no match for Jack and someone had to do something before Jack hurt him. Apparently, he’d elected himself as that someone. He really was an idiot.

Jonathan, who wasn’t dumb, threw Xander a grateful look and took to his heels, which Xander really didn’t blame him for.

“Harris, you wanna be starting something?” Jack sounded eager and Xander gave him his best “nothing to see here” smile, stepping back, hoping to avoid the consequences of stepping deliberately on the wasps’ nest.

“But me, Jack. Just trying to stop you from making a serious mistake.”

“And what exactly would that be?” Jack really had the scary, threatening voice down pat. Fortunately, Xander had heard much scarier ones.

“Well, picking on Jonathan, really not going to help your reputation. You don’t want people to think
that you waste your time on kids his size, do you?”

Suddenly there was an enormous hunting knife in Jack’s hands and Xander jumped back. Weapons had not been in the script. “Whoa! Let’s not get carried away here.”

“You calling me a coward, Harris? I ought to cut your throat with Katie here.”

“Katie?” he couldn’t help asking, his eyes riveted on the knife.

“You like her?” Jack had a seriously crazy smile on his lips and Xander was liking the situation less and less.

“She seems… very nice.” Xander put his hands up in a surrendering motion, bringing them up into a position where he could use them to defend himself while still seeming as unthreatening as possible. “Why don’t I leave the two of you alone?”

“Afraid, Harris?”

“Of the psycho with the enormous knife? A little,” he admitted frankly.

“It’s not about the knife, Harris. It’s about who’s got the least fear.” And suddenly, to his complete disbelief, Jack was slapping the knife into Xander’s hand. “Think you can take me, Harris? Or are you afraid?”

With a quick flick of his wrist, Xander sent the knife spinning away from them. In the same movement, he swept Jack’s legs out from underneath him and dropped down on top of him as he fell, landing with one knee in the center of Jack’s chest. He pressed all his weight into the knee and grabbed Jack’s throat with one hand, leaning down to glare into his eyes.

“You know,” he said conversationally. “My boyfriend is really into weapons. Almost embarrassingly fond of them. And even he doesn’t name them. You really should talk to someone, Jack.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. Rolling free, he jumped to his feet, backing up rapidly until he was well clear of the other boy. “I don’t want to see you picking on Jonathan again, Jack,” he said calmly and turned and walked away, listening carefully behind him to make sure Jack wasn’t going to try anything. In some ways, Jack wasn’t wrong, there was a lot of bluff involved in intimidating people. There was no sound of movement behind him and Xander kept his pace normal as he headed back towards the main cluster of students.

He was so going to thank Spike for teaching him how to defend himself.

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“Giles!”

They all looked up as Buffy burst back through the library doors and wolf-Oz flung himself at the bars of the cage, snarling and snapping at the disturbance. She’d obviously been running full out and Xander felt his stomach knot at the open fear on her face. “It’s happening tonight,” she panted.

“Tonight?”

“Willie overheard them. They’re going to open the Hellmouth tonight.”

Angel looked skeptical. “Do you really think he can be trusted? Willie will tell anyone anything if he gets paid.”
Spike had shown up shortly after sunset, bringing Angel with him. Buffy had already left to talk to Willie the bartender and they had been waiting for her return before going out to hunt the Sisterhood again.

Buffy shook her head, her eyes meeting Angel’s warmly, even as she answered with grim seriousness. “Not this time. He was hurt. Bad. The Sisterhood tore up his place and almost killed him.”

“Then where the hell are the bloody demons?” Spike asked. “They should be crawling all over here, workin’ their mojo to open the Hellmouth. Accordin’ to the Mayor, the Hellmouth opens right below the library here.” As he said it, he again had that faint recollection of Drusilla on her deathbed, rambling on about the dark energy beneath the books, back when she was telling him to go find his destiny on the Hellmouth. It was the reason he’d taken the Mayor’s information about the location of the Hellmouth so seriously.

Angel, Buffy and Giles exchanged glances. “When we went hunting the Master,” Angel said slowly, “his lair was really close, probably somewhere under the school.”

“And he was trapped in the Hellmouth,” Giles finished grimly.

“So, the Hellmouth is right below us?” Xander asked, appalled, instinctively looking down at the tiles beneath his feet.

“It would appear so,” Giles answered. “We’ve always known its approximate location, but I had not quite realized that it was directly below us.”

“So, where are the Sisterhood?” Xander asked. “If they’re opening the Hellmouth tonight, shouldn’t they be here? Or can they open it from a distance?”

“Spells of that magnitude are generally performed as close to the object as possible,” Giles answered.

Spike shot Giles a glance. “Loan me an ax, Watcher. Angelus and I will check the basement.”

“I’m going too.” Buffy headed for the office, emerging a second later with the tranquilizer gun Giles kept for werewolf emergencies. She approached the cage and lifted the rifle, waiting until Oz leapt at the bars again, firing as his body was fully exposed above the blankets Giles hung over the lower portions of the cage to give him some privacy in the mornings.

The wolf yelped and crashed back to the floor. “Sorry, Oz,” Buffy muttered, checking he was really out before opening the cage and then the weapons locker inside. “Axes all around?” she asked, reaching in and pulling two out, turning to toss them to Angel and Spike, who fielded them easily.

“Make mine a sword,” Giles said absently, scanning the books and pulling out several volumes. “Xander, I’ll need your help setting up a binding spell. It would be best to be prepared to take counter measures against the Sisterhood’s efforts to open the Hellmouth.”

Buffy locked the cage door again and the three disappeared out the doors, heading for the cellar.

“Xander, please move the table out of the way. We must clear this whole area,” Giles told him, flipping through the books without looking up. “When that’s done, I’ll have a list of supplies we’ll need from the magic shop.”

Xander set to work moving furniture as Giles began jotting down a list of ingredients.

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Stupid, fucking basement had more rooms than some whorehouses Spike had been in. The three of them had split up to cover ground more quickly, each taking a separate section of the maze of rooms under the school. Who the hell designed this place anyway? M.C. Escher?

Spike yanked open the door to another of the seemingly endless rooms in the basement and gave it one sweeping glance. Empty. He was two steps away, heading for the next door, when he froze, his brain suddenly registering what he’d seen.

Turning back, he opened the door again and crossed to the center of the room. A fucking bomb, he thought incredulously. Just what they needed to complicate things. Obviously home-made, amateurishly simple, but large enough to carry a fairly substantial punch. The timer was counting down, 49 minutes to detonation.

The room was empty. The jokers behind the bomb had come and gone, leaving their lethal little toy behind. Setting his ax down, Spike studied the wiring for a moment. The set up was childishly simple, no professional had had a hand in creating this. Two minutes study and Spike was confident he could easily disarm the thing.

He hesitated, then reached out and delicately unhooked the timer. The red digital display obediently died and he grinned. Reattaching the wires, Spike re-set the timer for 6 hours and left the display counting down again.

Picking up his ax, he took a satisfied look around, estimating the damage. The re-set bomb would detonate hours after they had either taken out the Sisterhood or lost the game. If they lost, it was a strong backup plan and a bit of bloody revenge on their foes. If they won, well, the school would be long empty and Xander would be needing that home schooling after all.

Feeling very pleased with himself, Spike left the room to continue his sweep of the basement.

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The battle was going badly. Two Master Vampires, a Slayer, and two not half-bad humans, and the Sisterhood had stolen a march on them. They’d gotten the bloody Hellmouth open and the thing that had come out of it had too damn many heads and they simply didn’t have enough axes.

Angel had found the demons, hidden in one of the endless rooms in the basement, in the middle of their fucking spell. Bloody tosser had charged in, not waiting for backup and never thought that the demons might have a bit of backup of their own. The noise of the battle had alerted Spike and he and the Slayer had run towards the sound of fighting, arriving just in time to see Angelus getting the shit kicked out of him by two of the Sisterhood while three others ignored the fight and worked their mojo.

The Slayer had dived into the battle, going for the demon that was wrestling with Angelus, trying to get his ax away from him. Spike swore profanely. Stupid bint hadn’t learned anything. He went for the magic-workers, leaping across the room, his ax swinging out and down and cleanly lopping off the head of one of the squatting demons.

It had been too late. There was a sudden deafening roar and the ground began to shake. Spike lost his footing as the pavement began to buckle underneath them, falling hard to the shaking floor as storage shelves toppled over and concrete exploded upwards as the ground opened up.

Staggering to his feet, Spike clung to his ax with a death grip. The two remaining magic workers were swallowed up by the hole that was rapidly expanding and Spike flung himself clear, running for the door, stumbling and nearly falling again as the ground continued to crumble beneath his feet.
Angelus and the Slayer were a step ahead of him, the remaining demon running with them, all interest in fighting gone as they all struggled to reach safe ground. The shaking lessened as Spike cleared the doorway and they all looked back, hearing an ear-splitting scream as a monstrous thing burst up through the hole, roaring in triumph at breaking free.

“The library!”

Spike wasn’t sure which of them said it and the three of them turned and ran as one. Spike thought his unbeating heart would burst as he poured every ounce of energy into speed, racing back to the library where Xander would be facing that monstrosity with nothing but an ax and his stubborn courage. Over the pounding of their feet on the stairs, he could hear the thing crashing through the basement ceiling, and somehow he found an extra burst of speed, pushing him ahead of Angelus and the Slayer as they rounded the final corner to the library.

Bursting through the doors, Spike screamed in fury and threw himself at the creature. Xander and the Watcher were both on their feet, swinging their weapons at the creature that filled the center of the library, broken tile and other bits and pieces littered the floor, making footing treacherous.

The thing was huge, filling the large open space as it forced its enormous body through the hole in the floor, widening it as it pushed relentlessly upward. Multiple heads on long, supple necks snapped viciously at the two humans who were doing their best but were clearly outmatched and overwhelmed.

Spike brought his ax whistling down on a head that sought to grab Xander from the side while his boy was occupied with another one attacking him square on. The force of the blow buried the ax blade completely inside the head and briefly pinned the head down as the blade bit into the floor. The creature screamed and the head jerked up, still alive somehow. Spike made the mistake of holding on to the ax and felt himself lifted off his feet, still clinging to the ax handle as the thing whipped its head sideways. The blade came free and Spike was thrown clear, smashing through the railing of the upper balcony and slamming to a painful stop against the bookshelves.

He rolled free, still clinging to the ax and threw himself back into the battle. Five fighters against something with a dozen heads. This should be interesting.

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Two heads had been severed and the one Spike had first injured was just flopping uselessly, nearly dead but still moving. All of them were covered in gore, their own blood and the creature’s. Footing was tricky as they slipped and slid on the blood-slick floor, grappling for purchase on the slippery tiles. Angelus was down, the demon had tossed him like a human, one ill-timed move and a head had swung around on its long snake-like neck and suddenly his Sire was hurtling through the air, crashing into the far wall so hard he’d been half buried in the plaster. The Slayer had screamed his name and almost abandoned her post until Xander snarled at her, yelling at her to stay put. Xander had moved, taking up position in front of the fallen vampire, using his ax to good purpose to keep the creature away from Angelus.

The Watcher was bleeding from a head wound and favoring one leg, limping heavily as he wielded his sword like a woodsman, chopping down again and again on one of the necks, staggering as he dodged the dying head’s teeth which were still snapping lethally at him.

Spike was fighting with everything he had, holding his own point in their battle line, but he could see they were losing ground, slowly but steadily falling back. The creature was too big, too strong, and it was slowly winning its way further out of the hole it had made in the floor, scrabbling and pushing at the edges, widening the gap bit by bit. Soon, the entire creature would make it through and then they
were dead.

“Slayer!” Spike yelled and saw her head jerk towards him. “Hold the line, I’m moving back.”

“What?!” She swore but shifted her position to fill the gap he was leaving.

In three jumps, Spike was bending over Angelus. “Angelus!” he bellowed, grabbing his Sire by his leather jacket and shaking him. “On your feet!” Angelus groaned and Spike shook him again. “Snap out of it, you useless lump,” he yelled. “You’re needed.”

Hauling Angelus to his feet by main force, Spike was relieved to see Angelus’ dazed eyes clearing. He shoved his own gore-smeared ax into his Sire’s hands. “Take my position,” he ordered, shoving Angelus bodily towards the fight, not taking the time to see if his Sire was ready to hold his own or not. Xander gave him a tired grin, then swung his ax sideways with exhausted arms, knocking aside a head that was lunging towards Spike.

“Hold on, luv,” Spike called and sprinted out the door. He hated leaving Xander but it was the only way.

Racing through the halls, Spike heard the roar of the battle fading behind him, as he put every ounce of his remaining energy into his sprint. He rounded a corner and slid to a stop, yanking open the door to the basement and pounding down the stairs.

The bomb. Forcing himself to move slowly enough to get it right, Spike detached the bomb from the barrel. The shoebox size detonator and explosive materials on top of the barrel should be enough to blow a serious hole in the creature, with luck, enough to kill it. It was the barrel of supplemental explosives below the detonator that was the real danger of the bomb, the extra power designed to tear down walls and destroy the school. Too big to move or safely use, Spike had to rely on the smaller charge with the detonator.

He didn’t dare run flat out with the explosives in his hand. Walking smoothly and carefully, Spike mounted the stairs and moved as quickly as he dared through the halls back towards the library, praying he would make it back in time.

Outside the library doors, he forced himself to stop again, resetting the timer for 30 seconds and praying the morons who set the thing up knew what they were doing. Pushing the doors open, he was relieved to see Xander still on his feet, still swinging his weapon. Xander was weaving with exhaustion, and one arm hung limply, but he was managing to swing his axe one-handedly, batting the nearest head away from him. Not doing any damage, but keeping the head occupied and away from himself.

“Xander! Out. Now!” Spike yelled the second he was through the door. Xander looked at him in astonishment, but began moving immediately, backing up towards the door as Spike moved past him and into the room, unbearably grateful for the trust that had Xander obeying his order without question or pause.

“Angelus! Watcher! Slayer! Fall back!” he roared. For one second, it looked like the Slayer was going to object, then Angelus added his own command and the three began retreating rapidly. “Get out and get away” Spike snapped, one eye on the creature, the other watching the red numbers ticking down. The three exhausted fighters disengaged and headed for the door, keeping their weapons up and ready as they retreated.

20 seconds to go.
The creature reared up, seven remaining heads reaching towards the ceiling as it squealed in triumph. Three necks with severed heads, and two more with badly damaged heads flopped blindly, spattering gore as they writhed in what Spike viciously hoped was a great deal of pain. The uninjured heads came down, lunging for Spike in a massed group and he threw the bomb at the creature, aiming for the center section where it was wedged in the hole in the floor. The second the bomb left his hands, he flung himself to one side and rolled frantically, trying to get out of the thing’s reach.

Pain slashed through him as a mouth closed on his side and he screamed, feeling the teeth driving deeply into his body. With no choice, he gritted his teeth and tore himself free, another scream forced out of him as the creature tore an enormous hunk of flesh from his side. Clamping one hand to the wound in a futile attempt to stem the blood pouring from his side, Spike staggered to his feet and headed for the door in a stumbling, wavering line. His vision was fading and pain lanced through him with every step but he forced himself on.

He was at the door, pushing it open when the bomb detonated.

An enormous flash of fire lit the room and the roar of the explosion was almost drowned out by the screaming of the creature. The blast force hit him and he was thrown through the door and halfway down the hall. Blackness closed over him and he never felt the impact as he hit the floor hard.

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“Spike!”

Xander was helping Giles, who’s right leg was showing a distinct inclination to collapse under him, glancing back anxiously over his shoulder, waiting for Spike to exit the library when the explosion happened. He saw Spike’s body fly out of the doors and he forgot Giles.

Shrugging free, he ran back towards the library, dodging Angel’s attempt to stop him. Racing around the corner, he saw with horror that Spike’s body had left a wide swath of blood as it slid along the floor before coming to a rest, nearly a hundred feet from the library doors.

Running to Spike, ignoring the pain in his wounded arm, Xander dropped to his knees beside his lover’s body. “Spike!”

Anxiously turning him over, he sucked in his breath, seeing the terrible wound in Spike’s side. Blood was pouring out of the huge, jagged wound and Spike was still as death. Ignoring everything else, Xander tore his shirt off, gasping as the movement jerked his arm, clumsily balling up the fabric and pressing it against the wound with both hands, trying desperately to stop the blood with pressure.

Looking up, he saw Buffy and Angel at the doors of the library, looking in on Spike’s handiwork. “I need some help here,” he yelled.

Angel turned and ran towards him. Giles appeared around the corner and grabbed Buffy’s arm as she started to follow Angel, pulling her around and back towards the library with him. They disappeared inside the doors as Angel reached his side.

Xander’s shirt was already soaked with blood and Angel swore sharply. Dropping his ax, he yanked his coat off and tore his own shirt off, wadding it up and, batting Xander’s hands away, used his own greater strength to put pressure on the wound. He let go with one hand and brought his wrist to his mouth, slicing open his wrist with his fangs.

“Hold his head up,” he snapped at Xander, who shifted quickly and lifted Spike’s head.

Angel pressed his bleeding wrist to Spike’s mouth. “Drink, Childe” he roared, and Xander could
hear the power in his voice. Sire’s voice, he realized dimly. Spike didn’t move and Xander forced Spike’s mouth open with his thumb. Angel worked his fist, keeping the blood flowing, dripping into Spike’s mouth. “Drink!” Angel ordered again in that same dark voice.

Xander forced back his terror as Spike remained unresponsive. He lifted Spike’s head up a little further, bracing it against his chest and began kneading and stroking Spike’s throat, forcing him to swallow the blood.

After a long, tense minute, he felt Spike move almost infinitesimally, his throat working slightly as he swallowed on his own. Xander sobbed in relief, looking up at Angel. “Will he be ok?” he asked desperately.

Angel shook his head grimly. “I don’t know.” He continued to force his blood down Spike’s throat, growing alarmingly pale himself, before he was forced to stop, pulling his wrist away and licking it, stopping the last of the bleeding. He eased the sodden fabric away from Spike’s side and grunted in satisfaction when he saw that the gush of blood had slowed to a trickle. “Hold it for me,” he told Xander.

Xander took up the pressure on Spike’s side, watching as Angel reached up, struggling a little until he was able to tear his undershirt off. Folding it into a neat rectangle, he motioned to Xander and they switched, swapping the blood-soaked shirt for the fresh one.

Angel swayed and Xander reached out to steady him. Not looking at Xander, Angel took the old bandage and swiped it through the pool of blood next to Spike and brought it to his mouth. It took a second for Xander to understand - Angel was drinking the blood from the shirt.

Xander looked away, giving Angel as much privacy as he could - doing this in front of Xander was obviously humiliating for the vampire. He looked down at Spike, stroking his hair with his free hand, leaning down to kiss his forehead, murmuring soft reassurances that Spike was going to be fine.

The three of them stayed that way for a long moment, Xander bent over Spike, hoping for signs of consciousness and not finding any, until Angel set the cloth down. Xander didn’t look up. “Thank you, Angel.”

“He’s my Childe.” Angel’s voice was quiet but filled with emotion.

They both looked up sharply as the library doors opened and Buffy and Giles appeared. Exhausted and blood stained, limping and looking ready to drop, they were both smiling with tired relief.

“The binding spell worked and Spike’s bomb killed the creature,” Giles reported. Seeing their motionless tableau, he asked worriedly: “How is he?”

“He needs blood. A lot of it.” Angel said, pulling himself to his feet, wavering unsteadily for a moment before he straightened and steadied. “I’ll go.”

Giles fished in his pocket, pulling out a set of keys and tossing them to Angel. “Take my car if it will help.”

“Thanks.” Angel looked down at Xander. “I’ll be quick.”

Xander nodded, not looking up from Spike’s face. As Angel left, he reached for the ax that Angel had dropped. Picking it up, he braced the blade, sharp edge up and drew his wrist along the blade, hissing as the flesh parted and blood began to well.

“Xander!”
Ignoring Giles, he pressed his bleeding wrist to Spike’s mouth, desperately grateful when the unconscious vampire automatically began to swallow. Giles was there beside him suddenly, dropping to his knees, his hand closing around Xander’s arm.

“NO!” Xander said fiercely, stopping Giles. “My choice.”

Giles looked mutinous, but his hand gentled on Xander’s arm and he no longer had to fight to keep it pressed to Spike’s lips. “Not too much.”

“I’m not suicidal, Giles,” he answered with a crooked smile. “Just a top up to hold him until Angel’s back.”

He was light-headed and beginning to feel very dizzy when Giles pulled his arm away, wrapping it with a strip of fabric he’d prepared. “Enough, Xander,” he said gently.

Horrified, Xander realized he’d stopped holding the bandage against Spike’s side. He gasped and shook his head trying to clear it, reaching out only to have his hand pushed away gently.

“I’ve got it,” Buffy said matter-of-factly, as if helping to save vampires was something she did every day.

Buffy was kneeling beside Spike, holding the bandage against his side. Spike was still unconscious but the bandage wasn’t soaked through, so the bleeding had obviously been checked. Letting his fingers rest tiredly in Spike’s hair, Xander realized he was leaning heavily against Giles, who was sitting close enough to keep him propped upright. “Thanks, guys.”

“Spike saved us all.”

Giles’ grateful voice was the last thing Xander heard as exhaustion and blood loss took its toll and he slid into unconsciousness, slumping bonelessly against Giles.
“What the bloody hell were you tossers thinking? How could you let him do that?”

Xander thought vaguely that someone was in trouble; Spike sounded really angry.

“Shut up, Spike, and lie still.”

Angel? Well, that explained it. Spike got cranky around Angel a lot.

“Lettin’ him practically bleed to death while you all just stood there and watched…”

“Stop being over-dramatic. He’s not anywhere near dead.”

Spike cursed and the pain threaded through the profanity cleared the fog shrouding Xander’s thoughts with shocking suddenness. Spike was hurt and Xander was just lying there daydreaming. He sat up with a jerk and almost toppled over as a wave of dizziness hit him. He tried to brace himself but his left arm wasn’t cooperating and his body tilted, sliding towards horizontal again until an arm around his middle braced him.

“Easy there, Xander.” Giles was suddenly beside him, steadying him but Xander only had eyes for Spike. Spike, who was propped up against the wall, looking white and frail, even as he argued with Angel, who was wrapping a bandage around Spike’s middle. Xander eyed the discarded blood bags around the vampire and saw that Spike had drunk at least five bags. Several more full bags were waiting nearby.

“Xander.” Spike’s blue eyes lit up when he saw Xander awake and sitting up. “Are you alright?”

Xander lurched to his knees and began shuffling towards him. “Am I alright? I’m not the one who stayed behind with a bomb and a demon the size of Kansas. Are you crazy?”

He collapsed next to Spike, careful not to actually fall on him, and leaned against the wall, scooting gingerly closer until their shoulders were just brushing.

“It was a brilliant plan, I’ll have you know,” Spike informed him.

“So brilliant it almost got you killed.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.” Spike reached across, picking up Xander’s right hand and tracing his thumb over the makeshift bandage Giles had hastily wrapped around the gash he’d made in his wrist. “Didn’t need to do that, luv. I would have been fine.”

“Couldn’t take the risk.” Seeing how white Spike still was, even after Angel’s and Xander’s blood and several bags, Xander knew he’d done the right thing. “Besides, no harm, no foul. We’re both alive. That’s what counts.”

“Xander,” Spike sounded exasperated and Xander looked at him in surprise. “I could have drained you accidentally. Wasn’t exactly aware of what was goin’ on. Never give your blood like that to an injured vampire, we don’t always know when to stop.”

“I can assure you, Spike, I would not have allowed you to drain him,” Giles interjected firmly.

Spike shot Giles an annoyed glance but his irritation faded at the resolute look on the Watcher’s face. After a long moment, he nodded. “‘preciate it, Watcher.” His fingers slid from Xander’s wrist to his
hand, entwining them with Xander’s. He closed his eyes for a moment, wincing as Angel finished tying off the bandage. Xander was relieved to see that it was a real bandage this time, not another shirt.

Rallying, Spike looked at Xander again. “Your arm, luv. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing to worry about, Spike. Do you need more blood?”

“Xander…”

“Spike, shut up and drink some more blood. I’ll look at your boy’s arm.”

Spike glared but did take the blood bag from Angel. Which worried Xander - Spike doing what Angel said without arguing was usually a bad sign. He watched anxiously as Spike tore into the bag, draining it rapidly, until his view was blocked by Angel.

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“Spike, where did you get a bomb?”

Spike didn’t look up from supervising Angelus’ work on his boy. “Found it in the basement,” he said briefly. Angelus was examining Xander’s arm, trying to see what the problem was. Spike growled when Xander gasped in pain as Angelus moved the arm, even though he could tell his Sire was trying to be gentle.

“There was a bomb in the basement?” Buffy asked incredulously.

“Yeah. Found it when we were looking for the Sisterhood.”

“I don’t think anything’s broken,” Angelus decided. “You may have torn some muscles or something but I can’t really tell. You should probably see a doctor.”

“I think the three of us would all benefit from a trip to the emergency room,” Giles said.

Spike narrowed his eyes, not liking the idea of being separated from Xander when he was injured, but he could hardly go to the hospital himself while he was so badly wounded. The staff would insist on treating him and they would be bound to fuss when they found out he was dead.

“Giles, we need to find out why there was a bomb in the school.”

Now that he’d hijacked the bomb for his own uses, Spike agreed. No way was he letting Xander go back to a school when someone was trying to blow it up. It was too dangerous, they might try again.

“I agree, Buffy, but there’s nothing we can do tonight. You need to have that cut seen to and Xander should have someone check his arm.” The Watcher didn’t mention his own leg injury but if the three of them went to the hospital, the Watcher could keep an eye on Xander for him.

“Xander, I’ll meet you at the apartment after the hospital. Watcher?” He waited until he had Giles’ full attention. “I’m holding you responsible for my Claimed,” he said pointedly.

Giles smiled. “Don’t worry, Spike. I’ll take him to the hospital and bring him back to your apartment afterward.”

“Spike…” Xander began, obviously about to argue.

“No, luv. Need to get your arm fixed.” He exchanged glances with Angelus, who nodded. “Angelus
will get me home and get me more blood. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Xander’s worried eyes warmed him more than all the blood Angelus had been feeding him.

“I’m sure, luv. Now go, get yourself taken care of.”

Xander kissed him, then let Angelus help him up and the three humans limped away.

Spike grinned cheekily at Angelus. “Helluva fight, eh, Sire?”

To his surprise, Angelus grinned back at him before carefully helping him to his feet. “Not bad.”

Thinking about the battle kept Spike’s mind off the pain as his Sire helped him out of the school. Any battle you left on your own two feet while your opponent was in gory little bits was a victory to be savored.

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It was six hours later when Giles dropped Xander off at the apartment and Xander had been quietly going out of his mind worrying about Spike. He didn’t have any reason to think Angel wouldn’t get Spike home safely but would Angel make sure he was comfortable or would he just dump him in bed and toss some blood bags at him? Spike tended to go all stoic about injuries and was too proud to ask for help and Xander was stuck in the hospital waiting room waiting his turn. He needed to get home. The hospital emergency room was having a busy night and Buffy’s six stitches, Xander’s sling, and Giles’ bandages had not rated immediate attention. He’d tried to get Giles to leave, so he could check on Spike but Giles refused to budge.

The three of them had sat in the waiting room for what felt like forever, alternately nodding off from exhaustion and discussing who could have put a bomb in the school and what to do about it. Not surprisingly, given how tired they all were, they hadn’t come up with any brilliant ideas.

Apparently the binding spell Giles had used to close the Hellmouth had done a lot to restore the damage the demon had caused in breaking free, re-sealing the opening physically as well as magically, for which Xander was extremely grateful. Having helped save the world, he felt that they were owed a pass on the physical clean up that usually followed.

He’d been horrified when he suddenly remembered that Oz had been in the weapons cage the entire time, still sleeping off the effects of the tranquilizer shot and completely helpless. How could he have forgotten that Oz was there? Granted, things had gotten out of hand pretty quickly, but still… He was relieved when Giles told him that Oz was fine and just beginning to stir when he and Buffy had finished the binding spell. Fortunately, the demon had apparently never noticed the sleeping wolf in the cage.

At long last, they had gotten in to see the doctor. Xander had some torn muscles in his arm but it would only require a sling and not using the arm for a few days until the muscles healed. Remembering with a shudder one of the heads smashing into him and throwing him halfway across the library, Xander figured he’d gotten off easily. Buffy had needed stitches for the deep gash on her forehead and Giles had gotten off with a knee brace and a number of bandaged cuts.

It was lucky they had Giles with them, he thought tiredly. Giles put on his most proper voice and that armor of tweed and talked vaguely about the masked hoodlums who’d attacked them as they walked home and all suspicion about their injuries died immediately. If he hadn’t been so tired, Xander would have laughed at the demonstration of the power of an English accent on gullible Americans.
Or maybe it was just Hellmouth blindness. Either way, the staff didn’t call the police or social services and that was fine by Xander. He was too tired to deal with authority figures.

Opening the door to the apartment, he moved quickly to the bedroom and sighed with relief at seeing Spike asleep in their bed. He knew from experience that Spike would sleep for a good long time, letting his vampire healing thing work. The wide bandage around Spike’s waist was clean, showing no blood, and Spike was in the near-coma healing sleep, not reacting to Xander’s presence at all.

He made a mental note to kill Angel the next time he saw him, leaving Spike alone and vulnerable like this. Selfish bastard could have waited until Xander returned, he thought wrathfully, Angel was hardly injured at all. Granted, it was unlikely that anything would happen here in their own apartment with Spike’s loyal Lieutenants nearby, but still, it was the principle of the thing.

He checked the refrigerator and saw that Angel had left them with a good supply of blood, and reluctantly decided to only hurt Angel, not kill him. Giving in to the fatigue dragging his steps, he clumsily dragged an armchair in from the living room and settled into it at Spike’s side, setting the alarm to go off in three hours. Resting his good hand on Spike’s arm, Xander closed his eyes and let exhaustion take over.

Spike would need more blood soon, but until then, he could sleep.

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It was late afternoon when Spike woke up, surfacing naturally without being disturbed. Xander had shaken him awake early in the morning and made him drink more blood but he had lapsed back into healing sleep immediately afterwards. This time, Spike could tell he was much better. Stretching carefully to test his injury, he winced as pain shot through his side at the movement. Much better, but still a fair ways to go. Another few bags of blood and a few more hours of healing sleep were needed, he decided. It would be at least another day before the wound was completely healed and a day or two longer before his strength was fully restored.

He checked the bandages around his mid-section. Angelus had done a good job with them and they were still in place. Closing his eyes, he ghosted his fingers over his side, concentrating hard on what his body was telling him. The unliving tissue was re-growing, filling in the area where the demon’s teeth had torn into his flesh. The area would heal over completely within a few days, leaving no sign of the injury, but for now there was still a significant amount of flesh missing.

He grinned in remembrance. It had been one beauty of a fight. Not many vampires could boast they’d single-handedly killed a demon that size. And the fact that he’d used a bomb didn’t detract at all from his victory - after all, he was the one who’d had the brains to come up with the idea of using it in the middle of battle.

Frowning, he thought about the bomb. Who had put it in the school? It hadn’t mattered when he’d intended to let it go off. They’d have been well out of the area by the time the detonator blew and you couldn’t blow up the same building twice. Now, because he’d hijacked the bomb and it hadn’t destroyed the school, there was a risk that whoever had made it might try again.

Wincing a little at the movement, Spike turned so he could see Xander. His boy was sleeping on his side, his bad arm cradled in a sling - no cast, he was relieved to see. Xander’s breathing was deep and even and Spike ignored the pain that tugged at his side to shift closer, snuggling into the living warmth of his boy and inhaling deeply, reveling in the familiar smell of his Claimed.

Xander had been hurt far too often since Spike had met him and Spike wished fervently that he could find a way to keep his boy safe. Xander was human and so fragile it terrified Spike. He could lose his Claimed so easily, in a thousand different ways, and he couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to Xander. The problem was that only way to keep his boy safe was to keep Xander by
his side every minute and, much as Spike would like that, it wasn’t an option. Xander would never allow it.

Sighing, Spike inched a little closer, sliding his arms around his boy, carefully avoiding the injured arm, and buried his nose in Xander’s neck. He could hear the steady thumping of Xander’s heart, feel the quiet movement of breathing and he basked in the warmth radiating from the broad back turned toward him. He had Xander to himself for the whole weekend, that would have to be enough. For now.

“Spike?” Xander mumbled sleepily. His head moved and he looked blearily over his shoulder at Spike. “Are you ok?”

“Fine, luv. Go back to sleep.”

Xander was clearly still half asleep as he turned over, shifting in Spike’s arms. “What time is it?”

“Late afternoon, pet.”

“Damnit!” Xander started to pull away and Spike tightened his hold, keeping him in place. “Let me up, Spike, you need more blood.”

“Calm down, luv. I’m fine.”

“Unless you’re saying you’ve gotten up, you haven’t had blood since this morning.” Xander had an impressive glare when the situation called for it, Spike noted proudly. “And you better not tell me you got up.”

Spike gave him an injured look. “Been sleepin’ like an innocent baby.”

“Please, do you even know the meaning of the word?” Xander leaned forward and kissed him, then rolled out of bed as Spike reluctantly unwound his arms from around his boy. “Don’t move.”

“Tyrant,” Spike groused, amused and secretly pleased as he always was when Xander was fussing over him. He shifted himself upright, knowing Xander was right and he needed more blood, only to have Xander exclaim in exasperation:

“Spike! Stop moving around, you’ll hurt yourself.”

Xander hurried around the bed and used his good arm to help Spike sit upright.

“Bit of the blind leading the blind, luv. Don’t strain your arm.”

“I’m not the one with the major injury here.” Hearing the worry under Xander’s sharp tone, Spike caught his hand before he could move away.

“Xander.” He waited until Xander stilled and looked at him, then squeezed his fingers. “Vampire, luv. I’m fine. A bit more blood and a few more hours sleeping and I’ll be up and about.” Xander looked away and Spike tugged his arm, pulling him down beside him.

“What’s wrong, luv?”

Xander didn’t answer and Spike ran his fingers through the tousled dark waves of his hair, pulling him down so his head was resting on Spike’s shoulder. For a long moment, they were quiet, Spike simply stroking his fingers through Xander’s hair and waiting while his boy struggled with his emotions.
“You almost died.” Xander’s voice was so quiet, a human wouldn’t have heard the whispered words. He turned his head, burying his face in Spike’s neck. “I almost lost you.”

“Didn’t happen, luv,” Spike said comfortingly. “I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.”

“You scare me, Spike. You throw yourself into things like you’re invincible and you’re not. You can be killed so easily if someone gets in a lucky shot. So many things can hurt you…”

Astonished, Spike pulled back. “Xander, what are you talking about? I’m not a bloody fledgling, I’m a Master Vampire.” He couldn’t quite hide the irritation in his voice. “I’ve survived over a century. Not likely to die any time soon.”

Xander lifted his head and Spike found his offense fading at the haunting worry in his Claimed’s brown eyes. “Spike, someone could tear the curtains off that window and set you on fire. You tackle bigger, stronger demons for fun. And because you’re Master of the Hellmouth, every two-bit vampire with delusions of grandeur wants a shot at you.” He buried his head in Spike’s shoulder again. “I couldn’t bear to lose you and last night…”

His voice trailed off and Spike simply held him, crooning comfortingly and rubbing his back soothingly. He was astounded by the revelation that Xander, his precious, fragile boy, saw Spike as vulnerable. Was terrified of losing him in the same way that Spike feared losing Xander, and for the same reasons. Involuntarily, his lips quirked up and he suddenly laughed.

“Right pair of daft buggers, aren’t we, Xander?” he said cheerfully. “Both so bloody afraid of losing the other we can’t see straight.” He pushed Xander back, giving him a tiny shake. “You listen to me, pet. It takes a lot to kill me and I’m not about to let that happen. Got too much going for me to let some two-bit vampire get the best of me.”

Xander’s lips twitched at the light mockery as he quoted Xander’s words back at him and a little of the worry faded from his eyes. “I love you, pet. And I will claw and kick and fight to the last drop of blood to stay with you.” He shook Xander gently once more for emphasis. “Not going anywhere.”

“Me neither,” Xander promised, smiling now. “Well, except for the kitchen. I was going for blood when you got me all sidetracked.” He grinned and stood up.

“I got you side-tracked?” Spike mock growled. “Wasn’t me doing the mother hen impression.”

“Jeez, try and help a guy out and this is the gratitude I get?” Xander muttered, deliberately loudly enough for Spike to hear. He paused at the door of the kitchen and looked back. “Love you, Spike.”

Spike felt his lips curve in what he was afraid was an embarrassingly sappy smile. “Love you too, Xander.”
Chapter 33

“I don’t want you going back there,” Spike repeated stubbornly. “It’s not safe.”

Spike had been bringing up the issue all day, saying there was too much risk in returning to school since no progress had been made on figuring out who had left the bomb in the basement. Xander understood Spike’s fears and had been non-committal in his responses, changing the subject every time Spike tried to get him to promise not to go back to school. Spike had even come up with a plan for home tutoring that sounded suspiciously well thought out, like something Spike had been planning for awhile. He’d been able to avoid a serious confrontation up until now but Spike wasn’t letting him avoid the issue this time.

Even though the idea of being able to spend more time with Spike was tempting, Xander didn’t want to give up his last months of high school. He’d finally been accepted at school in a way he’d only dreamed about in junior high. He had friends in enough of the school cliques that he didn’t get hassled by anyone: Larry kept the jocks off his back and his odd, snarky friendship with Cordelia ensured he was pretty much accepted everywhere. Say what you will about Cordelia - and Xander had said most of it to her face - if she liked you, no one messed with you. You weren’t safe from Cordelia herself, of course, but that was fair considering that Xander felt free to criticize her wardrobe, her dates, her personality and anything else about her. Their whole relationship was based on insulting each other but they both enjoyed it and it worked for them.

Of course, if he couldn’t convince Spike the school was safe, god knows what his lover would do to keep him home. Blow up the school himself in a preemptive strike or something, knowing Spike, Xander thought with an inward grin. Cordy had nothing on Spike when it came to not letting anyone mess with Xander. Fortunately, he’d had all weekend to marshal his arguments.

“Spike.” Xander looked at him seriously, knowing he couldn’t duck the issue any longer. “The bomb was set to go off after hours on a Friday night, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, whoever put it there wanted to destroy the school but wasn’t interested in killing anyone, right?”

“It was a bomb in a public building,” Spike shot back immediately, obviously not willing to give in on the issue, although Xander knew Spike had gotten his point.

“But it wasn’t set to go off on a Monday morning in the middle of classes,” he argued. “So I think we can assume that they weren’t deliberately trying to kill people.”

“Maybe,” Spike conceded reluctantly, “but it could have killed people easily - a janitor in the wrong place, a teacher workin’ late, any number of people in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I know and I’m not taking it lightly but, if they were going to try again, don’t you think they would have already? You said it wasn’t a complicated bomb, just stuff found in any hardware store. If they were serious about it, wouldn’t they have tried again by now?”

Spike looked at him disbelievingly. “Can’t use logic to predict their actions, luv. Bombers don’t exactly think like normal people.”

“Ok, good point, but Spike, we may never find out who put the bomb in the school. I can’t just hide out here the rest of my life because something might happen.”
“Not talking about you bein’ a shut-in because you’re scared of life, Xander, this is a specific threat.”

“Which may never happen again.” Their eyes met in a long stare, neither willing to back down, but both understanding the other’s point of view. “How about if I promise that we’ll check the school basement morning and afternoon to make sure whoever it was doesn’t try again?” he offered.

Spike thought about that and reluctantly nodded. “Every day. You don’t stop because a day or two has gone by and you haven’t found anything yet.” He looked sternly at Xander and Xander smiled at him.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised.

“Bloody well better,” Spike muttered.

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Looking at Xander in exasperation, knowing he’d lost the battle to keep Xander home where he belonged, Spike fought back the possessive instincts that clamored at him to chain his boy to the bed and not let him leave the lair - ever. Having Xander at his side all weekend, his boy in full nursemaid mode, had been a taste of how their lives should be and he was having a hard time reconciling himself to giving it up and going back to their daily separations.

He was almost fully healed now, the wound in his side could still be seen but no longer caused him pain. It would be awhile before the scars disappeared entirely, but he was ready to leave the lair, make his presence known and confirm the fact that he was still on top of things and capable of ruling the Hellmouth. A few days working out would see him back in fighting shape and, if the Watcher hadn’t come up with a name for who had set the bomb by then, Spike would see what he could find out.

That decided, Spike looked fondly at his boy. Xander was stubborn and determined to have his own way, qualities Spike prized except when he and Xander had one of their rare arguments. Rare and almost always about Xander recklessly putting himself in danger. Why he had to go and fall in love with a second person with the survival instincts of a lemming, Spike would never know. The chaos gods had to be laughing their asses off at him about now.

Pulling Xander closer, feeling his Claimed settle in comfortably by his side, he tried not to think about tomorrow, when Xander would be back at school and Spike would have to spend the long daylight hours alone.

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Spike didn’t bother knocking, just opened the door and walked in, striding rapidly through the empty outer office and pushing open the door to the Mayor’s personal office.

Two days of worrying and no progress in identifying the person who’d set the bomb and Spike had decided to take action on his own. He’d pretty much ruled out demons as the culprits - no self-respecting demon would use a bomb to blow up a school. Demons destroyed things the old fashioned way: with fire and brute force, tearing buildings apart stone by stone if that was how they got their kicks. Bombs were human things.

Problem was, no human agency was investigating - besides the Watcher and Xander, and neither one of them had a clue about how to hunt down human perpetrators. Outside their little group, no-one even knew the bomb had been placed in the school. Xander had found the barrel of supplemental explosives pushed against the wall in the basement room where Spike had left it. Some janitor had
apparently simply moved it out of their way without bothering to find out what it was or why it was there. With no other choice, Spike had reluctantly decided to involve the Mayor.

Mayor Wilkins and his weasely little assistant were bent over a stack of paperwork on the Mayor’s desk and both looked up in surprise at Spike’s entrance. The assistant flinched and stepped back nervously but the Mayor simply gave Spike a beaming smile.

“Mr. Spike, I’m glad you stopped by. I’ve been meaning to congratulate you on your handling of the Sisterhood of Jhe. Very well done.”

“Since I did you a favor by takin’ care of that lot, figure you owe me somethin’ in return,” Spike said bluntly. “Someone set a bomb in the school basement the night we took out the Sisterhood. Since it was humans, not demons who put it there, need your help in finding out who it was.”

The Mayor’s smile died. “A bomb?” he asked.

“Yeah. Would have taken out half the school if I hadn’t disarmed it. That kind of thing wouldn’t look good on your record if it happens again.”

“No, I agree,” the Mayor answered easily. “Terrible the things people do these days. Why, not even when… when my grandfather was Mayor during Prohibition did we have to worry about bombs in the schools. That’s just not a very civilized thing to do. I can assure you, Mr. Spike, I will look into this immediately.”

“Do that,” Spike let his eyes flare yellow, pleased when the assistant swallowed hard and retreated another couple of steps. The Mayor, on the other hand, just nodded, looking completely unfazed.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Spike, I don’t approve of that kind of random violence in my town. And certainly not in the schools. I’ll find out who is responsible.”

Spike nodded sharply. “I’m keeping the demons in check, least you can do is make sure the humans don’t run rampant.”

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention.” The Mayor smiled his too-wide smile, the one that never quite reached his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want to reconsider working for me, Mr. Spike? I think we make a good team.”

Spike cocked an eyebrow at him. “Was thinking more on the lines of you working for me,” he drawled insolently. “Ta, mate,” he lifted one hand in a half wave, and spun on his heels, stalking out the door without looking back.

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“So, this the new Watcher?”

It wasn’t rocket science, Buffy had spent most of lunch complaining about the pompous idiot who’d been sent by the Council to be her new Watcher. He and Oz had been sympathetic - none of them wanted Giles replaced - as she enumerated his character flaws, which had included a run down on the new Watcher’s bad fashion sense and geeky persona, his complete uselessness as a Watcher, and the fact that he was obviously all book learning and no field experience. Entering the library now, Xander had been on the lookout for a “geek with a smarmy accent and slicked back hair, wearing a dark, pin-striped suit, totally wrong for daytime.”

He hadn’t been hard to spot.
Despite dressing better now, thanks to Spike, Xander would never claim to be an authority on what was fashionable but he had to agree with Buffy that the suit was over-the-top for daytime wear at a school. The guy looked like a corporate attorney, or at least a corporate attorney according to television, he’d never actually met one in real life.

“Yes,” Giles confirmed and Xander shot him a questioning glance at the tight-lipped irritation apparent in the one syllable response. Buffy had been openly resentful about the prospect of a new Watcher but Giles had been Mister equilibrium on the subject of his replacement ever since he’d been fired. Xander suspected it had less to do with fair-mindedness than not wanting to worry Buffy, but still, Giles had been reassuring and more than fair, telling them all on several occasions that they needed to give the new Watcher a fair chance when he arrived. It didn’t bode well that Giles was already having difficulty with the new guy.

“Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Xander Harris,” Giels introduced them and Xander eyed the new guy with open reservation. The new guy was obviously irked at being introduced to Xander and making no attempt to hide it.

“Mr. Giles, this is precisely why you were fired.” He sighed heavily and continued as if Xander wasn’t standing there listening to every word. “Quite frankly, your handling of this assignment has been an embarrassment to the Council. And now I find out, in addition to everything else, you have not even kept the Slayer’s identity secret from high school children.”

Xander folded his arms and glared at the new guy. “That wasn’t exactly his fault. If you’d bothered to find out the facts, you’d know that. And hey, its not like I’m going around telling people.”

“It is in fact part of a Watcher’s duties to seek out promising individuals who have the potential to become Watchers,” Giles informed his replacement acidly. He met Xander’s astonished stare with a bland look, although Xander thought he could see a hint of amusement far back in Giles’ eyes. Giles thought he was a potential Watcher?

“Really?” The new guy - why did all Brits seem to have hard-to-remember hyphenated names? - suddenly seemed keenly interested. “You are interested in becoming a Watcher, Mr. Harris? I can be of assistance with that.”

“Ok, one, so not interested. Two, if I was, I’d stick with Giles.” Xander turned to Giles and said with deliberate malice: “have you done the bomb sweep this morning or should I?”

“Bomb?” Xander had to fight back a laugh at the shock and horror in the new guy’s voice. “W..what are you talking about?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.” Oh yeah, Giles was enjoying this too. Watcher-baiting, a new sport, fun for all ages. “A small problem with a bomb being planted at the school, we’re trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again,” he explained airily, as if it was barely worth mentioning. In fact it wasn’t worth mentioning, Xander had known perfectly well that Giles wouldn’t forget to do a bomb sweep, it had just been too much fun to pass up the opportunity to mess with the new guy.

“Surely that is something that should be left to the town authorities?” From the unmistakable quaver in his voice, the guy was going to be peeing his pants any second, Xander thought, ruthlessly suppressing a smirk.

“It was impossible to inform the authorities since we detonated the bomb ourselves in a successful bid to stop the Hellmouth from opening.” Giles had a smile rather like a shark’s, Xander discovered. “I wouldn’t concern yourself. It’s not all that likely that another bomb would be planted in the same place, directly below the library here.” After pausing for just a second to let that sink in, Giles
continued brightly: “You should go to class, Xander, I’ll take care of the bomb sweep. Would you like to join me, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce? I’m sure all the ‘modern, updated training’ the Council has given you will come in handy.”

“No, I’ll…” Seeing Xander’s sardonic grin, the new Watcher straightened defensively and squared his shoulders. “I will continue unpacking my books,” he said, trying for dignity.

Giles nodded and stood up to leave, looking a bit like an inmate offered a chance to escape from prison. “I’ll see you later, Xander.”

Xander gave him a wave but waited behind for a minute. Left alone with the new Watcher, Xander studied him openly, amused that his intense scrutiny was making the man nervous. Compared to Giles, he was really young, and obviously determined to prove himself.

“Is there something I can help you with, Mr… Harris, was it?”

“Just thought I’d pass on a word of advice,” he began.

The Watcher raised his eyebrows haughtily. “I hardly think I need advice from a civilian on how to do my job, Mr. Harris, especially from a high school student.”

Xander had intended to warn him that they all respected Giles and considered him a friend, especially Buffy, and he should tread lightly if he wanted to get along with his Slayer. Given the snippy response, he changed his mind. “You know that Giles was fired because he wouldn’t put Buffy’s life in danger, right?”

“Mr. Giles revealed the existence of a critical test to the Slayer, against the Council’s explicit instructions, yes.” And wow, Xander was pretty sure he’d just seen a demonstration of the meaning of the word “prig”. And “prissy”. And maybe “jackass”.

“So, can I take it as a given that you wouldn’t have done that?” he asked mildly, tilting his head to one side curiously.

“Oh, of course not. I have a responsibility to the Council, which I take very seriously.”

“Right.” Xander crossed his arms, glad he could finally do that again, now that the sling was history, and regarded him steadily. “So, you’re asking Buffy to accept you as her Watcher, knowing that you would put her life in danger without a second thought if the Council told you to?”

When the new Watcher gaped at him wordlessly, Xander grinned and clapped him on the back with false heartiness. “Good luck with getting her to accept you.”

Walking out, Xander thought that Spike was rubbing off on him. He’d really enjoyed that.
“Hey, Xander.”

Xander looked up from his book, surprised to see Jonathan Levinson standing next to his table. “Hi.”

Jonathan fidgeted nervously. “I just wanted to say thanks for the other day. You know, with Jack.”

Xander closed his book, leaning back in his chair and using his foot to push out one of the empty chairs at the table in invitation. “Have a seat. Just glad I could help.” Looking more closely, he saw that Jonathan looked uneasy and embarrassed and he could guess why. Universal guy code - it was almost worse being rescued from a bully than to be beaten up. “A friend has been teaching me self defense this past year,” he offered. “I’m just happy I finally got a chance to use it.” A diplomatic lie but Jonathan looked a little less uncomfortable and actually sat down.

“Maybe I should take some lessons too,” he said after a moment.

“They’ve really helped and not just with the Jacks of the world.” Jonathan looked interested and Xander explained: “I’m not as clumsy anymore - it’s like I finally know how to handle my body.” He grinned. “I think it’s the jocks’ secret. It’s not just the extra testosterone, it’s knowing how to move.”

Jonathan smiled at him tentatively and, for a moment, the loneliness retreated from his eyes. As they talked, awkwardly at first, then the words gradually beginning to flow more easily, Xander tried to remember if he’d ever seen Jonathan just sitting and talking to someone like they were friends. In all the years he’d known Jonathan, he couldn’t think of a single time he’d seen Jonathan just hanging out with someone.

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Spike swung his quarterstaff around and down, blocking a vicious blow aimed at his stomach and knocking his opponent’s weapon aside. He let the momentum carry him around and his grip shifted as he spun until he was holding the pole at one end, bringing it around in a savage blow that connected with his opponent’s midsection in a whoosh of displaced air and knocked her off her feet. The other vampire was thrown halfway across the room by the force of the blow, her own quarterstaff sent flying as she lost her grip. She crashed into the wall with a sickening thud and crumpled to the floor unmoving as her weapon clattered to the cement floor a long distance away.

Spike laughed, spinning his own quarterstaff in a flashy move, then resting the tip on the ground and subtly leaning against it. He hadn’t let it slow him down but his side had ached fiercely during the fight and he’d known that, in another minute, he would no longer be able to hide his weakness. He’d brought the fight to a sudden, decisive end for just that reason.

“Someone check on her,” he ordered the room in general. “If she’s still alive, I want her kept alive. Fetch as much blood as she needs.” He saw Anthony signaling two of the minions to take care of the fallen vampire and tossed his quarterstaff to Michael, nodding to him in acknowledgement as Michael raised it in salute. He started to walk towards the stairs to his apartment, concentrating fiercely on not limping, then turned back as if at a sudden thought.

“And boys? No take out. She drinks bagged until she can hunt for herself again.” He smirked, “that’ll teach her to leave her guard down like that.” He didn’t wait for acknowledgement, knowing his Lieutenants would see his orders carried out, just began the long climb up the stairs.
Only Jose knew he’d been injured, or at least knew for sure. The others might guess that there was some reason Spike hadn’t been seen on the factory floor in three days, but Spike could live with speculation. Sure knowledge of his weakness could have seen some of the more ambitious minions storming the apartment but none of them would risk taking on Spike unless they were absolutely certain he was vulnerable. Despite his fatigue, Spike smirked as he climbed the stairs. His minions were terrified of his wrath and that was how it should be.

Xander would fuss if he heard about it, but Spike had known he had to show himself and prove he was still in control. He’d simply appeared on the factory floor in late afternoon while Xander was at school and “volunteered” one of the newer members of the Court for a sparring session. He’d seen her practicing with a quarterstaff a few weeks earlier and knew she understood the rudiments of fighting with the weapon but had nowhere near his skill level. It made her a safe opponent, one he could defeat handily under the guise of teaching her, but it wouldn’t look like he had deliberately picked a weak opponent to spar with. It wasn’t unusual for Spike to work out with both his Lieutenants and the Court minions with a variety of weapons, so the members of the Court had seen nothing unusual in his actions.

Slowly mounting the stairs to the second floor, Spike knew he was going to need blood himself. His wound was almost fully healed but neither his stamina nor his full strength had returned yet. Fighting with a quarterstaff involved a lot of twisting moves and the muscles in his side had let him know in no uncertain terms they weren’t quite up to the task. More blood and another day should have him back on top of his form, he thought, resigning himself to another night in the apartment.

It wasn’t that spending the night in the apartment with Xander was a hardship - far from it - but he was itching to patrol his territory again. He hadn’t heard from the Mayor yet about the bomb at the school and Spike needed to follow up on the problem. Despite knowing that Xander and Giles were checking the school basement twice a day, he was nervous and tense all day until he heard Xander’s footsteps on the stairs at the end of the day, signaling his boy was home safely. After two days of that, Spike was feeling the need to kill something, preferably the cause of his upset. Surely Xander wouldn’t mind if he tortured and killed a human capable of planting a bomb in a school. Practically a public service, he thought, even though he knew Xander would never see it that way.

If he knew about it, Spike reminded himself, cheered considerably by the thought.

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Sitting in one of the private study rooms, Xander stared at the blank piece of paper in front of him and wondered if this was what they called writer’s block. No matter how he tried, words just wouldn’t come and the paper remained stubbornly blank. Sighing, he put down his pen and fished around in his backpack for the three letters Willow had sent to him. Pulling them out, he settled down to re-read them.

He hadn’t answered any of them yet, but Willow continued to write to him. The letters were arriving once a week and they were the same as the first one: friendly and reminiscent, describing England and her lessons and their mutual past. Nothing in the letters called for a response - Willow never asked questions or urged him to write back to her. Instead, it was like she was sitting in the same room, just talking to him like they hadn’t talked in over two years. He could hear her voice in his head as he read the letters and it made him miss the Willow he’d once known with an aching sense of loss he’d thought he’d put behind him.

Talking with Jonathan today had made him think. If he hadn’t had Jesse and Willow in his life, would he be Jonathan today? A hopeless geek, friendless and picked on by everyone? All too clearly, Xander could picture that life. Why hadn’t Jonathan ever seemed to find even one friend to
band together with against the world?

Remembering his years of friendship with Willow, when she had been there for him on a daily basis, before the misunderstandings and the mutual hurt, before they’d gone their separate ways, had made him long to reclaim even a little of that past. At the very least, he’d decided to make a start in that direction by writing back to Willow. The Willow in the letters sounded older and finally wiser but so like the girl he’d once known it made an empty place inside his heart ache - the place that Willow had once occupied. The wound he’d thought was finally scarred over and healed turned out to still be there.

Holding the image in his mind of the shy, red-haired girl he’d grown up with, Xander began to write.

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Spike had made a quick pass through four cemeteries when he caught scent of the Slayer and Angelus. Having not patrolled his territory in almost five days, he wanted to do a swift, thorough overview of the entire town. Although eager to work off his tension after three days of worry over his Claimed being in danger at school, he wasn’t really looking for a fight, knowing he would be better waiting one more day before mixing it up with anything too tough. His side only made its presence known when he put too much strain on the muscles but it remained a vulnerable spot in a fight.

His semi-peaceful intentions vanished as he caught wind of the Slayer and Angelus together, alone, in a cemetery. Swearing, he altered course. If those two were snogging, he was going to kill them both, he thought wrathfully. He’d thought he’d finally gotten them well and truly separated, only in each other’s company when there were others around but obviously they still hadn’t learned. Bloody idiots.

He slowed his pace when he was almost upon them and sauntered into the clearing where the two of them were crouched, watching a crypt.

Angel held up a warning hand for silence and the Slayer and he exchanged glances, then melted back from their target, joining Spike and signaling him to walk further away with them. When they were sufficiently far from the clearing that vampire ears could not have heard them, Angel asked quietly: “How are you?”

“How many are there?”

Spike answered briefly. His anger had cooled when he saw they appeared to be on business but he still wasn’t happy the two of them were alone together. He didn’t trust either of them to keep their hands off each other, when it came right down to it. “What’s up?”

“Better,” Spike answered briefly. “They’re some sort of duelist cult of vampires,” she continued when Spike shook his head. “Apparently a bunch of them are in town looking for some amulet. I was supposed to get it first but they beat us to the crypt.”

“How many are there?”

“Six. We thought we’d hit them as they came out of the crypt.”

Unwilling to admit he hadn’t completely healed yet, Spike nodded curtly. “Sounds good.” Six vampires shouldn’t give the three of them any trouble, he thought optimistically.
They moved back to the clearing just in time to see the last two vampires drop down through a sewer entrance.

“Damn it!” Buffy exclaimed. “we missed them.”

Spike kept striding forward into the clearing without pausing. “What are you talking about, Slayer? Know exactly where they are, don’t we? You coming or not?”

Without waiting for a response, he dropped down through the open manhole cover, behind the last of the vampires, grinning as he heard Angelus’ exasperated shout behind him. They’d follow him and Spike was itching for a good fight.

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“Now that was fun!”

Spike’s exclamation coincided with the last of the Eliminati exploding into a cloud of dust. Despite herself, Buffy grinned back at him. “Didn’t suck,” she agreed.

Angel shook his head in mock disapproval. “Don’t let him corrupt you,” he advised Buffy.

“Oi! ’s not corrupting to enjoy a good fight,” Spike protested. “C’mon Angelus, you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy this?”

Typically, his Sire just shrugged, not willing to admit that he still got off on a life and death struggle against a dozen foes.

It had been a sweet fight. Dropping in on the surprised vampires, outnumbered and out-weaponed, they had only the element of surprise and superior fighting skills on their side. The three of them had functioned well as a team, watching each other’s backs and dividing their opponents. Next time, Spike thought, feeling the ache in his side, he’d rather have a few more weapons, but he’d take on this lot of medieval morons any night. If any of them were left, that is.

The amulet had been yanked free from one of the Eliminati during the fight and sent spinning into a corner of the cave. Buffy picked it up now, examining it curiously. “We sure this is it? Doesn’t look like much.”

Spike shrugged. “If not, they put up a hell of a fight over a cheap bauble.” Not particularly interested in the amulet, he picked up a couple of the swords that members of the cult had dropped before being dusted. “Bit showy, but not bad,” was his judgment as he examined the jewel-encrusted hilts, deciding to keep them.

Buffy tucked the amulet into her pocket. “Giles will know if it’s real.” She made a face, remembering. “If New Guy lets him see it, that is.”

“Who?” Angel asked.

“My new Watcher,” Buffy explained. “Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. He got into town yesterday and I’m already trying to find a way around that whole ‘Slayers don’t kill people’ rule. You should come meet him, he’s a real prince.”

“Yeah, so Xander tells me,” Spike observed. From Xander’s description, the new Watcher was a complete twit.

Angel frowned. “What’s so bad about him?”
“How long do you have?” Buffy asked wryly. “Let’s just say he makes a really bad first impression. He claims he’s studied up on Sunnydale and knows everything about it.” She sounded skeptical.

Spike turned and looked at her. “Really?” he asked with interest, wondering if the Watcher knew anything useful about the town. Or the Mayor.

Buffy shrugged. “He did know about the amulet and where it would be and Giles didn’t,” she admitted reluctantly. “Says it originally belonged to a demon named Balthazar who died a long time ago. He sent me out after the amulet saying we should deprive the Eliminati of it even if it’s useless now that Balthazar is dead.” She tapped her pocket over the amulet. “I’d give him points for knowing about the amulet but, among other things, when he gave me this assignment, he said these Eliminati guys were nearly extinct. I wasn’t expecting quite this much of a party with the ‘few remaining Eliminati’.”

She was obviously quoting and Spike grinned, cocking his scarred eyebrow at her. “They’re extinct now,” he pointed out with satisfaction.

“Well, yeah, but he said there were only a few of them before we killed these guys. I don’t think that counts. Makes me wonder how dead the main demon is.”

“Good point,” Angelus put in, “Maybe we should check on that. Vampires aren’t usually into sentimental souvenirs. They wanted the amulet for a reason.”

Spike had his mind on other things. “Why don’t we go meet this new Watcher of yours?” he suggested.

Buffy’s slow smile was pure evil. Oh, yeah, the Slayer was coming along fine, Spike thought as the three of them headed out of the cave.

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“It appears to be genuine but I’ll have to run some tests.”

Standing next to Xander, Spike studied the new Watcher through narrowed eyes. Young and painfully inexperienced, he hadn’t even questioned the presence of Spike and Angelus yet. Instead, he’d snatched up the amulet and begun examining it through a magnifying glass without even a token acknowledgement of the Slayer’s efforts in retrieving it. Giles had quietly questioned Buffy about her well-being, showing a concern blatantly missing in the other Watcher. Spike shook his head in disgust. Didn’t this idiot realize that the Slayer was a 17-year old girl? An adolescent? Never mind that she was a warrior, she was still young enough to need the approval of the adults around her. Over the past year, Spike had seen how the Slayer responded to Giles’ fatherly concern and attention, blossoming under it and working twice as hard to be sure she never let him down. The new Watcher would never earn that kind of loyalty from the Slayer and the Slayer would have a shorter life for it.

“Where’d they come up with this idiot?” he asked Xander, who gave him a fleeting grin in return.

“He’s the new breed of Watcher, didn’t you know?” Xander’s response was just as quiet but Giles caught it, flicking an amused glance in their direction.

Looking up from the magnifying glass, the new Watcher seemed to realize for the first time that there were two more people in the room. Drawing himself up to his full height, he shot a disapproving look at Giles. “More people who know about the Slayer?” he asked with chill sarcasm.
“Not exactly,” Spike answered. Unable to resist, he shifted to his true face, thoroughly enjoying the frightened squeak as the new Watcher jumped back.

“Great, Spike. If he pees his pants, you’re cleaning it up,” Xander said, with just the right note of exasperation in his voice. Spike shook with silent laughter and even Angelus let out a short bark of surprised laughter at the comment.

“Spike, Angel, this is Wesley Wyndam-Pryce,” Giles performed the introduction with aplomb, as if they were strangers meeting at a tea party.


“They have both helped Buffy on occasion,” Giles filled in helpfully but Spike was already tired of the conversation.

“Slayer says you’ve researched the town’s history. What can you tell me about the Mayor?” he asked flatly.

For a long moment, he thought the man was too frightened to answer, but he finally gathered himself and took a deep breath, throwing his shoulders back and looking down his nose at Spike.

“Nothing at all.” He cleared his throat and continued: “And I don’t think I would tell you anything even if I had information on the Mayor. You are a vampire and, as such, the enemy.”

“Spike’s a vampire?” Xander asked in mock astonishment, twisting around to stare at Spike. Spike smacked him lightly and Xander grinned at him unrepentantly. “Yeah, known I’ve been a vampire for awhile now. I’ve gotten over the shock,” Spike said dryly. “Thought you were supposed to know everythin’ about this town,” he needled.

Wesley sniffed loftily, having apparently decided that neither Spike nor Angelus were going to kill him. Pity. “I’ve been researching the demonic history of the town, not the local politicians. That’s a bit outside my purview.”

“Good work. Missed the fact that the Mayor’s not entirely human, did you?”

The new Watcher’s lips tightened at Spike’s sarcastic response and he turned to Giles. “I cannot tell you how unbelievable it is to learn that you have not only allowed your Slayer to associate with Angelus but with William the Bloody. You’ve really gone beyond the pale, Mr. Giles, and I must insist that this association cease at once.”

“Fat chance,” Buffy muttered.

Angel just scowled at him, his brows lowered threateningly. Spike knew he hated it when anyone called him Angelus. Spike himself was the sole exception to that rule and that was only because Angelus had given up on the issue, just grateful that Spike no longer referred to him as “Peaches” and “Captain Hair Gel” and the myriad of other names he’d come up with over the years.

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Spike opened his mouth to add his two cents worth and Xander elbowed him sharply, cutting him off before he could even start. They had enough problems already. Xander stepped forward as Spike subsided unwillingly. Grateful in hindsight for all the practice he’d had last year in keeping Spike and Buffy from killing each other, he put himself bodily between the new Watcher and Spike. “You
need to understand something. Spike is Master of the Hellmouth, he does a lot to keep the demon population from wreaking havoc in this town. Thanks to Spike, the death rate has dropped 20% in the last two years."

Ok, he was making that part up, but a solid statistic sounded much better than a vague generality. “And if you knew what you were talking about, you’d know that Angel has a soul, which makes him different from other vampires. He patrols with both Spike and Buffy and is one of the reasons Buffy is still alive today.” And wow, he never thought he’d be spouting the “Angel has a soul” party line. He felt really hypocritical, considering the stance he’d taken on the subject last year, but this wasn’t a good time to explain his issues with Angel to the new guy.

“If you can’t deal, then get the hell out,” he finished emphatically, despite knowing it wasn’t really his call.

“Well said, Xander.” Giles put in and Buffy gave him a warm smile, probably for the compliment to Angel.

Xander crossed his arms and leaned back against Spike, who slid his own arms around Xander’s waist, clasping his hands over Xander’s stomach. “It ain’t broke, so don’t try to fix it, is what I’m saying.”

“You tell him, pet,” Spike said, kissing him lightly when Xander turned his head towards him.

“Wesley, this is a take it or leave it situation,” Buffy added, stepping forward in turn. “Angel and Spike are part of the team. So are Giles, Xander and Oz. If you can’t work with them, I won’t work with you. Got it?”

Looking around at the circle of hard eyes staring at him, the new Watcher seemed to wilt. Obviously unwilling to call Buffy on the stand she’d taken - probably afraid of losing his job, Xander thought cynically - he nodded his head and retreated to the office, closing the door firmly behind him. Not quite a slam, but close, Xander thought with a grin.

“Let me know when I can kill him,” Spike volunteered.

Buffy shook her head. “No way, I’m doing it personally if he pulls this kind of crap again.”

Xander almost felt sorry for the new guy. Almost.

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The end result of their discussion was that Buffy, Spike and Angel agreed to meet up the next night and do a joint patrol. All of them wanted to know if there were more Eliminati around. Despite the new Watcher’s reassurance, none of them were really confident that Balthazar was actually dead. As Angel had pointed out earlier, the Eliminati wouldn’t be hunting for the amulet for sentimental reasons. That meant that either Balthazar was still around or the amulet had other uses. Either way, they needed to figure out what was going on.

Giles and Xander had agreed to research Balthazar and the amulet while the other three patrolled. In the meantime, Giles assured them he would put the amulet somewhere safer than Wesley’s breast pocket.

Wesley had emerged from the office at some point during the discussion, but had remained silent, listening to the others talk. He’d barely resisted when Buffy demanded that he turn the amulet over to
Giles for safe-keeping, handing it over with only a token protest. Hearing their plans, he’d simply murmured quietly that, while he may have underestimated the remaining Eliminati’s numbers, surely they must all be as dead as Balthazar now.

Xander just hoped he wasn’t going to tattle to the Council on the situation. God knows what those guys would do. Granted, it was hard to imagine a worse replacement for Giles than this guy, but who knew what the Council would do if they learned of the near mutiny in Sunnydale.

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Walking home with Spike’s arm around his shoulder, Xander asked quietly: “Are you really up for this?”

“I will be by tomorrow,” Spike answered honestly. “I’ve been working out during the days while you’re at school, getting my strength back. I’m not there yet, but close to it.”

“You haven’t been overdoing it, have you?”

Spike almost made a flip reply but the worry in Xander’s voice made him answer seriously. “Maybe a little, but nothing that will set me back.” He stopped walking and turned so they were facing each other. “I have to do this, luv. Can’t be seen as weak or someone might try and take advantage of the moment. I just put on a little show for the minions, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

Xander nodded, pulling Spike in for a long kiss. “I do worry about you, Spike.”

They started walking again and Xander added, more lightly: “So, what was your idea of a small show? Taking on ten of the minions at once? How many survived?”

Spike just laughed.

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If Xander had to listen to Wesley and Giles snipe at each other any longer, he was going to kill Wesley. The guy just wouldn’t let up and he seemed to have completely forgotten Xander was there in the library. Either that, or he was just oblivious to the fact that his voice carried easily through the closed door of Giles’ office.

Granted, he could see that Wesley was smart, almost as smart as Giles, but he was obviously insecure about replacing the older Watcher. Not that Xander could blame him; none of them had exactly rolled out the welcome wagon for the new guy and Xander was as guilty as the rest, but jeez, you’d think the guy could acknowledge that Giles had a strong relationship with Buffy and try to work with him. But no, not Mr. by-the-book Wyndam-Pryce - paying even lip service to Giles’ nearly three years of service was obviously too much to ask.

Xander was seriously regretting his decision to wait for Spike in the library. It had seemed like a good idea yesterday - Buffy would need to stop at the library after patrol to report anyway and he would use his time productively, researching Balthazar and the Eliminati. But that had been before the Wesley and Giles snipe fest started.

Sighing, Xander tried to concentrate on the chapter discussing Balthazar that he’d been trying to read for an hour. Between worrying about Spike and the on-going snark-fest going on in the office, he hadn’t gotten very far. Shaking his head, he flipped back to the beginning of the chapter. Maybe if he started over, he’d remember some of what he’d read this time.

He’d barely turned the first page when the sound of booted feet walking through the stacks on the
upper level caught his attention. Relief flooded him. They were back and so quickly they must have had no trouble with the Eliminati. Looking up with a smile, he froze as five vampires in medievallooking tunics appeared at the top of the stairs. From Buffy’s description, he had no doubt these were the Eliminati.

He shot to his feet, his chair clattering to the floor behind him. “Giles!” he yelled, even as he ran for the weapons cage. He fumbled with the latch in his haste, hearing something land on the floor behind him with a thud, then a thick hand slammed the barely-opened cage door shut again.

Xander spun around and found himself facing the business end of a sword. Before he could move, the vampire shoved him back against the cage with one large hand to his chest, pressing the point of the sword against his throat.

Xander froze, hardly daring to breathe, arching his head back as far as he could, trying to relieve the pressure on his throat before the sword broke the skin.

“Leave him alone!”

Giles’ voice rang sharply across the room and the vampire fist ed his hand in Xander’s shirt to hold him in place as he glanced over his shoulder at Giles. Behind the vampire, Xander could see Giles and Wesley surrounded by vampires, all with drawn swords.

“Which one of you is the Watcher?” one of the vampires demanded.

“I am,” Giles answered, shooting a quick, silencing look in Wesley’s direction. From what Xander could see, it wasn’t necessary; Wesley looked beyond speech, white-faced and terrified.

“Kill the others,” the vampire ordered.

“No!” Giles lunged forward but the demons surrounding him grabbed him and held him despite his struggles.

“You’ll regret it, if you do,” Xander told the vampire holding him. He was fighting his own fear and tried to make his voice as urgent and convincing as possible. “We’re his assistants. You obviously need him for something. If you kill us, he won’t cooperate with you.”

The vampire hesitated and looked to his leader for guidance. The leader of the group strode across the room in their direction. “A bargaining chip, eh? Maybe, but why do I need two of you?” He smirked at Xander, enjoying his fear.

“Because one hostage is worthless. With two, you can kill one and still have a spare. With only one, you can barely start working them over before they’re dead and then they’re useless. You know how weak humans are.” One thing Xander had learned from Spike was that vampires all thought humans were weak. Even Spike thought that, he just tried not to say it around Xander.

The vampire laughed. “We’ll be sure to use you first,” he said. Jerking his head at the vampire holding Xander, he ordered: “Bring them along.”

The sword retreated from his throat and Xander barely had time for one relieved breath before he was spun around and slammed face first into the metal door of the cage. Rough hands tied his hands behind his back and then he was sent stumbling forward to join Giles and Wesley, the three of them propelled out the door by a lot of unnecessary shoving from behind.
“Stop!”

The vampire who seemed to be the leader of their little bondage party snapped out the order, halting the group before they had gone more than fifty feet outside the library doors. The vampire behind Xander jerked him to a stop and he saw the same thing happening to Giles and Wesley.

“There’s something…”

The lead vampire walked up and back between the three of them scrutinizing them carefully, then his hand flashed out, grabbing Xander by the collar and yanking him out of line. Xander tried to brace himself against the pull but found himself stumbling forward unwillingly, unable to do much to fight back with his arms tied behind his back. He heard Giles ordering the vampire to leave him alone but the vampire didn’t even glance in Giles’ direction and Xander winced as he heard a muffled thud and Giles’ voice cut off in a pained grunt.

“You. You wear the mark of a Master Vampire.”

Xander’s blood ran cold and he stared wide-eyed back at the vampire, not sure if this was a good thing or instant death. Spike said the mark would protect him because it marked him as Spike’s property in the demon world but Xander hadn’t forgotten the discussion he and Spike had had last year when Angel had temporarily marked him and Spike had admitted that some demons might try to harm him to prove they were stronger than the vampire who’d Claimed him.

The vampire fisted both hands in his shirt front and shook him hard, until Xander was dizzy, then tore Xander’s shirt open, revealing Spike’s mark. Glaring at Xander, he hissed angrily: “Who’s mark is this?”

Xander stayed stubbornly silent, desperately wishing he’d discussed how to handle this situation with Spike. If he survived, he and Spike were definitely having a talk about whether giving Spike’s name was the right thing to do or not. He didn’t dare look to Giles for guidance, not wanting to reveal that Giles knew who had marked him. The vampire shook him again, demanding: “Who’s mark do you wear?”

“He’s been Claimed by the Master of the Hellmouth,” Giles’ voice answered from behind him. The vampire stopped shaking Xander and let his grip slacken slightly as he turned to look at Giles. “And if you harm him in any way, there will be no place you can hide from his Master’s vengeance,” Giles finished, his voice hard.

“The Master of the Hellmouth allows his Claimed to assist a Watcher?” the vampire scoffed, giving Xander another shake for good measure.

“He wants the boy to learn everything there is to know about demons. Who better to teach him than a Watcher?” Giles answered smoothly. Xander could hear the tension in Giles’ voice as he answered, filling in the gaping silence left by Xander’s own indecision.

The demon grunted, seeming to accept that and Xander concentrated on not letting out a sigh of relief. It was too soon for that, as the vampire turned back to him. “Why didn’t you claim your Master’s protection when we arrived?”

Xander found his voice. “Would you have honored his Claim?” he asked.
The demon let out a short bark of laughter. “No,” he said flatly. “Our Lord Balthazar is stronger than any vampire. In his service, we don’t need to worry about anyone’s vengeance.”

“Even when he can bring nearly a hundred vampires to the fight?” Xander asked, hoping this was the right way to handle the situation. Really going to talk to Spike - first thing tomorrow. He didn’t think the Court was quite up to 100 vampires, more like fifty or sixty actually, but hey, some of them had to have friends, right?

“In any case,” he continued rapidly, before anyone could get any ideas. “What I said before still goes. If you’re not afraid of my Master, then you need me to make the Watcher cooperate.” He met the vampire’s eyes unflinchingly until he was suddenly thrust away contemptuously.

“Get them moving,” the vampire ordered.

One or two of the vampires looked unhappy about the decision but none of them ventured a protest. Xander found himself herded into a line again with Wesley and Giles as they were quick-marched out of the school.

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Spike, Angel and Buffy had met shortly after sunset in the library as agreed. Spike had felt almost sorry for Xander, given the tense atmosphere between the two Watchers, knowing the two men would be sniping at each other all night, with Xander a captive audience. He’d left Xander with a kiss and an amused request for a blow-by-blow description of the Watcher Smackdown, which had earned him a reproving smack and a warm chuckle.

The three of them headed out, with Spike filling the others in on what he’d learned from his Lieutenants - that the Eliminati had taken over a packing warehouse on Devereau Street, a run-down neighborhood not far from the docks. Angel confirmed the information, having gone to several demon bars after they split up last night and having been told the same thing.

Actually reaching the warehouse turned out to be a bit more difficult than they had expected.

Members of the Eliminati were out in force, patrolling the warehouse district for blocks around Devereau street and the first attack came ten streets away: a single vampire, with the trademark tunic and swords, and the Slayer took him out handily, ducking underneath the swords and coming up inside his guard with her stake out and ready. She was still brushing the ashes out of her hair when the next attack came.

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They were attacked three more times on their way to the warehouse and Spike was starting to find it annoying. The Eliminati had no sense of teamwork - attacking individually, the next one springing out of the shadows moments after the last one was dust. Came from being a duelist cult, Spike figured, each one more interested in proving their own worth through single combat than in actually winning the battle or accomplishing a goal like keeping enemies away from their master’s stronghold.

Bleedin’ outdated, outmoded idiots, he thought wrathfully, watching Angelus and the Slayer make short work of the next one - tag-teaming him, Angelus holding him and the Slayer going in for the kill.

Sensing movement out of the corner of his eye, Spike leapt forward, dragging the person hiding there out of the alcove and slamming him up against a wall.
“Spike, no!” Buffy yelled. “He’s human.”

“Know he’s human, Slayer,” Spike snarled. “Question is, what’s he doing here?”

It was the Mayor’s assistant and Spike slammed him against the wall again, just because he could. He could already smell the fear rolling off the man and he shifted his grip, bunching his hands into the man’s suit and lifting him up onto his toes. He heard the Slayer and Angelus come up behind him and thought savagely that they’d do better keeping an eye out for more attacks.

“Spike, let him go,” the Slayer ordered.

“Hasn’t answered my question yet.” Spike didn’t take his eyes off the human, glaring at him with yellow-eyed malice. “What are you doing here?” he repeated for the slow members of the class.

“The Mayor sent me,” the man answered, his voice quavering. Spike had not been impressed with the Mayor’s assistant when he’d encountered him at City Hall and was becoming less impressed by the second.

“Why?” Spike growled.

“Spike, we don’t have time for this,” Buffy said impatiently.

“Piss off, Slayer. This won’t take long. Will it?” he asked the Mayor’s assistant, his voice silky with menace. “Not real patient under the best of circumstances,” he informed the man, lifting him even higher, sliding him roughly up the brick wall until his feet left the ground entirely. A stupid move except with prey that was too terrified to struggle, as this man was. “And we have pressing business. So, unless you want me to start ripping off important body parts, you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

He felt the Slayer stirring behind him and hoped she would have the good sense not to interrupt or that Angelus would stop her if she tried. The man looked over Spike’s shoulder to the Slayer, saying desperately, “You can’t let him do this to me.”

“Yes, she can.” Thankfully, it was Angelus who answered. “As he mentioned, we’re in a bit of a hurry.”

Spike let the man slide down the wall again and pinned him in place with one arm, reaching down with the other to grab the man’s goolies in an iron grip. “Answer my questions, or I’ll rip ’em off and feed ’em to the pigeons.”

For one second, Spike thought he’d gone too far and the man was going to faint before answering Spike’s questions. He tightened his grip and the man gasped in pain, his eyes snapping back into focus. Spike just looked at him, eyebrows raised, a smirk on his lips.

“Balthazar,” he gasped, and Spike knew he’d won. “If he gets his strength back, he can cause problems. The Mayor sent me to keep an eye on the situation, there’s an amulet…”

“Yeah, we know about that,” Spike interrupted. “Why does the Mayor care?” He tightened his grip again as incentive and the man screamed.

“He’s the one who wounded Balthazar. The timing is bad. The Mayor can’t take the risk that Balthazar will get the amulet before tonight.”

“What’s tonight?” Spike asked sharply.
The man shook his head, and Spike snarled, twisting his hand until the only thing keeping his prisoner upright was Spike’s arm pressing him against the wall. “Not goin’ to ask again: what’s tonight?”

“The Mayor… there’s a ritual. He’s been waiting a hundred years to perform it.”

“A hundred years?” He’d thought the Slayer had been quiet too long and now the question burst out of her.

“He’s not really human anymore,” the man answered. “He’s made… pacts.”

There was a sudden noise behind them and all three spun around, Spike letting the man drop as he saw two more Eliminati with drawn swords running in their direction. Swearing at the interruption, Spike moved to meet them, fanning out with Buffy and Angelus to force the attackers to choose their targets, leaving one of the three free to maneuver.

Spinning to avoid a sword thrust, Spike got inside the duelist’s guard, where his swords would be of little use, slamming an elbow viciously into the vampire’s gut and grappling with him for possession of the sword. Peripherally, he was aware that the Mayor’s assistant was limping painfully away as fast as he could, but he couldn’t do anything about that now.

The vampire was bigger than him and used his greater weight to advantage, shoving Spike back against the wall of the alley and smashing him into the bricks. Spike grunted in pain but went with the motion, letting his own weight hold him against the wall for the second it took to raise his legs and kick out with both feet. His boots caught the vampire square in the chest, sending him staggering backwards and dropping the sword they had been struggling over. Spike dropped to the ground in a crouch and bounced back up, coming up with the sword and bringing it around in a clean swipe, cutting off the vampire’s head and dusting him.

Angelus and the Slayer were darting in and out, staying out of reach of the two swords the remaining Eliminati held. He was good - lunging at first one, then the other, keeping them back and unable to close, but not overextending himself and giving them an opening. Angelus had a bleeding slash in his upper arm, the swordsman had obviously taught him to be careful. Seeing his chance, Spike moved forward on silent feet and brought the sword around again for his second beheading of the evening.

Before the head had finished turning to ash, Spike said grimly: “Need to find that little piss-ant again.”

“Spike, the warehouse?” Buffy reminded him.

“This Balthazar doesn’t sound like much without the amulet,” Spike countered.

“Maybe, but the Eliminati are out in magnum force. The Mayor can wait.”

Spike hesitated, not sure which was the bigger problem. The closeness of the warehouse finally decided him. They were only a block from their target and City Hall was all the way across town. “Right. Let’s finish off these morons.” Tossing the sword aside contumulously, he signaled to the others to move out.

Keeping a wary eye out for more Eliminati, they closed the remaining distance to the boarded up warehouse rapidly but silently. There were no more challenges, they must finally have taken out the last of the vampires on guard. Peering through the window, Spike saw almost a dozen more vampires inside and….
Rage slammed through him. Xander. Those bastards had his Claimed. Spike wasn’t even aware that he was struggling in an iron grip, fighting to get free and go to his Claimed’s rescue.

“Spike!” Angelus hissed, Spike was fairly sure it wasn’t the first time. “Calm down or you’ll get them all killed.”

He was right. Spike forced himself to stop and realized that both Angelus and Buffy had been restraining him and thankfully, had pushed him back from the warehouse door. Ice-cold now, his fury under tight control, he moved forward quietly and saw that no-one inside the warehouse had heard them. Xander, Giles and the new Watcher were safe and relatively unharmed from the look of things.

“We need more weapons than none,” the Slayer breathed, nearly inaudibly except to vampire hearing. She was right. None of them had bothered to keep the weapons of the Eliminati they’d killed. Spike had taken his souvenirs the other night and the swords weren’t unique or valuable enough to want to keep more of them. Every one of the Eliminati carried two swords and now Spike cursed himself for not carrying weapons when going against vampires who habitually carried them. He looked around for inspiration and a cold smile crossed his face.

“Keep an eye on things, back in two minutes,” he said.

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The three of them had been dragged through the sewers for what felt like an endless time and then pulled up into a warehouse. Xander was concentrating fiercely on not showing his fear, admiring Giles’ calm and doing his best to mimic it. Wesley was unfortunately a model for what Xander didn’t want to show - the new Watcher was obviously terrified and unable to hide it.

While sympathizing with his fear - and sharing it - one thing Xander had learned from Spike was that showing weakness was not the best thing to do around demons. Or bullies, for that matter, he thought, remembering his encounter with Jack O’Toole. Vampires were hunters and humans their natural prey and, for many vampires, a terrified victim was preferable to a resigned one. An openly frightened victim could bring out the worst in demons as the scent of fear provoked them into tormenting the person to increase their fear.

Coming face to face with Balthazar, Xander swallowed hard and struggled to remember that and not let his own fear show. Balthazar should had been a comic figure: grossly fat and sitting in what looked like a hot tub, having water continuously ladled over him by members of the Eliminati; he was something out of a comic book. A dark, twisted comic book, granted, but he was over-the-top grotesque in a way that should have been laughable.

It wasn’t.

Balthazar was cold and alien in the way reptiles and snakes were and Xander had the sinking feeling that humans meant even less to Balthazar than they did to snakes. Balthazar’s red eyes were almost lost in folds of flesh but their malignant gleam was still plainly visible. Having a dozen vampires fawning on his every word wasn’t helping. Clearly the Eliminati saw Balthazar as a figure worth serving, not a joke, and Xander remembered that they had followed this demon for centuries.

"Stay calm," Wesley said desperately, sounding as if he was trying to convince himself. "We must all remain calm."

"Well, thank god you’re here, I was planning to panic."
Even in these circumstances, Xander felt his lips twitch slightly at Giles’ sarcastic reply. He felt the tight knot of tension inside him unclench ever so slightly and stood a little straighter, grateful for Giles’ steady presence beside him.

“What is that thing?” The tremor in Wesley’s voice was one of the reasons Xander was staying quiet, he didn’t want to reveal his own fear as plainly as Wesley was doing.

“That would be your demon. You know, the dead one?”

Balthazar, who had been focused on the vampires pouring water over his massive body, suddenly looked in their direction and spoke, ordering his minions to bring them closer. A hard shove sent Xander stumbling closer to the tub, Giles and Wesley were propelled closer as well until they were only about a dozen feet from Balthazar. Xander almost choked as the smell overwhelmed him: a fetid stench of disease and rot hung in an almost visible cloud around Balthazar and the unheated warehouse seemed to grow even colder.

“You know what I want.” It wasn’t a question, Balthazar knew they had about the amulet.

“If it’s for me to scrub those hard-to-reach areas, I’d like to request you kill me now,” Giles said with unshakeable calm.

Unlike Wesley, unfortunately, who appeared to be on the verge of losing it. “Are you out of your mind?” he hissed to Giles. “This is hardly the time for games!”

“Why not? They’re going to torture us to death anyway.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” Balthazar agreed with a malicious smile.

Xander opened his mouth for the first time, but Wesley’s desperate voice cut across his before he could speak. “Now, hold on. We… we can deal with this rationally. We have something you want. You have something we want.”

Xander turned to stare at him in shock, and anger rapidly replaced his fear. They couldn’t give this demon the amulet that increased his power something like a hundredfold. “Shut up,” he hissed, forgetting everything but the need to keep Wesley from talking. Unable to think of any other way to stop him, he kicked out hard at Wesley’s knee. Wesley cried out in pain as his knee crumpled under the blow, sending him to the ground. He landed hard, unable to catch himself with his hands tied behind him and Xander was hit from behind, a stunningly hard blow that sent him stumbling to the floor next to Wesley.

“Stop!” Giles commanded and Xander looked up to see Giles staring intently at Balthazar. “Look, let Captain Courageous and the boy go, and I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

“No! Giles!” Xander struggled to get to his feet and felt inhumanly strong hands close around his arm, hauling him up like a child. Another vampire yanked Wesley to his feet, but Xander had no eyes for anything but Giles. “I won’t leave you here alone, Giles.”

“Be quiet, Xander,” Giles ordered, flicking a brief glance in his direction. “I won’t have you killed.” He turned his gaze back to the demon. “Do we have a deal?”

“There is only one deal! You will die quickly, or you will die slowly!” Balthazar was shouting now and his voice continued to rise. “Tell me where it is or I will kill you all.”

The silence that followed was broken only by a small moan from Wesley. Xander shot him a hard look and saw that Wesley was white-faced and shaking, the muscles in his jaw quivering as if he was
only just barely able to stop himself from speaking, from giving Balthazar the information he wanted. But at least he wasn’t actually saying anything.

“Lord Balthazar,” the quiet, respectful voice sounded almost unbearably loud as it broke the quiet. The vampire who’d lead the group that captured them, stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

“What?” Balthazar snapped impatiently. The vampire gestured towards Xander.

“This one has been Claimed by the Master of the Hellmouth.”

Xander froze, not liking this development at all as Balthazar was diverted, turning his head to stare directly at Xander. “Hmmm. Bring him closer.”

Giles stirred and shifted slightly, trying to put himself in front of Xander but the vampires held him back as two of them pulled Xander forward until he was almost touching the tub Balthazar sat in. He gagged at the stench and tried desperately to pull back. Held immobile by the vampires, he could only breathe shallowly and hope he wasn’t going to puke. Or die.

“Leave the boy alone!” Giles shouted desperately but was ignored as Balthazar studied Xander intently.

“Yes, I can sense the Claim. Intriguing.” Balthazar half lifted one of his fat little hands and Xander flinched as the long, black nails flicked drops of water on him. “No, wait, boring.”

Imperiously, Balthazar waved the vampires to step back and Xander found himself shoved back into line with Wesley and Giles again. His relief was short-lived as Balthazar looked at Giles. “You will tell me where my amulet is or I will kill him.”

Xander and Giles stared at each other for a moment, then all hell broke loose.

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The sporting goods store was easy pickings. Spike was in and out with three crossbows and a handful of bolts in 30 seconds, leaving shattered glass cases and the door hanging crookedly in the splintered frame. Running back to where he’d left Angelus and the Slayer, he saw the red and blue lights of a patrol car turning the corner two blocks away but was confident they hadn’t seen him.

It didn’t matter. He needed weapons that would give them the advantage from a distance and no petty human rules were going to stop him from getting them. With his Claimed’s life at stake, Spike would have killed the entire police force if necessary, without hesitation or remorse, and dealt with the fallout later.

Returning to where Angelus and the Slayer waited, Spike grinned at the shock on the Slayer’s face. “Close your mouth, Slayer,” he advised. “It’s called break and enter.”

Tossing a crossbow to each of the other two, he ordered: “first target is the vamps closest to the hostages. Don't miss.”

He divided the crossbow bolts equally and passed two handfuls to the other two, keeping one for himself. Sliding a bolt into the mechanism and cocking it, he laid another alongside the body of the weapon, ready to instantly reload. Looking up, he saw the Slayer and Angelus doing the same and gave one last order: “Slayer, if my Claimed is hurt because you give away the advantage of surprise by one of your trademark jokes, I'll kill you myself. Make your jokes after the first blow, not before.”

Spike hadn’t forgotten the fight with Angelus last year when the Slayer had blown the advantage of surprise, alerting Angelus to their presence before firing her weapon, giving Angelus time to avoid
what should have been a fatal shot. Granted, given how events had turned out, he was glad she hadn't killed his Sire in that battle, but it was a bad fighting tactic and he wasn't going to let her risk Xander's life on amateur mistakes.

The others nodded their readiness and Spike lead the way to the warehouse entrance. He checked the door handle and was astonished, but pleased, to find it was unlocked. Turning the handle, he pushed the door open quietly and stepped inside, Buffy and Angelus right behind him.

The Eliminati weren't on guard. They were clustered around their demon master and the hostages listening to Balthazar as he blustered and threatened.

Checking that the other two were ready, Spike indicated the vampire he was aiming at - a big vampire who was gripping Xander by the arms, holding him in front of the demon, who was threatening to kill Xander if Giles didn’t tell him where his amulet was. Spike fought from giving vent to a roar of pure rage at the threat to Xander, bringing his weapon up swiftly and silently.

The click of the trigger mechanism and the twang of the bolt’s release were lost in the sound of Balthazar’s rantings. Spike heard Buffy and Angelus firing their weapons almost simultaneously with his but the first the vampires in the warehouse knew of their presence was when two of their number exploded into dust. The third screamed as a bolt pierced his chest in a near miss of his heart, knocked backwards by the force of the blow and at least temporarily out of the fight.

Spike had the second bolt in the crossbow before the ashes had settled and he fired again before any of the vampires had gathered their wits enough to locate their attackers. His second bolt also hit the mark, and a third vampire died even as Spike dropped the crossbow and flung himself into the fight, hearing the other two take their second shots as he moved.

Giles and Xander exploded into motion as their captors turned to dust, even as Spike slammed into the closest remaining Eliminati in a diving tackle that knocked the vampire away from the hostages and kept him from drawing his swords. They went sliding across the cement floor, both struggling for a death grip as chaos erupted around them.

“Unacceptable! Unacceptable!” Balthazar’s rasping complaint rose over the clamor of battle with the petulant anger of a spoiled child. Even his minions ignored him as all-out war raged across the warehouse floor.

As he struggled to tear himself away from the other vampire, Spike wondered vaguely just who Balthazar thought was listening to his tantrum, but dismissed the thought immediately - the vampire he was fighting with was taking all his attention. Larger than Spike, he obviously had some wrestling experience, and his massive arms wrapped around Spike as he strained to pin Spike to the floor.

Giving up on freeing himself, Spike switched tactics in the blink of an eye. Instead of fighting the motion, he rolled with it. The sudden reversal sent the two of them tumbling over the floor and, as he'd hoped, Spike ended up on top. His opponent’s grip slackened just enough for Spike to tear his arms free and in one quick, brutal movement, he twisted the Eliminati’s head off, thumping to the ground as the body beneath him vanished into dust.

Springing to his feet, Spike threw a quick, assessing glance around the room. The three former hostages were all on their feet and fighting. Giles had come up with a sword and was using it to good effect: beheading a vampire who had the other Watcher pinned. Xander had gotten ahold of one of the dropped crossbows and, even as Spike watched, took out a vampire that was menacing the Watchers. Buffy and Angelus were fighting well and there were only four Eliminati remaining.

Xander threw him a quick smile even as he re-loaded and took aim at another vampire. Spike heard the crossbow fire again as he moved to reinforce his Sire who was fighting two Eliminati at once,
their swords keeping him from closing with them as he spun and dodged and waited for an opening. The Slayer finished off her opponent and reached Angelus first, sending one of his opponents crashing to the ground with a leg sweep. Spike left the two of them to it and turned back to face Balthazar, still paddling about in his tub like an angry toddler. Xander’s crossbow fired again, directly at Balthazar, and Spike frowned as the bolt suddenly jerked in mid-air and was deflected into the wall.

He felt Xander come up beside him and fire at Balthazar again, point blank. For a second time, the bolt swerved impossibly and went wide. Xander looked at him in bafflement and let the weapon fall to his side, not wasting another shot.

Despite his concern for whatever power Balthazar had, Spike was glad the crossbow had missed. Now that the fight was over, Spike let the tight control he had kept on his anger slip and his banked rage burned like wildfire. They had survived and Xander appeared unhurt, but this thing had dared to touch what was his and Spike could now afford the luxury of bloody retribution.

Stooping to pick up a sword that had fallen near the tub, Spike spun it in a circle, the shining steel a blur in the warehouse’s uneven lighting. “Your followers are dust, you useless lump of blubber, and you DARED to touch my Claimed.” His voice rose as he spoke until he was shouting. “I’ll cut you to pieces an inch at a time, you bastard, and you will BEG for death before I’m through.”

He stepped forward to follow through on his promise and gasped in shock as he found himself suddenly pulled off his feet, drawn irresistibly towards Balthazar, unable to control his body or stop the forward momentum. The sword dropped from his nerveless fingers and he felt massive clawed fingers close around his head.

“Spike!”

He tried to yell at Xander to stay back, but no words came to his lips, his voice as paralyzed as the rest of him.

He felt Xander’s arms close around his waist as Xander threw his entire weight into pulling Spike free, heard a confusion of shouts, then a searing jolt of pain as lightning flared blindingly and he was thrown away from the tub, tumbling across the floor to land hard, dazed and shaken.

“Xander!” Shaking his head to clear his vision, Spike staggered to his feet, looking for Xander. His boy had been thrown clear as well, landing not far from Spike, who stumbled over to him and dropped to his knees beside him, as uncontrolled tremors shook his muscles from the jolt of electricity.

“Xander?”

Xander groaned and stirred, lifting his head dazedly and looking around blankly. “Spike?”

“’s me, luv. Are you all right?” Spike pushed the dark hair out of the confused brown eyes with a gentle hand, relieved to see that Xander was looking back at him and seeing him.

“What the hell happened?”

“Dunno, luv. Are you hurt?”

Xander shook his head and let Spike help him into a sitting position, throwing his arms around Spike and clinging to him. Spike looked around and saw that someone had dropped a light fixture into the tub of water, electrocuting the demon and throwing himself and Xander clear.
A low rasping whisper sounded above the slight crackle of electricity in the ozone-scented air. “You think you’ve won?” Balthazar gasped to the Slayer. “When he rises... You’ll wish I’d killed you all.”

Blue lightning still crawled across his body and crackled in the tub water, then Balthazar’s red eyes closed and his body stilled, the lightening slowly dying with him.

“Pretentious git,” Spike muttered, but his heart wasn’t in it and a shiver ran through him despite himself. There had been something ominous in Balthazar’s voice and Spike knew from experience that death curses always carried power.
Chapter 36

Shaking off his concern about Balthazar’s last words for now, Spike climbed to his feet and pulled Xander up behind him. Xander was relatively unhurt, bruises and scrapes mostly, but the pent-up rage inside Spike was not mollified by that fact. His Claimed had been put in harm’s way and Balthazar’s death had left Spike without a target for revenge. Although grateful for whoever had electrocuted the demon, the out of control fury that had washed over him at the sight of Xander being held prisoner still churned inside him and needed an outlet. Deprived of his primary target, Spike settled for a secondary one.

“Watcher!” he growled, stalking towards Giles. “I left you responsible for my Claimed.” His tone left no doubt that he thought the Watcher had failed in his charge.

Xander was suddenly in front of him, blocking his way, moving so quickly that Spike nearly crashed into him before he could stop himself. When Spike tried to swerve around him, intent on reaching the Watcher, Xander put both hands out, curling his fingers around Spike’s arms, holding him and forcing Spike to look at him. “Spike, Giles tried to make them let me go and stay behind in my place. He did everything he could.”

Spike scowled, knowing he couldn’t really blame anyone but the already dead demons but still wanting to find someone to vent his anger on. “And the other one?” he asked, flashing a yellow-eyed glare at the new Watcher, who flinched back at the naked threat.

Xander raised his eyebrows. “Did you miss the part where we were all tied up? There wasn’t much he could do.” Sliding his hands up Spike’s arms, he cupped Spike’s face between his hands, his thumbs stroking lightly over Spike’s sharply defined cheekbones, then slid his hands further back, pulling Spike in for a lingering kiss, heedless of the lethal fangs and their audience.

“I’m fine, Spike. You got here in time.”

“Gonna chain you to the bed, luv,” Spike threatened in a low, husky voice. “Bloody trouble magnet.”

“Promises, promises,” Xander mocked him lightly.

Giles pointedly clearing his throat made them break apart, Xander turning in the circle of Spike’s arms to face the librarian, leaning back into Spike, knowing his vampire needed the contact right now.

“If you two are through,” Giles began when Buffy interrupted.

“I think he’s telling you to get a room before Wesley faints from the shock of your PDA’s,” Buffy interrupted with a malicious grin in the new Watcher’s direction.

Xander’s lips twitched as he saw that Wesley was polishing his glasses fiercely, his cheeks flushed as he concentrated intently on the mundane task.

“Actually,” Giles said reprovingly, “I was going to suggest we all get out of here. It is possible, although unlikely, that there may be a few remaining Eliminati stragglers and I, for one, have seen enough of that group for one night.”

“Second that,” Xander agreed, feeling Spike’s arms tighten around him reassuringly.
“The Mayor,” Angelus said from where he stood next to Buffy.

“What about him?” Giles asked, surprised by the non-sequitor.

Spike growled low in his throat, wanting to take Xander home but knowing this could be important. “His flunky said he was performin’ some ritual tonight.”

“What kind of ritual?”

“We don’t know,” Buffy admitted. “Who was that guy anyway, Spike?”

“The Mayor’s assistant. Name’s Allan.”

“Allan Finch?” Giles questioned. “The Deputy Mayor?”

Spike shrugged. “Never bothered to learn his full name. He’s got the office next to the Mayor’s,” he added helpfully.

“He told us that the Mayor has been waiting 100 years to perform some ritual. Tonight. Said something about the Mayor making pacts,” Angelus filled Giles in quietly.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Giles observed. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes wearily, then glanced at his watch. “It’s nearly midnight. I suppose we could check City Hall and see if there is any sign of life, otherwise, I’m afraid I don’t have any idea of where the Mayor might be performing a ritual.”

“If it’s a time sensitive one, it may be too late already,” the new Watcher spoke for the first time. “Many rituals either start at, or must be completed by, the stroke of midnight.”

“I can go,” Angelus volunteered.

Buffy frowned. “You shouldn’t go by yourself.”

“I’ll be careful. You and Spike should get the others home.” Angelus smiled reassuringly at her. “I’ll come get you if there’s any need.”

Reluctantly, she nodded her agreement. Spike didn’t hesitate, he wouldn’t fully settle until Xander was safely in the lair, the Mayor would just have to wait. He started to lead Xander to the door, but his boy held back for just a moment.

“Buffy, Angel - thank you.” Xander smiled, gesturing helplessly with his free hand, the one not tightly held in Spike’s. “It’s not enough but, seriously - thank you.”

Angelus nodded and Buffy gave him a quick, pleased smile.

“Yes, indeed, your entrance was most timely. I’m very grateful. To all of you.” To Spike’s surprise, the new Watcher’s thanks came ungrudgingly.

“Yes, thank you,” Giles murmured. “Perhaps we should all meet tomorrow night?” he suggested. “I confess I am growing somewhat concerned about the Mayor. It may be useful to pool our knowledge and see what we can find out.”

“We’ll be there,” Xander promised, putting an end to Spike’s vague notion of never letting his boy out of the lair again.

“Good fight, Sire, Slayer,” was all he said. Xander went with him without protest this time when
Spike tugged gently on his hand, pulling him toward the entrance to begin the long walk home.

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“Thanking Angelus for saving you, are you now?” Spike growled, as they entered the apartment. “Forgetting who you belong to?”

Xander gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. “He was very helpful, cut the ropes off me and everything.” He scowled and poked Spike in the chest with an admonishing finger. “You, on the other hand, were too busy rolling around on the floor with other vampires to untie your Claimed.”

“Oi! Bloody ungrateful whelp.”

“That’s me,” Xander agreed. “I didn’t even thank you, did I? How about we do something about that?”

“’bout time,” Spike groused. “Thanked everybody in the bloody warehouse except me.”

“Aww. Poor baby.” His Claimed sounded suspiciously unrepentant.

They had made it to the bedroom by now and Xander pushed Spike backwards onto the bed, climbing after him and settling down comfortably on top of his vampire, leaning over him until their lips were almost touching. “I kind of thought you might like a private thank you,” he said huskily, his warm breath puffing over Spike’s face.

“Wot you got in mind, luv?”

“Letting you fuck me through the mattress,” Xander answered frankly and Spike felt a knot of arousal curl inside him at the blunt proposal. Before he could give voice to his enthusiastic agreement, Xander was kissing him fiercely, his mouth crushing down over Spike’s, his tongue darting across Spike’s lips and plunging inside, his teeth nipping and teasing. Spike wrapped his arms around his boy, loving the feel of the warm flesh against his own cooler body. Xander ground his hips down against Spike, their rapidly hardening erections rubbing together through the fabric of their jeans and Xander pulled back suddenly, ignoring Spike’s protest, sitting up with a decidedly wicked gleam in his eyes before reaching down to pull at Spike’s shirts.

“Off,” he ordered. “You’ve got too many clothes on.”

Spike couldn’t have agreed more. He sat up, causing Xander to gasp and grab at Spike’s shoulders for balance to keep from sliding off onto the floor as Spike chuckled and tore his jacket and shirts off, tossing them aside carelessly. Xander was shimmying out of his own shirt, writhing on Spike’s lap in a very distracting way as he did so. Xander had no sooner pulled his shirt off over his head than Spike growled fiercely and reversed their positions, flipping them over until Xander’s back was against the bed and Spike was lying on top of him.

Xander’s startled yelp at the sudden move was lost in Spike’s low sultry laugh before he swooped down to capture Xander’s lips with his own, his hands stroking and caressing the smooth, bare skin of Xander’s chest before beginning to concentrate on the flat brown nipples, rubbing them teasingly, circling them with the pads of his thumbs until they crinkled into tight little buds of arousal.

Spike dropped his hands down to Xander’s waist, never losing contact with his mouth as he began tearing open his boy’s pants. Xander was squirming beneath him, fumbling with the fastening of Spike’s pants and then they were both wrestling around on the bed, frantically shoving the annoying fabric impediments aside.
Lying on top of his Claimed, feeling the heat of his body along every inch on his own, Spike wished for a moment that he could just slam himself inside his boy and take what was his. But human tissue couldn’t take that kind of abuse, so Spike rolled them over until he could reach the bedside table, fumbling blindly in the drawer for the lube they kept there even as they continued to kiss and grope one another.

Rolling them back to the center of the bed, Spike hurriedly slicked his fingers and reached down, swirling a teasing fingertip around the opening to Xander’s body. Xander spread his legs wider, opening himself fully to his lover, and Spike abandoned his lips to kiss his way down Xander’s neck, lingering there, nipping and suckling at the smell and heat of the hot blood pulsing madly just beneath surface.

Xander arched his neck back and moaned as Spike eased a finger inside, forcing himself to go slowly and let the human muscles adjust and stretch. Xander was bucking up to meet him as he added a second finger and began thrusting gently, scissoring his fingers and stretching his lover carefully.

“Now, Spike, do it, oh god, just do it,” Xander panted.

Chuckling, Spike dropped his head to nip at the tight peaks of Xander’s nipples, loving the way his boy cursed and moaned and tried with desperate hands to pull Spike closer. Unable to wait longer, he pulled his fingers free and dropped them to his own dripping, throbbing erection, slicking himself up quickly but thoroughly. He lined up at the twitching entrance and began to press inside, moving unbearably slowly and holding Xander down as his hips bucked up, trying to force Spike deeper.

“Love you, Xander.”

Spike pushed inside the rest of the way in one long, slow thrust and, in the same instant, buried his fangs in Xander’s throat, renewing his mark and tasting the arousal-spiced blood. Xander screamed at the double penetration, his body arcing upward as pleasure tore through him and he came hard, semen erupting between their bodies even as Spike began to thrust hard, his own orgasm torn out of him by the feel of Xander’s tight heat clamping down around him.

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“Spike?”

“Yeah, luv?”

Having slept half the day away after several rounds of mind-blowing sex, Spike was feeling that all was right with his world again. He dropped a kiss on top of Xander’s tousled dark hair as his Claimed stirred in his arms.

“Last night, they wanted to know who had Claimed me.”

Spike’s whole body tensed and he had to struggle not to lose control and accidentally hurt his boy at the reminder of the demons who had dared interfere with his Claimed. Xander looked up at him apologetically. “I’m sorry, it’s just that I didn’t know how to handle the situation and I wanted to ask what I should have done.”

Spike hated talking about this. Hated the idea that Xander even needed to be prepared for someone ignoring Spike’s Claim or worse, intentionally targeting Xander because of Spike. Once again, Spike had to fight against the urge to keep Xander by his side, to never let him leave the lair again. Finally, he shook off his demonic features, shifting back to human visage, and sighed. “Tell me what
“The Eliminati didn’t realize I was marked at first - and, hey, why not? I thought you said that all demons could sense the mark?” Xander asked, momentarily distracted from the main point.

Spike snorted in disgust. “Those idiots couldn’t find their own arses without a map and a Sherpa guide.” Then he added, more quietly, one finger coming up to trace the renewed mark and smirking in satisfaction when Xander shivered at the touch, “I hadn’t renewed the mark in about two weeks, remember? Was worried about the muscles you tore the night the Hellmouth opened, so it was fainter than it usually is. Not surprising it took a bit longer for them to sense it.”

Xander nodded, then continued: “One of them sensed the mark and then he demanded to know who had marked me. I didn’t know if I should tell them or not. So, in the spirit of pure intellectual curiosity, because I’m sure it’s never going to happen again, what should I have done?”

“If it’s a minion, tell them immediately,” Spike answered. “They’ll be running so fast it’ll take me days to catch up with them and explain their mistake.” Reluctantly, he added, “it’s a bit more complicated when it’s a bunch of bloody fanatics like the Eliminati. Much as I hate to say it, they’ll do what their Master wants even before self-preservation. Hate that I wasn’t there to protect you, luv,” he whispered, burying his face in Xander’s neck.

“Shh, it’s ok. You got there in time,” Xander soothed him, his warm hands stroking comfortably over Spike’s back.

When Spike had settled again, Xander said: “So, the mark is mostly to protect me from random demon attacks?”

“Any ordinary demon will give you a wide berth, luv, from the moment they sense the mark. They won’t risk messing with a Master’s property.” Spike grinned and kissed Xander quickly, knowing how much Xander hated being referred to as property. “Problem comes with stronger demons. Unfortunately, the Hellmouth has a bit more stronger demons than your average town.”

“So, with a stronger demon, do I give them your name?”

“Yeah, never be afraid to give my name and rank, luv. If they’re ignoring the mark enough to ask…”

Spike looked angry at the mere thought and Xander was almost sorry he’d brought up the whole subject. “It won’t ever cause you problems, will it?” he asked, knowing he should probably drop the subject but needing to know.

“By the time anything happens to you, luv,” Spike said simply, “I won’t still be around to be bothered by problems. Die before I let anything happen to you.”

Xander shivered at the intense emotion behind the quiet promise and clung to Spike, taking comfort in his lover’s strength and praying silently that nothing ever happened to Spike. Xander wasn’t sure he’d survive without Spike either.

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The knock on the apartment door late in the afternoon found them both still in bed. Xander stirred sleepily, throwing the covers back and grumbling about the disturbance, when Spike shot out a hand to stop him. Xander obediently froze as Spike sat up, stretching his senses out until he could sense the two humans waiting at the door.

Swearing quietly to himself, Spike motioned for Xander to stay put. Sitting up in alarm, Xander
watched with worried eyes as Spike hurriedly dressed and went to answer the door. Spike closed the bedroom door carefully behind him, even as Xander was climbing out of bed and reaching for his clothes. Spike crossed the living room and opened the outside door to find the same two police officers the Mayor had sent to fetch him once before waiting nervously outside. Both men were standing carefully back from the door in a patch of the fading sunlight.

Spike remained well inside the door, avoiding any risk of an attempt to pull him into the sunlight, cocking his head and drawling with feigned casualness: “Thought we had an understanding about this, boys. If the Mayor wants somethin’ from me, he goes through the Court.”

“Yes, sir,” the older officer said. “Begging your pardon but the Mayor said it was an emergency. He needs to see you immediately in his office.”

Spike considered telling them to sod off or, better still, just killing them and dumping their bodies on the front steps of City Hall to let the Mayor know how Spike felt about being summonsed anywhere by flunkies. But these were humans and police officers, not only would Xander object but they were in a position to cause Xander a great deal of trouble if ordered to do so by the Mayor. “Fine. Tell the Mayor not to get his knickers in a knot until I get there.” The Mayor could bloody well wait until the sun went down, Spike thought, he wasn’t venturing onto the Mayor’s turf during daylight hours.

That seemed sufficient for the officers who nodded and beat a hasty retreat down the outside steps. Closing the door, Spike turned around to see Xander standing in the bedroom doorway.

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That seemed sufficient for the officers who nodded and beat a hasty retreat down the outside steps. Closing the door, Spike turned around to see Xander standing in the bedroom doorway.

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“I’m very disappointed in you, Mr. Spike. We’ve worked well together in the past, but I can’t work with you if you treat my employees the way you treated Allan.”

The Mayor shook his head in disapproval, then picked up a file off his desk and handed it to Spike. “I’m a man who keeps my word, it’s the reason I keep being re-elected, so here is the information I promised you.”

Spike flipped the folder open curiously as the Mayor continued.

“Loyalty, Mr. Spike. It’s something I expect from my employees.”

Spike looked up from the folder, his expression carefully blank. “Not one of your bloody employees, though, am I?” he asked, standing up. “We through here?”

The Mayor stood as well. “I don’t want us to be enemies, Mr. Spike, but that is what will happen if you interfere with one of my associates again.” He stared at Spike and Spike cocked his head, studying the Mayor in turn.

There was something subtly different about the Mayor but Spike couldn’t put his finger on what it was. The faint aftertaste his just-off-human-normal scent left in the back of Spike’s throat had deepened a little, a slightly acrid note added to his normal scent. His usual breezy confidence and utter fearlessness had turned up a notch, almost as if he was on the verge of proclaiming his not-quite-human status to the world. Coupled with the unknown ritual the Mayor had performed, it made Spike unusually cautious.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said and strode out of the office without another word, enjoying the way the Mayor’s assistant jumped out of his way as he passed through the outer office.

The file folder clutched tightly in his hand had all the information Spike needed to settle a matter left too long unattended and Spike fully intended to deal with the situation permanently immediately after the meeting at the school tonight.

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Xander had debated about whether he should say anything to Wesley all the way over to the school. He arrived early for the meeting and found only Wesley and Giles there, neither Buffy nor Angel had arrived yet. Taking that as a sign, he waited until Giles left for a quick sweep through the basement - even though they hadn’t found anything since the original bomb, it was ingrained habit now to check.

As soon as they were alone, he approached Wesley who was sitting in the office. Something in the set of his shoulders almost made it look like he was hiding out there. Considering his performance last night, Xander wouldn’t be surprised if he was hiding.

Xander moved to the office doorway, and leaned against the door jamb, subtly blocking the exit in case Wesley didn’t feel like talking. “I’d like to talk to you for a minute.”

Wesley looked up from the book he was writing in. Probably one of the Diaries that the Watcher’s Council required the Watchers to write, Xander thought, idly wondering how the Balthazar incident was going to sound when reduced to writing. “Mr. Harris,” he began formally, “this isn’t really…”

“Ok, first off, it’s Xander, not Mr. Harris. Second, this won’t take long.”

“Very well,” Wesley closed the book and stood up, his hands nervously smoothing his suit jacket. “What is it, Xander?”
“I’m sorry I kicked you.” He wasn’t sorry and would do it again in a heartbeat if necessary but it seemed like a good lead in to an awkward subject.

“Oh, ah, that’s… that’s quite alright,” Wesley stammered, looking surprised and flustered and his eyes fled from Xander’s. After a moment, he added almost inaudibly: “under the circumstances…” before his voice died away completely, red sweeping over his face. He looked humiliated and miserable standing there, like he was waiting for the ground to open up and swallow him. Xander hoped he wasn’t actually wishing for anything of the sort, this was Sunnydale after all.

Seeing Wesley’s embarrassment and shame, Xander suddenly felt very sorry for him. Wesley really was in a hopeless situation; sent here to replace Giles like he had been, and granted, he hadn’t done well in his first foray into the field, but he had ultimately kept his mouth shut and not told Balthazar anything and even Giles had taken a long time to learn to think outside the box and accept that Buffy wasn’t your typical Slayer. To accept Xander and the rest of them as part of a team effort.

Suddenly reminded of how much he’d disliked and distrusted Giles when he first met him, Xander thought that maybe, just maybe, they should give Wesley another shot. After all, none of them had exactly rolled out the welcome mat for the new guy. When he spoke, the words came out very differently than what he’d planned.

“Wesley, Buffy didn’t like Giles when she first met him. She thought he was stuffy and overbearing and resented having him as her Watcher.” His oblique approach worked, Wesley was looking at him now, puzzled and with the faint beginnings of curiosity. Ok, he might be projecting a bit, but Xander knew that Buffy had had problems with Giles at first. “She hates that Giles has been fired and the Council has forced a new Watcher on her. I know you Watcher types don’t like that Giles and she are so close but it’s a fact and you’re going to have to deal with it. If you can’t accept that she thinks of Giles as a father and work with him, she’ll never be willing to work with you. Like it or not, you’re the unwanted stepfather in this scenario.”

“What are you suggesting?” Wesley seemed to actually be listening, which was more than Xander had thought he would do.

“Lighten up? Bend just a little? Don’t be so completely by-the-book? Not to bring up a sore subject or anything, but books aren’t always right. You saw how right the books were when they said that Balthazar was dead and the Eliminati almost extinct.”

“That’s certainly true,” Wesley admitted. There was a short pause, then he said: “Thank you, Xander, I will consider your suggestion.” Wesley sighed, looking suddenly very tired. “I’m grateful for your actions last night,” he admitted in a low, troubled voice. “I confess I hadn’t anticipated quite how different the field would be from my studies.”

Xander grinned. “Welcome to Sunnydale.”

Wesley tentatively smiled back. “Xander…” he hesitated, then continued slowly: “Your relationship with Spike…” He shook his head and started again. “Having a vampire as a paramour is unbelievably dangerous…”

“Spike’s not your average vampire,” Xander interrupted, without heat. Wesley didn’t seem like he was trying to be offensive and this certainly wasn’t the first time he’d had to deal with the subject. “I appreciate the concern, but Spike won’t hurt me.”

Surprisingly, Wesley seemed to accept that. “I must say, I have never read of a Master Vampire treating a Claimed human as Spike treats you.” He added with a trace of self-mockery: “Perhaps this is another example of how the field differs from books.”
Xander chuckled and unfolded himself from the doorway. “You know, you’d be a bit less sore-thumb-like if you learn to speak the local language,” he said, unable to resist, and grinned when Wesley looked completely taken aback. “Here in California, we call them lovers, not paramours.”

He gave Wesley a little wave and went to sit down at the library table while he waited for the others. For the first time, he thought there was a chance the new Watcher might actually work out.
Chapter 37

Spike strode into the bar and, without thinking, ordered a beer. A moment later, glass of beer in hand, he turned casually, leaning back against the bar and lifting the glass to his mouth, watchful eyes sweeping over the patrons and learning the layout of the place.

The Mayor summit meeting had been a complete waste of time. Mayor Wilkins had just been leaving City Hall when Angelus got there the previous night and following him had proved useless as he’d simply gone home to a normal suburban house. Angelus had doubled back to City Hall and found the remnants of a spell circle in the Mayor’s office and a very disturbing cabinet that contained equipment and supplies for dark rituals. The two Watchers were currently deep in research mode trying to figure out what ritual the Mayor had performed from the few clues they had - a task Spike suspected would prove fruitless. He’d shared what little information he knew about the Mayor and that had ended the meeting. After escorting Xander home, Spike had immediately left again to take care of the business that had brought him to the bar.

He hadn’t told anyone, not even Xander, where he was going. They would have insisted on accompanying him and Spike didn’t want that. If the Mayor’s information was right, this was Spike’s business and no one else’s.

The taste of the weak, cold swill Americans called beer made him grimace and hastily set the glass back down, wishing he’d ordered a shot of whiskey. Not that it really mattered, he wasn’t here to drink.

The folder he’d gotten from the Mayor at their last meeting said that the bomb at the school had been planted by a small group of zombies that had been running around town recently. That had been surprising enough that Spike seriously doubted the information. The only zombies he’d ever dealt with were mindless, rotted things, incapable of planning anything, even something as rudimentary as the bomb he’d found in the school basement. The zombies had reportedly been hanging out regularly at this bar and Spike was going to make sure they were the right target and not just a false lead the Mayor had sent him chasing after for whatever reason.

The bar was on the outskirts of town, disreputable even by demon bar standards, an establishment that allowed anyone and anything inside. The demons who came here tended to be slimy, smelly, or otherwise disgusting even to other demons, and not welcome in other bars for that reason.

Even in this crowd, the zombies were easy to spot.

There were four of them, drinking and talking, their loud laughter disrupting nearby conversations. One could pass for human, dark blond hair and the glittering eyes of a sociopath, the other three were obviously re-animated corpses - two of them had been dead a long time, from the expanses of bone revealed where the flesh had rotted away. The last was between the two extremes - obviously dead, even aside from the bullet hole in his forehead, but the flesh still mostly intact.

Spike wondered briefly what made these zombies so different from the others he’d seen, then shrugged it off as unimportant. As long as they could be killed, he didn’t really care what made them different.

Deciding on the direct approach, Spike picked his way across the bar’s sticky floor to their table, carrying his barely touched beer as cover. Arriving at the punch line of a joke, Spike waited for the roars of laughter to die down before pulling up a chair and settling down in it in a comfortable sprawl a careful distance back from the table.
“You boys new in town?”

“How’s asking?” The most recently dead one asked challengingly.

“Name’s Spike.” There wasn’t a flicker of reaction, which didn’t surprise Spike. Zombies like these weren’t likely to be accepted as part of the demon community. Neither human nor truly demon, as far as Spike could tell, they wouldn’t be accepted by either group - too dead for humans, too human for demons. Spike wouldn’t expect them to know who the Master of Sunnydale was.

“Great name, dude,” one of the more rotting ones said enthusiastically. “Hey, Jack, wha’dya think, maybe we should change our names?”

“What, you wanna be ‘Dead Dickie’ officially?” Bullet-hole-in-forehead slapped the smaller zombie on the back, knocking him into the table. Spike watched in disbelief as the two of them started a friendly pushing-shoving match, yelling insults that a seven year old would have thought childish. These guys were an embarrassment to respectable dead people, Spike decided. Even if they’d had nothing to do with the bomb, he was going to have to kill them.

The freshest dead guy was watching the others with a tolerant amusement that clashed oddly with his serial killer eyes. “Don’t mind my boys, they’re just blowing off a little steam.”

“This is your idea of blowing off steam?” Spike asked with more than a touch of disdain.

“Hell no!” the fourth zombie said proudly. “We’ve been raising hell in this town since Jack raised us.”

Spike lifted his scarred eyebrow skeptically. “Like what? Haven’t heard about much hell being raised recently.”

“Well, we had some catching up to do,” the zombie began defensively, only to be interrupted by Bullet-hole-in-forehead.

“Walker, Texas Ranger!” he hooted, ending the wrestling match and turning back to the table. Spike had no idea what he was talking about and even less interest in finding out.

“That your work in the school basement a couple weeks ago?” he asked casually, forcing himself to sip his beer again.

“Sure was!” Dead Dickie exclaimed, then his face fell. “Didn’t work right though. Hey Jack, how come we never baked another cake?”

“Hardware store put in bars when they fixed the window.” The answer came absently, the alive-looking one kept his eyes on Spike even as he responded to the question.

“Oh, yeah. Then Bob had to have his non-stop Walker marathon. Hey, we should go back and try again!”

Jack leaned forward, staring at Spike. “You seem awfully interested in our plans.”
Spike rolled his eyes as the zombie pulled a huge hunting knife out and began toying with it, flashing it under the lights in a way that might have intimidated a human. “I’m thinking it might be time for you to move along.”

Spike had learned what he needed to know - that these were in fact the idiots who’d planted the bomb - and wasn’t about to put up with these morons for another second. His hand flashed out, grabbing Jack’s wrist and yanking it to one side even as he sprang up from his deceptively casual
sprawl, sending the chair he’d been sitting in sliding back and away from the table. With his other hand, he smashed his glass of beer over the head of one of the other zombies, then snatched the knife away from the first zombie and sent it flying across the room to imbed itself in the far wall.

His foot shot out, catching another zombie in the stomach and sending him crashing to the floor. A split second later, and a blow with the entire weight of his body behind it dropped a second one. The deadest one had finally recovered from the impact of the beer glass, jumping to his feet and yelling as Spike turned his attention back to Jack who was struggling to free himself from Spike’s iron grip on his wrist. Surprised that the zombie seemed to have little more than ordinary human strength, Spike found he could hold the zombie easily - however these zombies had been made, it wasn’t the typical process. These were just humans whose corpses had been brought back to life, no extra strength added, as far as Spike could tell.

With a quick, vicious snap, he broke the zombie’s arm and, as Jack doubled over, curling around the wounded arm and screaming in pain, Spike brought his knee up, connecting solidly with the zombie’s chin. Kicking the table over, he slammed Jack into the wall then jumped back to give himself room and freed the small battleaxe he’d strapped to his back under his duster, bringing it up and around in one clean sweep and beheading the last zombie who was still sitting frozen at the table. Spike took a moment to watch the results clinically, as the head bounced across the floor and the body slid out of the chair, landing with a wet thump on the ground and staying down. Yep, beheading worked on these zombies.

A hard blow from behind momentarily staggered him and he heard the familiar sound of wood crunching as Bullet-hole-in-the-head broke a chair over his back. Un-fucking-believable. Where did these idiots learn to fight? he thought, executing a spin kick that dropped the zombie to the floor again before he could even lower the remnants of the chair he still held raised over his head in preparation for another blow. Spike kicked him viciously in the head while he was down, just for being such an idiot, and the zombie raised its arms pleadingly.

“You’re already dead, nitwit.” he snarled, and brought the ax down in a shining arc, severing the zombie’s head and unintentionally burying the blade in the floor.

“What the hell’s your problem, man?” Jack asked, scrambling painfully to his feet, still clutching his broken arm. The fourth zombie joined him, looking a bit worser for wear than he had a few moments ago and Spike smirked at the fear and uncertainty the two were showing.

“My problem is that your bomb threatened my Claimed.” he snarled furiously, yanking the ax out of the floor and turning to face them again.

“Your what?” the rotting one asked in confusion.

Enough talk. Spike was on him before his mouth had a chance to close, swinging the ax savagely until it cleaved through flesh and bone, making the score Spike 3, zombies 0. Jack was backing up, cradling his broken arm and looking around desperately for help. Other than shifting in their chairs for a better view, none of the other demons in the place had moved.

Stalking forward, Spike didn’t bother with threats or taunts, leaping up as soon as he was within range and planting both feet squarely in the zombie’s chest. Jack staggered back from the force of the blow, screaming in pain as Spike’s boots smashed into his broken arm, splintering the already cracked bone. As Jack slid helplessly down the wall, Spike brought the blade around one last time, making it four out of four.
Straightening, he looked around the bar, twirling the ax in a move that was as threatening as it was showy, but the patrons were still simply watching motionlessly and clearly had no intention of taking him on. He wiped the ax blade clean on Jack’s clothing, noting without surprise that these zombies didn’t vanish into thin air when they died and shrugged - not his problem. Wasn’t his bar to clean up.

The frustration and rage that had been growing inside him since he’d found the bomb, since he’d been cheated out of his rightful revenge on Balthazar, dissipated as if it had never been and Spike felt like roaring in triumph, felt like pissing on the corpses, felt like returning to burn Balthazar’s warehouse down just so he could dance on the ashes in celebration. The ones who’d endangered his Claimed were dead and Spike had been able to take his revenge personally this time. The sense of failure that had been haunting him recently had been erased by the violent end of the zombies at his own hands and replaced with a glow of satisfaction.

“Hope you enjoyed the show,” he said flippantly to the bar at large, then simply turned and strode out the door, the ax held ready in his hand. He smirked as he heard himself being given a brief round of applause as he left, resisting the temptation to stop and take a bow. It was Xander he wanted to tell the tale to and whose thanks he wanted to receive. Especially considering how Xander had thanked him last time, he thought with a grin, quickening his steps towards home.

The quiet “hey” was a welcome intrusion on his Shakespeare assignment and Xander looked up with a grin, sitting up straighter in his chair and slapping his book closed.

“Oz! Where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you in… forever. I finally decided you’d given up on the whole crazy high school diploma thing that us mere mortals are striving for.”

“Just the attending classes part. Piece of advice - getting held back a year, not the laugh riot you’d think.”

Xander nodded with mock sympathy. “I can imagine.” Sobering, he looked searchingly at his friend. Oz looked tired, with a bone-deep weariness that made him seem almost old. With a feeling akin to shock, Xander saw that Oz had light brown roots showing in his black hair. Oz never let his die jobs show roots, even if it was mostly because he dyed his hair so often there was never a chance for it to grow out. More quietly, he asked: “Are you ok?”

“Had better years,” Oz said, looking away. After a long pause, he added: “I heard from Willow.”

“Yeah?” Xander felt his shoulders tense, wondering what Willow had done now.

“She’s coming home.”

“Oh.” Xander didn’t think he could have said anything more if his life had depended on it. Even though he’d known it was going to happen sooner or later, the shock was like a punch in the gut. He wasn’t ready. Not that it was all about him but - he wasn’t ready.

“She’s been seeing someone else.”

That brought his head snapping around in shock. Oz’s voice was matter-of-fact but his eyes were devastated. “My god, Oz, I’m sorry.” How could that have happened? Willow loved Oz and Oz was perfect for her. How could she possibly want someone else?

“She says it’s over, that it was just… experimenting.”

“Experimenting?” Even as he repeated the word blankly, Xander wondered if he really wanted to
Oz glanced at him briefly, then turned his gaze back to the far wall. “It was Amy.”

“Oh.” And again with the one syllable but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Hadn’t seen that one coming.

“Yeah. Hence the need to bail.”

Well, that was understandable. Finding out your girlfriend was cheating on you was harsh. Finding out she was cheating with someone of a different gender than you… took some dealing.

“Anything I can do?”

Oz shook his head. “Nothing to do.”

Xander could appreciate that. His own stomach was graphically demonstrating the meaning of the phrase about having butterflies, he could only imagine what Oz was going through. Willow’s return meant finding out if she’d really changed. For Xander, it meant they would have to actually talk about what had happened, not just tiptoe around it like the proverbial elephant in the room. For Oz, he had that plus infidelity and sexuality issues. Xander didn’t envy him.

On impulse, he asked: “Want to go to a club with Spike and me tonight? Beer, dancing, maybe a game of pool?”

Oz shot him a surprised look and suddenly he was smiling in that mysterious way he had of smiling without his lips ever moving. “Yeah, that sounds really good.”

Xander had debated whether to warn Oz that they were going to a demon bar but had ultimately decided not to tell him. Oz was Mr. Unflappable and Xander was sure he wouldn’t freak out or anything, especially since Oz wasn’t 100% human himself these days. So, he and Spike simply roared up to Oz’s house in the deSoto and headed out for the bar in a squeal of tires.

Ok, he probably should have warned Oz about Spike’s driving.

Xander himself had gotten used to the white-knuckled thrill ride that was Spike even at his most conservative behind the wheel, but he knew from personal experience that Spike’s driving tended to bring on worrisome thoughts of imminent death by mangled metal. Oz was looking startled and alarmed and was openly clinging to the back of the front seat as Spike careened through town headed for the bar he and Xander usually went to when they went out.

“Don’t worry,” Xander shouted over the blaring radio and the sound of squealing rubber as Spike dodged around a car that was actually observing the speed limit, one hand on the wheel and the other tapping to the beat on the driver’s side door panel. “He never actually hits anything.”

He had a feeling that didn’t sound quite as reassuring as he’d hoped it would.

Oz’s hair was dark blue tonight and no-one watching him would ever know that he hadn’t spent most of his life in demon clubs. Xander had still not figured out how Oz managed to do that. Oz never dressed in anything that resembled fashionable clothes - between Spike and Cordelia, Xander had gotten far more of an education in style than he’d ever wanted to have - he never made any attempt to blend in with any crowd, he simply was Oz, so comfortable in his own skin that he fit in everywhere. It was a two-way street. Oz never judged anyone, he accepted them on their own terms,
and if some of the people here tonight had horns or warty skins or tails, well, that was their business and not a problem for Oz.

Watching Oz listening to the demon band on stage, his eyes bright with interest at the non-human instruments and music being played, Xander was really glad he’d thought of this. When the band took a break and Oz went to talk to them about jamming with them sometime as easily as if the lead singer had been Devon and not a Yngana demon, Xander let Spike drag him over to the pool tables without guilt, knowing Oz had found his own way of dealing with his emotional turmoil.

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Inserting the two pieces of wood into the clamp, Xander nodded and Larry began slowly tightening the screw as Xander held the pieces steady, watching the narrowing gap closely. If they didn’t do this right, the glued joint he was trying to hold together would slip and he’d have to start over. Ok, the copious amounts of beer he’d drunk last night with Spike and Oz might have something to do with how slowly and carefully he was moving, but he really didn’t want to have to start over.

“Steady,” he said warningly as the gap closed to a hair’s width. “Ok, that’s enough.”

Larry stopped and Xander gingerly let go of the wood, his hands hovering for a moment to make sure it wasn’t going to slip. The piece held steady and he grinned at Larry.

“Thank, Lare.”

“No problem.”

The piece was part of a weapons chest he was making for Spike and Xander was pleased with his progress on it.

Glancing at the clock, Xander saw they had five minutes left in the class period. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure, help me clean up.”

Shifting to Larry’s work area, Xander helped him gather up the scattered tools while Larry wrapped and stored the carved tray he was working on. Xander was more into inlay work, enjoying the delicate precision of working with small strips of contrasting wood, creating designs on flat surfaces. To his mind, it was the best of both worlds: flat planes that gave a chance for the beauty of the wood grain to show and the inlays allowed him to work with many different kinds of wood. He was modeling his designs on some of the mission furniture he’d seen pictures of, hunting down samples on the internet when he needed inspiration. Larry, on the other hand, had gotten into carving, liking the power and control of chisel work. The two of them often helped each other with their projects when another set of hands was needed. The wood shop teacher was good, insisting that the class members try all different kinds of projects to see which they liked best.

Grabbing a dust pan, Xander swept the wood shavings off the bench, dumping them into the garbage can that Larry fetched.

“I’m wondering if you could help me out with something.”

“Sure thing.” Larry was remarkably easy going this year, especially considering what he’d been like for all of junior high and high school, up until this year. Early last fall, he’d straightforwardly apologized to Xander for how he’d treated him over the last few years, telling him that he’d been overcompensating, terrified someone would figure out he was gay. He’d thought that acting like a stereotypical macho jock would keep anyone from guessing his secret. Since coming out openly
early in the fall, he’d gone back to being the person Xander vaguely remembered from grade school -
friendly and funny and unpretentious. Sometimes, Xander wondered if Larry-the-obnoxious-jock
had been a figment of his imagination.

“It’s Jonathan Levinson.”

“The little guy?”

“Yeah. I’ve gotten to know him recently and I hate the way everyone picks on him. I feel bad
because I never really noticed it before but he really is the number one target of the jocks. He’s ok
once you get to know him, he’s just never really learned how to make friends.”

“You’re asking me to be his friend?”

Xander shook his head and immediately wished he hadn’t as his headache came throbbing back.
“I’m wondering if you can get the jocks to back off.”

Despite coming out as gay, Larry still ruled the jocks. He’d settled the issue last fall with a couple of
spectacular fights, taking on four and five guys at a time and emerging battered but victorious. Since
then, the jocks had apparently accepted that Larry wasn’t going to hit on them and his gay cooties
weren’t going to infect them and just decided to ignore the whole issue. Xander had thought at the
time that it probably didn’t hurt that Larry could pummel any guy in school and had proved it more
than once. Apparently, gay bashing wasn’t much fun when your target could flatten you without
breaking a sweat.

It hadn’t hurt that Larry was the football team’s star fullback and was being actively recruited by
several college teams. Anyone on the team who gave him flack had found themselves benched
during the games that college scouts attended as Larry simply told the coach that they were having an
off night and, if the other guy wasn’t benched, Larry was going to sit the game out. As a result, the
team had done a rapid about-face and had become remarkably sensitive, open guys, and amazingly
politically correct. The really great thing was that some of it seemed to have actually sunk in and
stuck around after the season ended and Larry lost his terrifying power to bench the homophobes.
Well, it had either sunk in or they were just still afraid to cross Larry.

“That’ll only take care of some of the problem,” Larry pointed out.

“I know. Cordy’s promised to get the Cordettes to back off. If those two groups leave him alone,
that’s 90% of the problem.” And hadn’t getting Cordelia to agree been fun? Xander had eventually
had to promise to introduce Cordelia to his boyfriend. He’d never given in to her efforts to find out
who he was dating and she’d refused to admit she couldn’t find it out from Xander, so she wouldn’t
ask anyone else who might have told her. Now, she’d made it a non-negotiable condition to helping
out with his “be kind to losers” project, as she insisted on calling it. Xander had a week to arrange
the meeting and he was not looking forward to finally having the answer to his question about
whether Spike would like or hate Cordelia. Cordelia was going to flip when she learned that he was
dating Spike. Xander just hoped the meeting wasn’t going to end up actually being fatal.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Larry said.

Xander gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks, Lare. I really appreciate it. Like I said, Jonathan’s an ok
guy once you get to know him.”

He meant it. Jonathan had taken to hanging around with him a bit and Xander had sat with him
several times at lunch. Jonathan was painfully insecure and wouldn’t approach Xander if he was
with anyone else, but they’d had some fun conversations about comic books and sci-fi movies and
the other geeky stuff he’d used to talk about with Jesse. While that stuff was no longer nearly as big a part of Xander’s life as it had once been, he still enjoyed a good debate over the relative merits of Kirk vs. Picard. Xander had coaxed Jonathan into sitting with him and Oz at lunch one day and it had been nice to see Jonathan opening up just a bit.

Giving Larry a thoughtful glance, Xander wondered if Larry’s good nature would stretch to having lunch with Jonathan and Xander. Larry’s deepest secret, now that he was out, was that he was a total X-Men fanatic. It would do Jonathan a world of good to find out that he had something in common with the school’s reigning jock.

Xander was sitting at the kitchen table, nervously fiddling with a sheet of paper when Spike shuffled out to the kitchen, barely awake at the godawful early afternoon hour. Moving on autopilot, he pulled out a bag of blood and stuck it in the microwave, punching in the time and fumbling for a mug.

Sitting down across from Xander, Spike glared at his boy. “One word about the hair and you will pay in ways you’ve never even dreamed about,” he muttered, draining the mug and fighting the need to go straight back to bed.

Xander gave him an innocent look that didn’t go well with the smile lurking at the corners of his mouth and Spike growled at him under his breath. Xander had a nasty habit of telling Spike that his just-woken-up, pre-shower bed-head was “adorable”. Made a vampire grumpy, Spike thought righteously.

Too bad his early afternoon grumpiness - legendary in some circles - had no effect on Xander who thought it was cute and wasn’t afraid to say so.

This afternoon, though, Xander didn’t tease Spike with his usual sappy compliments which he claimed were all part of a sincere effort to help Spike wake up. Instead, Xander went back to fidgeting nervously and Spike drained the mug of warmed blood, and shook his head vigorously, shaking off his sleepiness.

“Somethin’ wrong, luv?”

“Sort of… not really… kind of…” Xander said unhelpfully, obviously nervous. He looked down at the paper on the table. “Willow’s coming back.”

Spike stiffened at Xander’s quiet words, the last traces of sleepiness vanishing in a tidal wave of emotion: anger, worry, fear for Xander, need for revenge, all those and more surged through him, robbing him of speech for a moment.

“It’s not like I haven’t known she was going to be coming back eventually,” Xander went on. “It’s just that… I’m not ready to see her yet.”

“Then don’t. Tell her to stay where she is and leave you the hell alone. Tell her if she comes within a mile of this town I’ll tear her apart.” Spike was already making plans to meet the witch’s plane and eviscerate her in the terminal.

“I can’t do that,” Xander objected. He looked up and smiled wryly. “And whatever you’re thinking, you can’t do that either.”

“Witch so much as looks at you cross-eyed and I can and will do exactly what I’m thinking.”
“Spike, do you honestly think that Maggie would let Willow come back if she wasn’t better?”

Spike scowled. Maggie had been impressive and any coven that the old woman was part of was undoubtedly on the ball. Xander had a good point but it wasn’t one that Spike wanted to accept. He resented the witch coming back, hated her for what she’d done to his Claimed, and hated being denied the right to take vengeance on her. Xander was still looking at him, his brows raised pointedly and Spike finally said grudgingly: “Not deliberately. Doesn’t mean the witch can’t pull the wool over Maggie’s eyes.”

“Willow’s written me some letters,” Xander admitted, ignoring Spike’s darkening look at that revelation. “She really seems like she understands what she did wrong.”

“Full of apologies, was she?” Spike asked scornfully.

Xander shook his head. “No, and for some weird reason, that’s why I think she finally gets it. Like she knows that it’s too big for an ‘I’m sorry’ to make everything all better now.”

“Clever of her,” Spike commented sourly. Xander was too trusting, too loyal, even to someone who’d betrayed him not once but twice. Someone who’d hurt him over and over and thought she was doing it for Xander’s own good.

“Can’t stop her from coming back,” he said flatly, “but you let her know that I’ll be watching her.” He stood, feeling a sudden need to spar with his Lieutenants to work off the anger inside. “And I will kill her if she hurts you again.”

Xander smiled. “I love you too.”
Chapter 38

Wesley wasn’t half bad once he settled down a bit and stopped trying so hard to shove Giles out of the loop. Either he’d taken Xander’s advice about lightening up or else he’d just realized that Giles was the loop, so to speak. Giles was the thread that tied the group together, the anchor that kept them from drifting apart. Even Spike and Angel respected him and he was surrogate father and mentor to the rest of them.

Wesley had committed the cardinal sin when he first arrived of getting into a power struggle with Giles over his role as Watcher. Which was understandable: it was difficult to step into a position still solidly filled by your predecessor. Wesley had obviously resented Giles’ presence and had acted accordingly. However, it was a power struggle that Wesley was not only destined to lose but that had completely alienated Buffy. Wesley seemed to have finally grasped that Buffy had bonded with Giles in a way that Wesley could never hope to compete with and changed his strategy accordingly.

Xander remembered hearing a saying once that the only way to win was not to fight. Einstein or somebody. Maybe Yoda. In any case, Wesley seemed to have figured out that he could either be co-Watcher with Giles or not a Watcher at all. Once Wesley started asking for Giles’ input and opinions, Buffy stopped freezing him out and began listening to him. Despite the spectacularly bad start Wesley had made, it soon became apparent to them all that he was really smart, just inexperienced. Giles stopped sniping at him and began teaching Wesley some of the things Giles had learned in his 20-some years of experience.

Wesley had expressed interest in Xander’s demon studies and was fascinated when Xander started passing on some of Spike’s comments and addendums to the materials. Spike had never lost interest in what Xander was learning and still liked to critique the Watchers’ materials. When Giles showed Wesley the notes he’d been keeping on all of Spike’s information, Xander couldn’t help but be amused at how excited the younger Watcher had gotten at having access to a fresh source of information. Wesley really was a scholar at heart.

Usually Xander thoroughly enjoyed his demon study sessions in the library with Giles but today he was having a hard time concentrating. Wesley sitting beside him, methodically reading through Giles’ Watcher diaries, wasn’t the distraction, it was the letter he’d gotten from Willow. Willow was flying back from England on Saturday. The letter made her return real. Not that he’d thought that Oz was lying about her return but seeing it himself in black and white made it harder to ignore. Buffy and Giles were going to meet her at the airport and he was grateful that Willow hadn’t even hinted that he be there to greet her. She obviously understood that Xander would be cautious, just saying that she’d missed him and was looking forward to seeing him again.

He was glad for Oz’s sake that Amy wasn’t returning with her, at least not yet. According to Willow, Amy was going to stay in England for awhile longer. Willow hadn’t said, and Xander was so not going to ask, if it was because of their “experimenting” or for some other reason. It was apparent from her letter that Willow was as nervous about returning as Xander was about seeing her again and that made him feel better, knowing she wouldn’t push things.

“Check out Giles, the next generation.”

Xander looked up, startled at the sudden comment disturbing the silent library. Cordelia was standing by the check-out desk, head cocked to one side, openly studying Wesley, who leapt to his feet courteously at the sound of a woman’s voice.
“Very nice, Xander,” Cordelia purred. “I didn’t expect you’d done this well for yourself.” Her glance slid up and down Wesley, who blushed crimson at the open perusal.

Xander looked blankly at Cordy until he suddenly realized what she meant. Cordy had been reminding him daily of his promise to introduce her to his boyfriend and obviously thought Xander had just made good on that promise. For one second, he wondered if he could get away with claiming Wesley as his boyfriend, but he discarded the thought almost immediately. Wesley would never be able to pull it off and, if Spike ever got wind of it, he’d kill Wesley even if it had been Xander’s idea. Plus, he didn’t really want to present Wesley as his boyfriend; the younger Watcher was improving but he was so not Xander’s type, which ran more to snark, and irreverent humor, and danger. Plus the leather coat, he thought with a smile.

Grinning, he made a game-show buzzer noise. “Sorry, Cordy, he’s not my boyfriend, but thank you for playing.”

“What? Oh, ah… no, indeed.” Wesley blushed again and looked apologetically at Xander, adding hastily: “Not that I wouldn’t be honored, it’s just that…”

Xander laughed. “Don’t worry, Wesley, I didn’t take the rejection personally.”

Giles came out of the office. “What do you need, Cordelia?”

“Psych class. Freud and Jung. Book me?”

“Of course.” As Giles disappeared into the stacks, heading for the psychology section, Cordelia’s gaze swung back to Wesley, who extended his hand.

“Wesley Wyndam-Pryce.”

“I like a man with two last names.” Xander had to admit, she was impressive when she swung into action. “I’m Cordelia.”

“And you teach psychology?” Wesley asked.

“I take psychology,” Cordelia corrected, her smile blinding. Wesley seemed completely dazzled, still dazedly holding her hand.

“She’s a student,” Giles said dryly, returning with the requested books.

Xander laughed at the haste with which Wesley dropped her hand and stepped back. Cordelia just continued to smile at him as she reached for the books Giles handed her without ever taking her eyes off her target. Cordy was as much a predator as Spike when she had her eye on a victim.

“So, welcome to Sunnydale.” There was a world of promise in the sultry voice and Wesley looked like he’d already forgotten the whole ‘she’s a student’ issue under the power of Cordelia’s flirtatious smile.

Cordy turned away with a last, lingering look, and stopped on her way out long enough to level an implacable stare at Xander. “Four more days, Xander.”

“Got it,” he answered automatically, amused to see that Wesley still hadn’t been able to tear his eyes away from Cordelia as she walked out the door. Xander was pretty sure her hips didn’t usually swing quite that much.

“My. She’s… cheeky, isn’t she?”
Xander shook his head, amused. “Wesley, today’s phrase is an important one: first word ‘jail’, second word ‘bait’.”

He had continued to tease Wesley about his fresh-from-England vocabulary and had jokingly started a ‘word of the day’ tutoring session in Americanese. Wesley had been taking it with good grace and seemed to be trying to speak a little less formally, sort of like Giles had after lengthy exposure to his charges. Now, though, Wesley just blushed deeply and hurriedly sat down, burying himself in the book he’d been reading earlier and Xander hoped he hadn’t pushed it too far.

Turning his attention back to his own reading, Xander promised himself he would talk to Spike about Cordy tonight. He needed to get at least one of the meetings he was dreading over with or he’d be a complete wreck by Saturday.

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“No way!” Cordelia’s voice rose in shock the moment she arrived at the table. “I mean I knew Buffy had gotten into necrophilia - and can I just say ‘eww’ - but no way are you dating the undead, Xander Harris.”

Xander winced, grateful the diner was almost completely empty as Cordelia really wasn’t into voice modulation, waiting for Spike to erupt. This was off to a good start.

He’d arranged for the three of them to meet at the diner because he thought of it almost as a good luck spot since he’d had his first real conversation with Spike here and Spike and Joyce had worked out their problems at one of the tables. This table. Not surprisingly, Cordy had bitched about the low rent place he was asking her to go to, but she’d been too curious not to show, settling for being fashionably late. He just hadn’t expected quite this level of fireworks two seconds after she walked in the door.

“Prefer ‘living impaired’ myself.”

Xander did a double-take at the amusement in Spike’s voice. Not to mention the mere idea that his vampire would use a politically correct term for anything was pretty much messing with his head.

“Whatver,” Cordelia said impatiently. She crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing them up and out just a bit more than usual - purely accidentally, of course - and tapped one foot impatiently. “Are you really his boyfriend or are you just covering for his real boyfriend, who’s too embarrassing to be seen in public?” she asked suspiciously.

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “You saying I’m lying, cheerleader?” he growled.

Cordelia wasn’t impressed. “Hello - evil undead? Like you’d have a problem with lying,” she scoffed.

“Got that right.” Spike was grinning now, clearly enjoying this and Xander was beginning to wonder just when Spike had been replaced by a pod-person. Pod-vampire. Or something. Spike wasn’t reacting like he’d expected. Of course, since his expectations for this meeting had tended to veer into the gratuitously violent, that was probably a good thing.

“How long have you been dating?” Cordelia asked, eyes narrowing like she thought she could trip Spike up.

“Let’s see, first time we shagged was just after we sent Angelus to hell, right, luv?” Spike glanced at Xander for confirmation, his eyes glittering with wicked laughter. “Kind of a celebration,” he confided to Cordelia.
Xander buried his head in his arms, pretty sure he was officially in hell. Maybe he should leave the two of them alone.

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“You are so not getting any tonight,” Xander threatened as they left the diner.

“What?” Spike’s voice was all wounded innocence. “I met with your little friend just like you asked. Didn’t kill her or anything,” he added virtuously.

“Oh, let’s see, was the low point of the meeting when you offered to shag me in front of her so she would believe we were a couple, or when you offered to kill the waitress to prove you’re still evil even though you’re dating a human?”

Spike just smirked, not even a little repentant. “I like her,” he announced. “She’d make a beauty of a vampire - she’s more evil than half the vampires in town.”

Xander groaned. “So not getting any,” he muttered again.

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Willow faced the group with composure but Xander saw the hands gripping the back of the chair with seeming casualness were white-knuckled and her voice had just the tiniest tremor as she spoke. Willow was beyond nervous but faced them all squarely without looking away, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

She’d flown into town yesterday and Giles had called this morning to say that Willow had asked if they could all meet at the school library. Spike had flat out refused to let Xander go alone but, surprisingly, Giles had said that Willow had asked that everyone be there including Spike and Angel. Giles had mentioned that a member of the coven was with her and said he thought it was important that they all be there.

Spike had reluctantly agreed and they’d set the meeting for an hour after sunset. They had all gathered around the library table with varying degrees of trepidation, curiosity, and anger. Oz was as shut down as Xander had ever seen him, Wesley just looked uncomfortable. Buffy and Giles, who’d met Willow’s plane, were worried but calm, and Spike was hovering over Xander like a mother hen with one chick.

A blood-thirsty, homicidal mother hen.

Willow had arrived with a woman in her 40’s and Xander was disappointed that it wasn’t Maggie. The woman had shoulder-length brown hair and unremarkable features. She walked in through the library doors beside Willow but then stayed back by the entrance, letting Willow approach the group on her own.

Willow took a deep, steadying breath and walked slowly towards them, stopping short of the table and resting her hands on the back of the chair that had been left empty for her.

“I won’t ask you to forgive me,” she began in a shaky voice. “I’m not even sure that any of you should. I’ve hurt all of you, some more than others, and none of you have any reason to trust me. I can’t promise you that I won’t ever do anything to hurt you again, but I do promise that I will try not to.”

Spike growled and the hands on Xander’s shoulders tightened unconsciously. Xander slid his own hands up to cover Spike’s, squeezing them reassuringly. No one else said anything. Xander was
listening intently, Willow didn’t sound like herself, she sounded as if she’d rehearsed what she was saying. Given her obvious nervousness, that wasn’t surprising, especially since Willow had had nightmares about public speaking since grade school. Still, he wished she’d just talk to them so he could get a better sense of her sincerity. He found himself wishing Maggie had come with her instead of this other woman. Maggie had been formidable, a force to be reckoned with, and Xander trusted her judgment.

Buffy smiled encouragingly at Willow, who continued after a short hesitation: “I’m back because I need to prove myself. Not to any of you but to myself. I need to prove to myself that I can learn to not misuse my powers.

“I know you all would probably be happier if I never did magic again but what I’ve learned from the coven is that it doesn’t work that way. Giles warned me when I did the re-souling spell that I would be opening a door inside myself that couldn’t be closed again and he was right. The magic is inside me now and I have to learn how to control it. It’s not like being an addict who needs to go cold turkey. I need to learn to learn how to use my gifts as they were intended to be used and not for my own selfish purposes. The coven has been helping me with that.

“I won’t try and tell you that I’m all better and everything is fine now, or ask you to forget what I did. I’ve just begun to get the training I need but, as much as I hate to say it, we actually have a bigger problem than me. The coven sent Elizabeth with me to help.” Willow gestured towards the woman who had been waiting by the door. “This is Elizabeth Hartness and I’ll let her explain.”

Willow sat down abruptly in the chair as if her legs had given out, head up, hands clasped in her lap to still their shaking.

The woman who’d come to Sunnydale with her moved forward to stand beside and slightly behind her, placing a comforting hand on Willow’s shoulder as she addressed the group. “The Devonshire coven I belong to is a very old, very powerful group,” she said by way of introduction. Wesley nodded imperceptibly, obviously he’d heard of them. “A seer among our number has recently begun to sense the rise of a very dark power here in Sunnydale. Unfortunately, we do not have a great deal of information about this power but what little we do know is that it carries the potential to destroy the entire town, and possibly more.” She paused to let the information settle in for a moment, then added: “I was sent to give you whatever assistance I can.”

Spike stirred. “And your solution is to send the wicked witch of the west back into the heart of the storm?” he asked, disbelievingly. “Perfect.” Xander didn’t have to look at him to know he was glaring challengingly at Willow.

Willow met the glare unflinchingly. “Spike, the harm I caused was in using magic against friends.” Spike didn’t answer but Xander felt Spike’s hands tighten on his shoulders again and knew that Spike’s anger stemmed from his fear for Xander’s safety. “I want to help with what’s coming, in any way I can. Sunnydale’s my home.”

Spike made a scoffing noise but didn’t say anything else. Xander studied Willow closely, realizing that that was the first time he’d heard Willow call Spike by name, as if he was a person, not a thing, and wondering if that was a sign that she was finally accepting his choice to be with Spike. If so, that was a huge change on her part and would bode well for other changes.

The woman from the coven looked around the circle of faces, her dark eyes catching and holding each person’s gaze in turn. “The coven made the decision that Willow is ready to return. She is strongly connected to this town and to your group. In our judgment, being here and helping you in the battle to come is the next step for her. She and I ask only that you set aside your doubts and fears sufficiently that you may work with both of us.”
Xander wondered why he’d thought her non-descript. When she looked directly at you, you could see the power and wisdom in her eyes. He began to feel a little better about this coven representative and the coven’s ability to deal with Willow in general. Obviously, Maggie wasn’t their only impressive member.

“What can you tell us about this dark power?” Not surprisingly, Giles was the first to find his voice.

“Very little, I’m afraid. There have been vague portents of trouble for some time but something changed about a week ago as if the danger had suddenly increased dramatically.” Her shoulders moved in a fluid shrug. “Unfortunately, we are not sure what caused the sudden increase in its power.”

“A literal increase in power?” Wesley asked.

Miss Hartness spread her hands in a helpless gesture. “Possibly. It could have been a power boost, or multiple entities combining, or something else entirely. That is what we must ascertain in order to act.”

Angel spoke for the first time: “The Mayor’s ritual?” he suggested.

Giles and Wesley exchanged glances. “The timing is about right,” Wesley said thoughtfully.

“I suspect we must re-double our efforts to research the Mayor.” Giles hesitated, then became the first to extend an olive branch. “Willow, we have sorely missed your computer skills. Perhaps you could assist us by researching the Mayor on the computer.”

Willow nodded. “Of course, Giles.”

Xander heard the relief in her voice but he couldn’t bring himself to say anything. Seeing Willow was twisting him in knots: the recent reconnection in their letters fighting against the fear and distrust brought on by seeing her again in person. He felt guilty but he couldn’t force himself even to offer a simple ‘welcome back’ and he was secretly grateful that Spike was bristling with the angry challenges that Xander couldn’t say either.

Oz was similarly torn, he could tell. Oz had barely looked at Willow and Xander hoped he wasn’t going to bail again. It was Oz’s way of dealing and he respected that, but Oz had only returned this week and Xander had missed him. He thought wistfully about going back to the bar with Oz, but he knew Spike would need to kill things tonight. It was Spike’s way of dealing.

Right on cue, Spike’s voice put an end to the meeting. “I’ll be keeping my eye on you, witch,” he promised. “You give me the slightest excuse and I will follow through on what I told you the last time we spoke.”

Willow’s hand went to her throat, unconsciously rubbing at where Spike had put his hand around it and threatened to choke the life out of her if she ever did another spell on Xander. “I remember,” she said quietly. “And I hope you do.”

Spike stared at her for a long time then abruptly nodded, apparently satisfied. “We’re done,” he announced and tugged Xander gently up out of his chair. Xander went willingly, lifting his free hand in a general goodbye, knowing that Spike needed to get him safely in the lair before Spike could seek the release of violence that he needed. Seeing Willow again was almost harder on Spike than it was on Xander, bringing back Spike’s feelings about having failed his Claimed by letting a threat to Xander live. Even though he’d done it for Xander, he knew that Spike still hated that Willow was alive and unhurt.
Slipping his arm around Spike, Xander leaned into him, knowing Spike would feel better once he’d killed something. “Thanks, Spike,” he whispered, knowing Spike would understand what he was thanking him for.
Chapter 39

The demons were new in town and just what Spike had been looking for: tough, hostile, and spoiling for a fight. It was all the excuse Spike needed.

He’d been patrolling his territory for some time, moving restlessly through the demon areas looking for something worth fighting when he stumbled across them in the small playground. He recognized them, of course, there weren’t that many demons with no mouths. They were a breeding pair of Szynmrl.

Szynmrl generally kept to themselves - not being able to communicate outside their species pretty much assured that - but when they moved into an area, they tended to clear out anything they saw as hostile, which included anything not human normal. Spike had seen some damn strange demon alliances formed to clear out large packs of them from a territory. Humans weren’t their natural prey but they killed a lot of humans who strayed too close to their nests. No one had ever been able to figure out what or how they ate, if they ate anything at all, and the Szynmrl certainly weren’t talking about it.

The Szynmrl went on alert the moment they sensed him and immediately went into battle readiness, moving further apart so that they could come at him from both sides. Spike concentrated on the female, keeping a wary eye on the male but otherwise ignoring him. The males were the egg carriers and a breeding pair moving into a new territory meant that the odds were good the male was pregnant. If so, the male would hang back in a fight to protect the eggs it carried.

Spike grinned triumphantly as the pair shifted position, the female moving forward aggressively while the male circled around, always staying slightly further back than the female. His own movements cautious, Spike deliberately waited until the pair was almost directly across from each other on either side of him, then charged the female.

Running directly at her, he spun away at the last second, dodging the claws that were her main weapon and using the momentum of his turn to bring both hands around and down in a single smashing blow aimed at her vulnerable side. She was quicker than he anticipated and was already turning away from him as he struck, causing the blow to land on her scale-armored back, the force of it staggering her but not doing the intended damage.

Spike kept moving as she stumbled forwards a step, leaping and aiming a spin-kick at her back. The demon had caught her balance almost instantly and spun around, her clawed hands closing around his booted foot and Spike found himself flipped in mid-air.

Snapping into a ball, he went with the spin’s motion and landed crouched and ready, bouncing back to his feet before she could close on him. He danced backwards, checking that the male was still hanging back and changed tactics. As the female charged him, her claws swiping viciously at him, Spike waited ’til the last second, then dropped to his back on the ground, kicking up savagely with both feet.

The risky move caught her by surprise and his feet connected solidly, sending her flying over his head to crash into a picnic table, the impact splintering the wood and leaving her scrambling as she tried to get to her feet. Spike flipped upright and closed on her again, only to have to leap aside to avoid another swipe from her clawed hands.

Keeping a wary eye on her mate, Spike let himself fall back towards the swing set, maneuvering carefully as she scrambled to her feet and came at him. Judging his moment precisely, he turned and
leapt for the upright metal pole supporting the swing set. His hands closed around the cool metal and he swung around it in a circle, meeting her head on, the full weight of his body behind the kick that caught her squarely in the chest.

He dropped to the ground as she sailed backwards to crash into the jungle gym, the metal bending beneath her weight before she crumpled to the grass. She rolled and tried to get to her feet, moving more slowly now, and Spike was on her before she was halfway up, smashing her back with a savage kick to the head.

She fell back against the jungle gym, still half upright, and Spike rained blows down on her, feeling bones crack beneath his fists. Sensing movement behind him, Spike turned and swung, his fist connecting solidly with the male’s jaw. The male’s own intended blow went wild, the claws missing him entirely, and Spike kicked out, his foot landing hard in the male’s stomach and sending him crashing to the ground.

Turning back to the female, Spike saw she was still moving, struggling to rise, and he grinned ferally. Another kick to the head dropped her back down and he reached down and grabbed her around the neck with both hands. Szynmrll had bony growths on either side of their necks and couldn’t be killed by Spike’s usual method of breaking his opponents’ necks. Planting one foot in the center of her back, he hauled upright on her neck with all his strength until a muffled crack sounded as her spine snapped.

Dropping her like the carrion she would soon be, Spike immediately turned back to the male. The kick to the stomach had dropped the male onto its back, where its eggs sheltered under the bone plates lying under the scaly outer skin, and the male had been slow to recover. Spike was on him in two steps, his foot swinging out to connect in the exact spot where the bone plates met, leaving a vulnerable gap. The demon shuddered in pain as the kick landed and Spike kicked it again and again, until it lay still on the grass.

Snapping its spine in the same manner he’d used on the female, Spike let the male’s body fall, then dropped to a crouch by the body, panting for unneeded breath and feeling the tension flow out of him. There was nothing quite like taking on multiple opponents at once to focus your attention on survival, the fierce concentration of battle eliminating normal, everyday concerns.

“Got that out of your system?”

He looked up and grinned at Angelus who was leaning against a tree and watching him. “Felt good,” he admitted.

Angelus looked at the bodies and made a noncommittal sound which Spike decided was approval. “Never did like Szynmrll.”

“Yeah, I remember. We killed four of ’em, wasn’t it, in Rome.”

“Three but who’s counting.”

Think you are, mate.” Spike answered without offense, then rose to his feet. “Could use a spot of something strong. Fancy a drink?” he asked.

Angelus nodded and Spike grinned at him. “First round of human’s on me,” he said. When Angelus just nodded without even his usual token protest, Spike wondered if the witch’s return had raised issues for Angelus as well. After all, the bint had been responsible for the cock-up that sent his Sire to a hell dimension with soul intact. Bound to be some lingering, or not so lingering, resentment about that.
Who knew? If the witch got out of control again, maybe Angelus wouldn’t even scold him when he killed her.

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Home schooling. Really, it had been an absolutely brilliant idea. Spike was a genius and Xander was clearly out of his mind for having rejected the thought. When he got home tonight, he was apologizing to Spike immediately for not having recognized his visionary insight into Xander’s needs.

Perched on a picnic table in the school courtyard, Xander sat with his chin resting on his drawn-up knees watching the between classes movement with unseeing eyes and wondering if the week was ever going to end. Right now he didn’t think he could take even one more day.

The representative from the coven, Miss Hartness, had done something to allow Willow to slide seamlessly back into her classes, the teachers all accepting the explanation of a special study session abroad to cover her nearly two month absence. It didn’t hurt that Willow was the smartest kid in school. She could probably have sat at home for the same period of time and still been on top of all her classes. So the fact that she had essentially been in England taking a crash course in ‘How Not to be Evil’ hadn’t affected her standing at all in the eyes of the school administration.

The Willow who’d come back from England was quieter than before, and well aware that the others had issues about her return. She spent a lot of time with Miss Hartness and during their research meetings, Willow worked on the computer, trying to break into the Mayor’s files and, Xander suspected, grateful for the isolation of computer research that allowed her to focus on her monitor and not on the uncertain, suspicious and downright hostile looks thrown her way.

Buffy had been the quickest to accept Willow’s return. Although Buffy had been uncomfortable at first, Xander knew how much she’d missed Willow and didn’t begrudge Buffy her happiness at having her best friend back in town. The two of them had spent hours together after school and Xander could see the results as they gradually fell back into their old easy companionship, walking through the halls side-by-side and sitting next to each other in classes. Willow was putting up a brave front but he could see the strain as she struggled to fit back into school and the life she had had before she’d left.

Admittedly, none of them were making it especially easy for Willow. Buffy was the only one who was able to accept Willow’s return with something approaching happiness. Giles was struggling to work with her but obviously didn’t trust his own judgment where Willow was concerned. Willow had fooled him before when he’d thought he’d been monitoring her closely. As a result, he was stiff and formal around her and obviously preferring to deal with Miss Hartness.

Oz had gone practically non-verbal, the only outward sign of how miserable he was. He avoided Willow as much as possible and spent much of his time in the music rooms and Xander was just selfishly grateful that Oz hadn’t simply taken off. Willow’s eyes followed Oz sadly but Xander took it as a good sign that she was respecting Oz’s request to be left alone. Oz would talk when he was ready but he was obviously still struggling to come to terms with his own feelings about Willow and Xander had spent several quiet hours with him, listening to Oz play his guitar, the tunes varying from angry to melancholy, the music he’d written for Willow conspicuously absent from his repertoire.

As for Xander himself, Willow being back, being around, being there every day was like nails constantly scratching on a blackboard. Or something equally irritating and pervasive. Every time he saw her, he was afraid and angry and sad and guilty and pretty much every other emotion you could name. He felt guilty that he couldn’t shake his instinctive reaction at the sight of her but every time he saw her, his stomach clenched and nausea rose up and he found himself frantically and uselessly
checking that he had all his memories. Even knowing he wouldn’t know the difference didn’t stop him from doing it. It was horrible to be reassured that he felt so torn because if she was messing with him again, he probably wouldn’t. She’d seemed sincere in her apology and Miss Hartness was reassuring about the progress she’d made, but Xander couldn’t bring himself to trust her. Not yet and he wondered if maybe not ever. He missed the Willow he used to know, before death and Spike and magic and betrayal had come between them, but he wasn’t sure if what they had once had could ever be recaptured. The smashed pieces of their friendship could perhaps be glued back together, but it would never be strong and whole again, just a sad, patched facsimile of something that had once been great.

He knew he and Willow were going to have to talk. She was doing her best to get through the days and Xander recognized that it was hard for her but, as he’d overheard Oz saying to Willow in the hallway - that really wasn’t his problem. As guilty as he felt over his inability to just forgive and forget when it did seem like Willow was sincerely trying to make amends, he needed time. If Willow ever wanted to patch things up with himself and Oz, she was going to have to give them that time.

Which thoughts led to him stopping Willow at her locker and asking if he could talk to her alone. Xander shrugged off his backpack and sat down on one of the desks, wondering how to start. Willow made the decision for him.

“Xander, I didn’t say it in my letters because I needed to tell you face to face. I’m sorry.” Willow met his eyes squarely. “I kept telling myself that what I was doing was for all the right reasons: to help Buffy, to make us friends again. I was lying to myself as much as to everyone else. I didn’t let myself see what I was doing, see that what I was doing was wrong and that I was hurting you. I can’t ever make up for what happened but I want you to know: I’m really sorry.”

Xander nodded. “I’m glad that you’re doing better,” he said without commenting on the apology, “what I hadn’t realized was how hard it was going to be to see you again.” He sighed. “I guess what I’m saying is that I’m kind of still at the letter writing stage of reconnecting, not the seeing each other every day stage.”

“I don’t understand.” Willow said after a moment and he couldn’t blame her. He’d been less than clear. Trying to think of how to explain it, he decided on the bald truth.

“Willow, sitting here alone in a room with you, my heart is pounding so hard I can barely hear myself think.” Willow’s eyes widened and the color drained from her face. “When I turn around in the hall and see you unexpectedly, it’s a shock. It’s like…,” he faltered, hating the only example he could think of, but forcing himself to continue.

“When Angel came back from Hell,” he continued, “it freaked me out completely. All I could remember was what he’d done to me. When I first saw him, I was terrified. I knew it was Angel and not Angelus and I still couldn’t stop shaking. It was months before I could see him without that knee-jerk reaction.”

Willow bowed her head, her hands clasped tightly, and Xander could tell she understood what he was telling her.

“I don’t think Angel and I will ever be friends,” he continued gently, “but I can work with him now.” He smiled suddenly. “Granted, I didn’t like him before he lost his soul, but that’s another story.”
“So, you need time.”

“Yeah.” He hesitated but knew it had to be said if they were ever going to get past this.
“Willow, when Angel kidnapped me, he’d lost his soul and he didn’t know then about the happiness clause. You don’t have that excuse.”

“I know.” Willow’s voice was so quiet he barely heard her.

He took a deep breath. “And I know it’s none of my business, but you really hurt Oz and that’s not helping.”

Willow looked up, startled, and Xander shrugged. “That’s between you and Oz and I won’t mention it again but I want you to understand what I’m feeling.” Their eyes met for a long moment and Xander could see the pain and acceptance in her green eyes.

“I’ve missed you, Willow, for a long time now, and I hope that someday we can start over. But I’m not there yet and I don’t know if I ever will be. I can work with you, because we both want to stop whatever the Mayor’s planning but I’m not ready to be friends yet.”

There wasn’t anything left to say. Picking up his backpack, Xander quietly walked out, leaving Willow behind.

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The nightly sessions pouring through newspaper archives and the enormous dusty books containing the town’s records, the quiet clicking of computer keys as Willow tried to find a way around the Mayor’s firewalls, were getting them nowhere. They had learned that Richard Wilkins had been Mayor of Sunnydale for nearly 80 years. Twice he had been elected as his own son assuming the office, re-appearing first as Richard Wilkins, Jr. and then as Richard the III. Comparing old photographs that Oz had dug up out of the archives, it was obvious that Mayor Wilkins the First was the same guy as Mayors II and III.

Xander couldn’t help wondering how the campaigns had handled endorsements from a predecessor who couldn’t appear on stage with his successor. Not to mention he was seriously beginning to question the validity of the vote counts. Three generations of men being elected to the same post without a peep about nepotism and vote fixing? Not even Chicago could pull that off. Granted, it wasn’t the issue, but still…

Oz continued to stick around and work with them, a quiet, intent researcher who somehow always found the furthest spot in the room from Willow. Xander hurt for the pain that showed on his face in unguarded moments before the blank mask slid back into place. Willow’s face showed the same hurt and regret as Oz’s as she carefully respected his silence and distance and Xander suspected they were never going to get back together.

Four days of digging had produced almost no useful information. They’d already known the Mayor was other than human, so finding out he was a lot older than he appeared wasn’t exactly the key that was going to solve the mystery of what he was up to. The details were too sparse to be able to determine what ritual he had performed, despite Giles’ and Wesley’s futile attempts to at least limit the possibilities to something less than infinity.

The coven hadn’t been able to provide any more information and they were still just guessing that the Mayor was the “dark force” the coven had sensed. They were seriously screwed if it wasn’t the Mayor because, despite their lack of progress, he was the only suspect they had.
Buffy and Angel had pretty much abandoned research to patrol extensively and Xander had been able to persuade Spike to join them. Spike had clearly wanted to go but was reluctant to leave Xander alone with Willow. Pointing out the number of people in the room with them and the fact that Willow was being supervised by Miss Hartness, Xander had been able to convince his reluctant partner to go kill things instead of spending his nights leafing through books and glaring at Willow. Given the aura of lethal menace Spike could project whenever he chose to, his presence hadn’t helped anyone’s concentration.

When Buffy returned early the third night, Xander had looked up in alarm, worried about Spike, but Buffy looked pleased and he settled back into the chair he had half risen out of at her solo entrance. Buffy had called for Giles as soon as she entered the library, and began describing her encounter with a demon that wanted to sell her some books.

“He was looking for me in particular, Giles,” she finished like she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. “He waited until the three of us split up to approach me.”

“The Books of Ascension?” Giles repeated, glancing at Wesley and Elizabeth Hartness, who shook their heads. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“He said that the Mayor would hate for anyone to get ahold of them and he wanted to sell them and get out of town.” She shrugged. “Said he would meet me at the same place tomorrow and bring the books.” She glanced at Xander. “Angel and Spike are following him to see if they can find out anything more.”

“And you say this demon wanted cash? That’s very unusual,” Wesley said thoughtfully.

“Demons after money,” Giles said disapprovingly. “Whatever happened to the still beating heart of a virgin? No one has any standards anymore.”

Xander grinned at Giles’ disgruntlement. “Sorry, Giles. American demons are obviously into crass capitalism. What’s Ascension mean?”

“I’m not sure,” Giles confessed.

Wesley concurred. “It’s not really a common term in demonology.”

Miss Warness looked like she was mentally snapping her fingers, searching her memory for something half forgotten, when Willow spoke up.

“Maybe the Marenschadt Text?” she said hesitantly. “I think in the section on genocide, they mention Ascension.”

Giles gave her a sharp look which Willow met steadily, her cheeks flaming but not dropping her eyes. “Maybe the MarenschadtText?” she said hesitantly. “I think in the section on genocide, they mention Ascension.”

Giles gave her a sharp look which Willow met steadily, her cheeks flaming but not dropping her eyes. Giles’ lips tightened but he didn’t say anything, moving instead to the book cage in search of the volume. The fact that the book was kept in the cage told Xander it was one of the books on dark magic which Giles felt merited extra precautions to keep safe.

“What kind of demon was it?” Wesley asked as they waited for Giles to return with the book.

Buffy shrugged. “Short, crappy clothes, in serious need of orthodonture help,” she said, less than helpfully.

Wesley sighed at the worthless description and Xander couldn’t help feeling sympathetic. Buffy’s demon descriptions left something to be desired, despite the fact that she could spend five minutes describing a new outfit in unbelievable detail. From that description, the demon sounded more like a
human than anything else. He didn’t get why Buffy was so dead set against the demon study part of her job. She wasn’t stupid, although she sure had the act down when she wanted to, but she disliked studying demons, preferring Giles, and now Wesley, to spoon feed her whatever she needed to know about the demon of the week.

Before Wesley could say anything in response, Giles returned with a leather-bound volume, flipping quickly through the pages as he crossed the room.

“Here we are,” he murmured after a second. “There’s a reference here to the journal of Desmond Kane, pastor of a town called Sharpsville. ‘May 26, 1723. Tomorrow is the Ascension. God help us all.’ It was the last anyone heard.”

“Of Kane?” Wesley asked, looking over Giles’ shoulder at the text.

“Of Sharpsville. The town more or less disappeared.”

“So, Ascension, possibly not a love-in,” Buffy said lightly to fill the grim silence that followed.

“I think you should meet with this demon, Buffy.”

“Yeah? Anybody got five thousand dollars?” She raised her eyebrows at Giles who shrugged.

“Perhaps you can persuade the demon to accept less,” Wesley said encouragingly.

Xander rather thought Spike might already be on that.

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The demon wasn’t hard to track. Once he’d left the Slayer behind, he made no more attempt to hide than any other demon who could pass for human at a distance. It was obvious he didn’t have the books with him, so Spike and Angelus kept well back, letting the demon lead them to where he was staying. Which appeared to be near the bus station.

“Disgusting neighborhood this,” Spike commented idly.

“No worse than where we stayed in Edinburgh that time,” Angelus reminded him.

“There was a reason they burned that neighborhood down. It wasn’t just because of us.”

“Good point.” Angelus pointed ahead, “I think we’re here.”

“’bout time.” Spike watched the demon look around furtively then enter a flea-bag motel down the street. He waited a minute, giving the demon the time to make it to his room, then the two of them followed the demon into the hotel.

The unshaven human behind the counter was watching a small portable TV and drinking a can of beer. He barely glanced at them. “35 bucks for the night. 200 for a week.”

“We just need information,” Angelus said, leaning one elbow against the counter. “Which room is the man who just came in staying in?”

“100 bucks for information.”

Angelus’ hands flashed out, dragging the heavy set man halfway across the counter. “I’m asking politely, then I’m going to get testy,” he snarled. “Which. Room?”
After a brief struggle which got him nowhere, the man said, “Room 14, around back.”

Angelus set him down again. “See how civilized that was? If you call him to warn him, I’m coming back and I will be very upset.”

“Like this dump has phones in the rooms,” the man answered, turning back to his TV program. Spike almost laughed at Angelus’ surprise at the man’s dismissal.

Room 14 was, as promised, around back. Spike didn’t waste time with knocking, just kicking in the flimsy door and stepping inside. A short demon with a fringe of graying hair and two rows of horns on his otherwise bald crown was in the middle of packing.

“Hey, do the words ‘damage deposit’ mean anything to you?” he complained.

“I didn’t hear the manager mention a damage deposit, did you, Spike?” The demon stepped back. “Master Spike?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, in that case, damage away. I’m won’t be using the room much longer anyway.” The demon fidgeted nervously and moved towards the bag on the bed. “You know, I wasn’t expecting company. Give me a minute and I’ll have the place tidied up.”

“You have the Books of Ascension?”

“Books of Ascension?” At Spike’s glare, he raised his hands in surrender. “Yes. Are you a buyer? I already have an offer but a bidding war is always appreciated by an honest seller.”

“Let’s see them,” Spike growled.

“They’re not here -” His voice cut off in a gasp of pain as Spike punched him. Hard.

“You’re tough in negotiations and I respect that,” the demon said, wiping a trickle of blood away from his split lip. He turned and opened his bag, revealing five large books, then hastily stepped back away from them as Angelus began pulling the books out of the bag.

“Check ‘em out. That is quality merchandise. Worth five grand easy.”

Angelus flipped through the books hastily, confirming they were as claimed the Books of Ascension, at least according to the worn gilt titles on the spines.

“Original editions and everything. Great condition. Okay, that volume is a little worn on one spine, some slight foxing here and there, but otherwise, perfect. Now, the five grand,” he stepped back again at Spike’s glare, “it’s, you know, negotiable,” he finished lamely.

“Not real big on haggling,” Spike informed him in case he hadn’t noticed. “Tell you what, you give us the books and we won’t pull your intestines out and strangle you with them.”

“Now, let’s not be hasty. I’m sure, we…”

“One thousand dollars, or I watch while he kills you,” Angelus interrupted.

Spike shot him a glare but Angelus just stared at the demon.

“I’ll be back in one hour with the cash.”

Spike reached over and dumped the rest of the stuff out of the bag, then began stuffing the books inside. “The books we take now.”

“Those are my security -”

Once more the demon’s voice cut off in a yelp of pain as Angelus slammed him up against the wall. “Are you telling me you don’t trust my word?” he snarled.

“Not at all. One hour.” The demon obviously knew when he was defeated and Angelus let him go, straightening his clothes with mock solicitude.

Heading towards the high school with the bag of books, Spike looked at Angelus. “You’re not actually going to pay him, are you?”

“Yes.”

Spike shook his head in disbelief.
Chapter 40

“Books of Ascension, people. Volumes I through V.”

Spike dropped a carryall onto the library table, looking smug and pleased with himself. Giles and Wesley reacted first, unzipping the bag and spilling the books out onto the table with far less care than either Watcher usually showed towards books. Both grabbed a volume and immediately began flipping through it.

“Where’s Angel?”

“Had an errand.”

Xander made a note to ask Spike later about the disgust in his voice as he answered Buffy but for now he was drawn to the books out of curiosity as well. Even Willow left the computer and she, Oz and Xander each took one of the remaining volumes, settling down at the table to see what they had. Buffy contented herself with roaming in a circle around the group, looking over everyone’s shoulders in turn at their books.

Spike pulled up a chair next to Xander and Xander laid a caressing hand on his thigh, nudging his book over a little so Spike could read it as well.

“Worth a thousand?” Spike asked after a moment.

Xander looked at him in surprise. “You guys paid the demon?”


“Hey,” Xander protested mildly and Spike smirked at him.

“Demons don’t pay for things. It’s the principle of the thing,” he said as if it was self-evident.

“I’ve seen you paying for drinks in a bar,” Xander argued.

“That’s different.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Gentlemen, a little less noise would be helpful,” Wesley said without looking up from his volume.

“Sorry,” Xander apologized sheepishly. He’d forgotten they weren’t alone. Spike just laughed, rubbing his hand over Xander’s back. He too settled down to read, curious about what the books contained.

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The Books of Ascension were the genuine article. Fragile, handwritten, almost transparently thin pages contained all the information you would ever want to know about an Ascension. If you were the one choosing to Ascend, that is.

Essentially, they were how-to manuals: How to Achieve Ascension in 12 Needlessly Complicated Steps. Other than telling them what Ascension was, Xander already had a sinking feeling they weren’t going to be very useful.
Not that the books weren’t a good start. They now knew that ‘Ascension’ referred to a human transforming into a demon, but the books contained hundreds of different Ascension recipes for transforming into one demon or another. Apparently, different rituals were called for depending on if you wanted to become an Azrasch or a Zhyn'dahk demon.

After an hour, punctuated by occasional exclamations of interest and one or another of them reading a passage out loud to the group, Xander pushed his book away and stretched in his chair, rolling his shoulders to ease the stiffness. “Is it just me or does this not make any sense?”

“What do you mean, Xander?” Giles asked, looking up from his own volume.

“Why is becoming a demon such a big deal? I mean, it’s not like we don’t have hundreds of them running around Sunnydale already.”

“There are thousands of species of demons, Xander,” Wesley answered. “I suspect the Mayor has chosen to become a particular type of demon for some reason that we may never know. In the meantime, all we can do is try to narrow it down to the more likely possibilities.”

“Well, what does the Mayor want?” Willow asked.

Giles took his glasses off and gestured with them. “Power?” he suggested.

“He already has that, at least at the local level,” Elizabeth, as they were now all calling Miss Hartness, said thoughtfully. She had joined them a bit late and was now sharing Volume II with Wesley. “I think we can safely assume he is seeking additional power. The question is: what does that mean to him? Power comes in many forms.”

“He’s already immortal, or close to it,” Oz said quietly.

Giles leaned back in his chair, chewing absently on the earpiece of his glasses as he thought. “These books are very old,” he said after a long pause. “They are unknown to both the Council and the Devonshire coven, which says a great deal about how exceedingly rare they are.” Putting his glasses back on, he sat upright again.

“If we are on the right track and the Mayor intends to Ascend and become a demon, it seems likely he is using the information contained in these books. Ascension is such a rare term that none of us,” his gesture indicated Wesley, Elizabeth and himself, “had ever heard it before. Nor have we been able to find more than the vaguest reference to it despite all our research. I think we can therefore assume that the Mayor must have gotten his knowledge of Ascension either from these actual volumes or from a secondary source based on these volumes.”

He looked around the circle but no one ventured a counter argument. “Until we know more about the specific ritual he is planning to use, I believe our best course of action is to compile a list of all the possibilities, then try to determine which are the most likely demons the Mayor might choose to become. Perhaps exceptionally strong ones, or ones with unusual and useful abilities. At least that way, Buffy will have some idea of how to fight the demon if we are unable to stop the Mayor before he transforms.”

From the deafening silence, no one had any better ideas. Giles got to his feet and went to gather notebooks and pens for everyone to start listing the demons in their particular volume. Xander flipped his notebook open with a sigh. It was going to be a long night.

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Giles and Wesley looked like they hadn’t slept in three days. They had taken the staggering list of
1,135 demons referenced in the Books of Ascension, which the group had compiled in that first marathon session, and begun gathering information on the demons; listing strengths, weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, in an attempt to winnow down the daunting number of possibilities. Unfortunately, the Books of Ascension pretty much just listed impressive demons, so the weeding out process wasn’t going well. Apparently, no one was interested in transforming into a small, harmless demon.

Willow had triumphantly broken through the Mayor’s firewalls only to find she must have tripped an alarm and the files were empty when she finally accessed them. After all her hard work, it was a crushing blow and Elizabeth had taken her off for a meditation session to rejuvenate her aura, or something. She’d come back the next night, ready to work, and immediately begun putting together a searchable database of the information Giles and Wesley were so laboriously charting.

“Because,” she pointed out. “If we find out what demon he’s going to become, we can pull up the information with one mouse click and that’s a whole lot easier than fumbling through dozens of pages of notes.”

Seeing the wisdom of the suggestion, Giles had gratefully turned over their notes on the various demons and Willow began entering them into the computer. Giles, Wesley and Elizabeth then turned their attention to the actual rituals, listing which ingredients were required for each ritual, hoping they could track purchases of exotic ingredients to give them a clue about the Mayor’s plans.

And that was their problem: too much information. The Mayor could become any one of over a thousand demons, each of which required the Mayor to perform a different ritual to become that demon. It was complete information overload. If they couldn’t stop the Mayor before he transformed, Buffy would have to be prepared to fight every one of those thousand different kinds demons, each of which had different vulnerabilities. Some demons could be killed by beheading, others had multiple heads or could re-grow their heads; some could be stopped with fire, others were impervious to flames. There were demons that could be killed with ordinary weapons: swords and axes, and demons with skin so tough that no blade could pierce it, and others that could only be killed with weapons made of specific materials - stone, crystal, silver, or whatever.

“It’s like studying for the worst test in the world,” Buffy grumbled. “We have to narrow this down or I’ll have to wheel a cart around with me just to have all the weapons I’ll need.”

Wesley uncovered a disturbing fact as he read through the volumes, cross-referencing rituals and demons: over half the rituals involved the person wishing to achieve Ascension becoming impervious to harm as the first step. His face grim, Wesley showed his notes to Giles and Elizabeth.

“That may be the power boost the coven sensed,” Elizabeth said, after reading about the ritual common to so many of the Ascensions. She exchanged a concerned glance with Wesley and Giles. “If so, we are in serious trouble.”

“Impervious as in…” Buffy began, when Giles interrupted her.

“As in they cannot be hurt or harmed in any way.”

“Great. Anyone else think it’s time for a vacation in Bora Bora?”

“Worse, it doesn’t even help us narrow down the search,” Wesley said, taking off his glasses to rub at eyes red-rimmed from too much reading and too little sleep and ignoring Buffy’s remark. “First, we don’t know if that is the ritual the Mayor performed. Second, nearly half of the rituals in the Books of Ascension start with the individual becoming invulnerable. And finally, the ritual to become invulnerable must be performed at different times in relationship with the intended
Ascension, depending on which demon the person intends to become.” He flipped through his notes in frustration. “To become Lo-Hash, one must perform the invulnerability ritual 40 days before Ascension. It is performed 120 days beforehand if you are intending to become H’ruushalh and 86 days if your goal is to become a Nyrtaan.” He slapped the notebook closed. “I could go on.”

“Please don’t,” Buffy muttered. She shook her head in exasperation. “We’re wasting our time. This -” she gestured around at the charts and lists and books scattered everywhere in the usually neat library, “this isn’t getting us anywhere. We can’t prepare for this many possibilities. We have to try something else.”

“What do you suggest?” Giles asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered in obvious frustration. “Right now, I’m thinking we need to do something: storm the Mayor’s office, beat up Willie the Snitch, burn down City Hall, anything but what we are doing.”

“Maybe you should patrol with Angel and Spike,” Wesley suggested. Spike had flatly refused to spend hours every night in tedious note-taking research and he and Angel spent the hours while the others were researching out patrolling before Spike returned to take Xander home each night. Buffy had been obviously envious of them but had felt duty bound to work through the information in the books of Ascension since she was the one it was intended to help.

“I’m for burning down City Hall myself,” Spike’s voice interrupted from the upper landing.

“That’s unlikely to take care of the problem.” Wesley sounded like he wasn’t sure if Spike was joking or not.

“Be fun.” Spike’s feral grin wasn’t helping, Xander thought in amusement, Wesley looked nervous.

“Spike and Buffy are right,” Giles announced, standing up abruptly.

“You want to burn down City Hall?” Willow asked in disbelief.

“No, of course not. But we all need to take a break. We’re drowning in information and are far past the time when anything is making sense. Everyone, go home, and take tomorrow off. No researching. No patrolling. No database compiling.”

“Are you sure?” Xander thought longingly of a night off but didn’t want to bail when things were this critical.

“Quite sure. The chances that the Mayor will do anything tomorrow night are remote. We will all be the better for the chance to clear our heads and get a fresh approach to the problem.”

“Giles, you are a god. Kind of a minor, tweedy god, but one nevertheless.” Buffy stood. “What do you guys say? Who’s for the Bronze?” She suddenly looked full of energy, in a way Xander could only envy.

Spike looked at her like she was a particularly stupid insect. “Takin’ my boy home and shagging him,” he announced, pulling Xander to his feet.

Buffy made a face. “Way too much information.”

“Quite,” Giles agreed.

“How about tomorrow night?” Willow suggested. “Personally, I’m thinking of sleep for about 14
hours but I’d be up for the Bronze tomorrow.”

Although Xander really liked Spike’s plan - really liked it - and thought it was worthy of a repeat tomorrow night, his eyes went to Oz and Angel. Angel really wasn’t a Bronze kind of guy and Oz wouldn’t go because of Willow. Left to their own devices, Oz would probably retreat to the music studio in his garage and Angel would just go to the mansion and do whatever it was he did there. He threw Spike an apologetic look and planted himself against Spike’s efforts to pull him out the door to go home.

“Giles, Wesley, Elizabeth?” He waited until the three adults looked at him, then said: “You guys are taking tomorrow off too, right? You need the break as much as we do.”

“Don’t worry, Xander,” Giles smiled. “There is a glass of Glenlivet and some wonderful opera music waiting for me at home.”

“Buffy,” Xander laced his fingers through Spike’s and chose his words carefully. “If its ok, Spike and I will give the Bronze a miss. I think Spike and Angel will want to go to a bar that serves blood. Oz, why don’t you join us?” he asked casually, pleased when Oz nodded. “I know you liked the band.” He made an apologetic gesture. “Sorry, it’s a place that isn’t big on Slayers, so do you mind if we leave the Bronze to you and Willow?”

Buffy flicked a quick glance at Oz and obviously grasped the situation. “No problem. Willow and I will have a girl’s night out, ok Willow?”

Willow nodded. “Thanks, Xander,” she said quietly, her gaze also going briefly to Oz before resolutely turning away and smiling at Buffy. “We haven’t had a girl’s night in a long time. It’ll be fun.”

She and Buffy moved to the door and Xander found himself the center of attention, Angel looking surprised, Oz unreadable, Giles approving. “Well done, Xander,” he said quietly, then looked at Elizabeth and Wesley. “Would you two like to come to my apartment tomorrow for an adult evening?” he offered.

“I’m more an early rock-n-roll than classical, but maybe we can negotiate,” Elizabeth smiled, suddenly looking much less proper than she normally did.

Giles got a disturbing gleam in his eye. “I think I have just the music for you. Wesley?”

“Yes, indeed. Thank you, Giles.”

“Right, shag tonight, drinks tomorrow,” Spike agreed and Xander laughed as Buffy’s voice floated back through the door.

“Ewww!”

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Arriving at the library with Spike two nights later, Xander was instantly aware that something was up. Giles was pacing back and forth agitationed, Wesley looked deeply troubled, and Buffy looked like she was about to blow a gasket.

The night off had been great and Oz had seemed more relaxed than Xander had seen him since Willow’s return. Spike and Angel hadn’t needed the break as much as the humans in the group because they had been out every night happily killing things and not building up stress like the rest of them but they’d seemed to enjoy themselves as much as he and Oz had. Oz ended up joining the
demon band on stage, admitting he’d been talking to the lead singer about a joint tour with the Dingoes. Spike and Xander played pool and Xander got fairly thoroughly drunk. Which didn’t do much for his pool game but felt really good after the exhausting week. This morning, his head throbbing, he’d decided that his classes could live without him for one day and had called in sick to Giles this morning, admitting he was blowing off his classes to sleep in but would be back at the library after school, ready for work.

He’d been joking with Spike as they entered the library but his laughter died at the obvious tension in the room. “What’s up, guys?” he asked warily, his eyes moving between the humans and Angel, who appeared to be the source of the trouble.

“Oh, nothing. Giles just wants to risk Angel’s life for no good reason.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Spike asked sharply.

“The Mayor has summoned a demon Mage to remove Angelus’ soul,” Giles explained.

Xander’s head snapped around to stare at Angel but it was Angel not Angelus, leaning against the bookshelves, hands in his pockets, head down slightly, not looking at anyone as they argued about him.

“Fortunately, the Mage is an old acquaintance and owes me a debt of honor. He approached me and let me know what was happening. I have proposed that he pretend to do the ritual and Angel, posing as Angelus, seek out the Mayor to see what he can learn.”

“No.” Buffy’s arms were folded stubbornly as she glared at Giles. “It’s too dangerous. You said yourself that there’s a good chance the Mayor is invulnerable.”

“True, but the idea is not for them to fight, just for Angel to learn what he can,” Wesley pointed out. “I know there is some risk but - ”

“Some risk?” Buffy interrupted, glaring at him. “What if something goes wrong? You can’t send Angel in alone against something he can’t fight.”

Spike had been uncharacteristically silent, listening to the others and Xander could tell he’d been thinking hard, now he spoke. “Slayer, the Mayor’s a nutter. He’s just as likely to lecture you about manners as he is to attack you. Feeling invulnerable can make you slow to provoke because, since nothing can hurt you, you don’t need to react quickly. Angelus should be fine.” His eyes never left Angelus even as he ostensibly addressed Buffy.

“Buffy,” Wesley said persuasively. “This may be our best chance to find out if the Mayor really is planning to Ascend, and, if so, where and when he will do it. Maybe even how we can stop him. Right now we are working in the dark with nothing more than theories to go on.”

“We can stop him by just killing him. He’s not human, that makes him fair game.”

Xander winced at her flat pronouncement, thinking of all his demon friends, but this wasn’t the time to argue about it.

“We don’t actually know what he is…” Giles began but Wesley overrode him.

“Buffy, human or not, the Mayor is a public figure. You can’t afford the exposure of an act which will be investigated by the authorities and seen as a homicide if you are discovered to be the one responsible. Slayers are able to operate in the modern world because no one investigates the deaths of demons. Killing the Mayor of a town…” Wesley shook his head. “We may very well reach that
point, but if we do, it will require the utmost caution and extensive planning.”

“So, let’s get with the planning.”

“Sending Angel in is a step in that direction. We must have more information before we act.”

“I’ll do it.” Angel’s quiet voice broke through the arguing voices.

“No!”

“Buffy, it’s the only way. Ever since his assistant saw us together, the Mayor knows that Spike is working with you and me. He won’t let Spike get close enough to learn anything and no one else can either. I’m the only one who can do this.”

“Angel, I don’t want to lose you.”

Spike didn’t like cloak and dagger stuff, preferring straight forward attacks to skulking about in the shadows, but the idea had merit. “Don’t get melodramatic, Slayer,” he growled. “I met with the Mayor several times and I’m still here.”

Buffy looked around and saw she was fighting a losing battle. “Fine,” she said reluctantly. “Where do we do this?”

“None of you can be around or the Mayor will know I’m faking it. I suspect he’ll send someone around to convince me to go to City Hall right after the Mage does the spell.” Angel hesitated, looking at Giles. “Do you trust this Mage?”

“Yes. If he wasn’t being honest about his intentions, he would never have approached me at all. You would most likely already have lost your soul.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. Spike watched with disapproving eyes but didn’t say anything as Buffy clung desperately to Angel. Despite how well they’d been doing in staying away from each other, it was obvious they still cared deeply for one another.

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A knock on the door of the apartment in the early morning hours had Spike crossing the living room rapidly. Xander had fallen asleep hours earlier but Spike was awake and pacing the apartment, worried about his Sire. Giles had admitted frankly that the Mage had the power to remove Angelus’ soul. Giles had only his belief that the Mage wouldn’t actually do it.

Spike had to admit, it was a brilliant ploy on the part of the Mayor. Given the chaos Angelus had caused last year when his soul had gone walkabout, the Mayor had every reason to expect that Angelus would create the same kind of havoc if he lost his soul again. Angelus had never been an inconspicuous demon and his presence would cause problems for both Buffy and Spike, thus removing three impediments to the Mayor’s plans with one stroke.

Swinging the door open, he studied Angelus carefully, stretching his senses out and checking for any hints of blood, cigarette smoke, or alcohol. All of which were nearly permanently part of Angelus’ scent when he was soulless and a far better indicator of his status than his appearance.

Angelus waited patiently, aware of what Spike was doing, and Spike eventually pushed the door open and stepped back to let his Sire inside. “Mage do his thing?”

“The Mayor strolled into the mansion as cool as you please, saying he had a proposition for me.”
Angelus couldn’t hide the faint note of resentment that someone would invade his territory in that way. “Then he threw some sort of blood and herbs cocktail at me. He was apologizing and offering dry cleaning tips when the Mage put on his light show.”

Spike couldn’t help smirking. Angelus obviously was having as much difficulty figuring out the Mayor as Spike. “Did he say what he wanted?”

Angel shot him an unreadable glance. “For starters, he wants me to get you in line,” he answered shortly. “He’s not happy about you working with the Slayer.”

“Not a surprise,” Spike said reasonably. “I’m the biggest threat to him - this is my territory he’s mucking about in.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, he wants me to take out Buffy too.”

“You supposed to do all this for him out of the goodness of your heart?”

“He’s aware that Angelus wouldn’t need a lot of incentive,” Angelus said dryly. “He’s offered me the chance to become his right hand man.”

“Big of him,” Spike commented. “Learn anything useful?”

“He’s invulnerable.”

Spike cocked his head curiously. “He just sayin’ that or did he prove it?”

“I stabbed him through the heart.” Spike grinned and Angelus shook his head. “The knife went in to the hilt and it didn’t faze him at all. Didn’t even hurt him. He just pulled it out, scolded me for being rude, and said I could try again if it would make me feel better.”

“Annoying.”

“Very.” Angelus looked puzzled. “He’s… odd. Invulnerable, but he hates germs. He’s planning on killing half the town, but he thinks it’s rude to swear.”

“Not quite as barmy as Dru, but close,” Spike summed up. Drusilla had been a similar odd combination of fastidious manners and bloodlust. Far classier than the Mayor, though, he thought with a sniff. “Any timetable on killin’ me and the Slayer?” he asked absently.

“Actually, he doesn’t want me to kill Buffy, because he doesn’t want another Slayer called. Just wants me to get her out of the way until the Ascension.”

“He is going for Ascension, then?” Spike still suspected they were missing something but he couldn’t figure out what.

“Yeah. He wouldn’t tell me anything other than he was working towards Ascension and that he would tell me more when I had proved myself to him.”

Angelus was looking uneasy, his eyes shifting every so often towards the bedroom and Spike was getting suspicious. “Prove yourself how?” he demanded.

“He suggested I bring Xander to him as proof of my allegiance.” Angelus admitted. “Said it would keep you under control if he had your consort.”

Spike felt a growl rising in his throat, even though he knew Angelus had no intention of following through with that idea. Angelus let him swear for a moment, then put both hands out to stop Spike
when it looked like Spike was about to charge through the door headed for City Hall.

“We’ll kill him, Spike,” he promised. “But there’s nothing you can do to him right now, remember?”

Frustration and anger pulsed through Spike at the reminder that, once more, he couldn’t avenge a threat to his Claimed. He subsided reluctantly, acknowledging that, for the moment, the Mayor was out of his reach. “Coven must be good for something,” he growled. “Maybe they can reverse the invulnerability ritual.”

“We’ll find out,” Angelus promised.
Spike stared down at his sleeping boy sprawled out in their bed, his quiet breathing the comforting sound Spike fell asleep to each night.

The Mayor was right. Xander made him vulnerable. No matter how well Spike taught him or how proficient with weapons he became, Xander was human. He was slower, weaker, and more vulnerable than a vampire and, once again, Spike considered whether he should turn his Claimed, make Xander his Childe.

Xander didn’t want to be turned and that was a strong consideration, although that reluctance wasn’t likely to last beyond the new vampire’s rising. No, the bigger problem was that Spike didn’t really want to turn his Claimed, not unless he had to. He liked Xander just the way he was: his human warmth, his stubbornness, and his frequently misplaced compassion, even the way he refused to obey Spike like a proper Claimed human. Xander loved Spike and was fiercely loyal, staying by his side because he chose to, not because he depended on Spike like a fledgling Childe would.

Every time Spike woke to the sound of Xander moving around their home, every time he felt Xander’s arms around him in their bed, Spike was content in a way he’d never known before, either as human or vampire. Xander loved him and put Spike first - before his friends, before his worthless family, before everything. No one else had ever done that and Spike wasn’t willing to give that up. It was worth everything to him, even the frustrations and compromises of living with and loving a human.

Sighing, Spike shook Xander gently. “Xander, wake up, luv.”

“Hmmm?” Xander opened one eye and looked up at him blearily. “What time is it?” he asked sleepily.

“Early. Got something we need to talk about.”

Xander’s eyes cleared rapidly and he sat up abruptly. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing we can’t handle. Angelus met with the Mayor last night.”

Xander swung the covers back and stood up, heading for the closet. “I take it he learned something?”

It was a mark of how unsettled he was that Spike wasn’t distracted by the sight of Xander’s naked backside crossing the room.

“A bit. Not as much as we’d hoped.” Xander gave him an impatient look over his shoulder and Spike continued. “The Mayor is invulnerable and he wants Angelus to work for him,” he summarized briefly.

“Doing what?” Xander asked suspiciously.

“Stopping me and the Slayer.”

That got Xander’s full attention and he turned back towards the bed, still holding the pair of pants he’d pulled out. “Stopping? You mean killing you?”

Spike shook his head. “Not necessarily. Doesn’t want the Slayer killed because he doesn’t want another one called right now.”
“And you?”

Spike shrugged. “Told Angelus he just wants me ‘under control’.”

“Doesn’t know you very well, does he?” Xander scoffed, stepping into his jeans. “How’s he think Angelus is going to do that without killing you?”

“By using you.”

Xander froze, pants pulled halfway up, and stared at Spike for a long moment, seeing the fear and the anger that Spike wasn’t even attempting to hide. His jaw tightened and he yanked his pants up the rest of the way, zipping the fly and then reaching for a shirt. Despite his calm movements, Spike heard the slight hitch in his breathing and the way his heart began beating a little faster.

“Oh.”

“Not gonna happen, luv.” Spike crossed the room in two long strides and put his arms around Xander. “He won’t get near you.”

Xander clung to him for a moment, then carefully pushed back so he could see Spike’s face. “Maybe we should let him.”

“No.” There was no give at all in Spike’s voice. Decision irretrievably made, issue settled, end of discussion. Except Xander, of course, wanted to talk about it.

“Spike,” he said persuasively. “Believe me, I’m not crazy about the idea, but we have to consider it. We know something bad is coming; something so bad they could sense it all the way in England. That’s not your demon-of-the-week bad, that’s the-whole-town-is-gonna-be-destroyed-and-we’re-all-dead-anyway bad. We need to know what’s coming.”

“’m not stupid, luv,” Spike snapped. “I know that. And you walking into the lion’s den isn’t going to help.”

“You’ve told me how much the Mayor likes to talk. Maybe he’ll talk to a hostage.”

“He likes to talk about bloody comic strips and his golf game and proper manners, Xander. He doesn’t say sod-all about his plans. He’s not as dumb as he looks.”

Spike was more than a little angry at the turn the conversation had taken and it was seriously pissing him off that Xander was even discussing letting himself be taken hostage. Xander kept doing this, insisting on throwing himself into the path of danger, never taking into account his fragile mortal state and it was driving Spike out of his fucking mind.

“He’s testing Angel, right? To see if he’ll do what the Mayor says. If he brings me in, the Mayor will trust him. At some point, you tell your Lieutenants what your plans are or that aren’t any use to you.”

“Don’t tell my Lieutenants half of what I’m doing,” Spike pointed out, beginning to pace in agitation.

“You tell Jose pretty much everything,” Xander countered.

“Trust Jose,” Spike muttered unwillingly after a moment, having not thought that argument through.

“If Angel drags me to the Mayor by my hair, he’ll trust Angel too.” And wasn’t that an image that hit a little close to home for Xander’s peace of mind. Angelus kidnapping him… not a happy memory.
“No.”

Spike struggled with his desire to end this by shaking some sense into Xander and forced himself to step back and consider the idea with cold logic. He wasn’t going to win this argument with emotion, Xander was too stubborn for that. He was going to have to convince Xander logically that it was a bad plan.

“Xander, if Angelus takes you to the Mayor, what would my reaction be? If it was for real,” he asked finally.

“You’d come rescue me,” Xander answered promptly with complete confidence.

“Exactly. Angelus and I would be in an all-out war. He’d also be fighting the Slayer, messing with her head, killing people around her, just like last time.” Spike gave Xander a long, measuring stare. “Mayor doesn’t want a Lieutenant, luv. If he did, sure as hell wouldn’t be Angelus. Angelus doesn’t share power. What the Mayor wants is to stir the pot, get us all fighting Angelus and not him.”

He could tell that Xander was considering that argument, his brows drawn together in thought. “Ok,” he said, and Spike almost sagged in relief. Xander wouldn’t do something crazy if he agreed with Spike’s reasoning. “But maybe we can use his own ideas against him.”

“What do you mean, luv?”

And found himself grinning like a fool as Xander told him his idea.

“You want to do what?” Wesley’s eyebrows shot up.

“I think we should kidnap the Mayor,” Xander repeated.

“Are you crazy?”

Ok, so Buffy wasn’t on board with the plan yet. Actually, from the shocked looks around the table, no one but Spike was. Even Angel had just looked dubious since they told him. Spike was the only one who looked like he wasn’t wondering what size straightjacket Xander wore. Spike’s expression was one of gleeful anticipation. Spike really wanted to test the whole invulnerability issue: immolation, acid, drowning, hacking to pieces with an axe; Spike had been making a list.

“No, I’m serious. We can’t hurt the Mayor, which means he’s pretty much impossible to fight because eventually, Buffy is exhausted and the Mayor’s still just standing there.” Xander looked around and saw that Buffy at least had considered the physical impossibility of fighting something she couldn’t harm. At least they were listening and not in a humoring the crazy guy way.

“But the Mayor’s just a guy right? Invulnerable, psychotic, wanting to become a demon guy, but as far as we know, he’s got no real fighting abilities.”

“As far as we know,” Giles cautioned.

“So, a bunch of us go in, tie him up, lock him in a cell somewhere and wait the Ascension out.” Xander looked triumphantly around at the group. “He’s only got so long to do the Ascension spell, right?”

Giles and Wesley exchanged glances and there was a long silence.
“I don’t think it would be that easy, Xander,” Elizabeth said slowly.

“Boy’s not sayin’ it’ll be easy. Just possible,” Spike answered sharply.

“It does rather depend on a lot of assumptions,” Giles began.

“Can we assume the Mayor has no special abilities?” Wesley asked.

“We know he can do magic,” Elizabeth answered thoughtfully. “He’s passing as human, so he could be hiding abilities, or his increased lifespan could be the only extra-human ability he has.”

“Where could we keep someone prisoner for an indefinite period?” Wesley asked, then answered his own question: “Although, I believe the Council - ”

“No,” Buffy interrupted harshly. “I don’t trust them.” She made an apologetic grimace. “Present company excepted.”

“Thank you,” Wesley replied gravely, with a small, quickly-hidden smile.

“Are we really talking about kidnapping someone and holding them prisoner indefinitely?” Willow asked, looking worried.

“Hey, Buffy was talking about killing him yesterday. This is way less extreme than that,” Xander pointed out.

“True.” Willow didn’t look any less troubled.

“Can set up something in the sewers, easy as can be,” Spike offered cheerfully. He really wanted to get to work on testing the Mayor’s invulnerability.

“We need to think this through extremely carefully,” Wesley answered. “We are talking about the Mayor of Sunnydale. The entire police force would be called in if he disappeared.”

Spike’s scoffing noise was echoed by almost everyone else. Giles, while clearly agreeing with the group’s opinion of the Sunnydale Police Department’s competency, added: “We wouldn’t just be dealing with the local police, I fear. Undoubtedly, the State police and federal agents would be called in as well. And the Deputy Mayor is aware of Buffy, Spike, and Angel’s existence, possibly the rest of us as well. If he pointed the finger at us, there could be all kinds of trouble.”

Xander sighed. He’d really liked his idea but Giles made some good points. Spike and Angel couldn’t risk police interrogation, someone was bound to notice something, especially if the interrogation went into daylight hours. Or Spike killed the interrogators. Even the Sunnydale police noticed things like that.

“Can kill the Deputy Mayor,” Spike suggested.

“He’s human, Spike,” Angel said quietly from his place on the edge of the group where he’d been leaning silently against the bookshelves.

“Know that. Make a one-time exception because he’s trying to destroy the town.” Spike glanced casually at Xander, who smiled reassuringly. He knew Spike was just thinking out loud. For now.

“It’s a very good thought, Xander,” Giles said. “I don’t think we can make it work right now, but we’ll keep it in mind.” He sighed. “If we knew the date of the Ascension, it would be more feasible but without knowing that, we could conceivably have to keep the Mayor prisoner for months.”
Willow raised a hand for attention. “Now that we know for sure that the Mayor is invulnerable, and since we know the date he did the invulnerability spell, I can sort the database by that factor. It will eliminate about half the possibilities, the ones that don’t call for invulnerability, and we can keep track of possible dates for the Ascension by the period between invulnerability and the Ascension itself.”

“Good thinking, Willow,” Wesley said. “Anything that narrows it down will be helpful.”

“Only 600-some possibilities,” Buffy said gloomily. “Great.”

Which pretty much summed it up.

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They decided not to have Angel keep up the Angelus act. They’d learned one crucial fact - that the Mayor was invulnerable - and trying to find out more could cause more trouble than it was worth. The Mayor would expect Angelus to do something: attack Buffy or Spike, kidnap Xander, kill lots of random people, something Angelus-y. Either they spent all their time and energy faking a war, or the Mayor caught on to them. Either way, it would just lead to badness.

Willow sorted her database, which did eliminate almost half the possibilities - still unmanageable but no longer completely hopeless. The Ascension recipes had a lot of common factors, so it wasn’t like they could expect the Mayor to become demon A on the 53rd day and demon B on the 54th day after the invulnerability spell. The list sorted into clumps: 47 demons at 45 days, 92 at 75 days, etc. etc. They were able to eliminate almost another 50 species because their recipes called for the Ascension to happen 30 days after the person became invulnerable and that time period had already passed earlier this week. Most of the recipes called for Ascension to happen 90 to 120 days after the invulnerability ritual so, most likely they had some breathing room.

Spike was still fuming that the Mayor had threatened Xander and began spending a good portion of his nights watching City Hall and the Mayor, looking for weaknesses he could exploit, leaving the regular patrols to Angel and Buffy. To his surprise, he discovered the Mayor had gathered a cadre of vampires around him.

Prowling outside City Hall for several nights in a row, Spike watched as vampires came and went openly. None were members of his Court, the Mayor obviously knew better than to recruit from vampires loyal to Spike. Spike marked them carefully, memorizing their faces and scents. A spot of questioning might help them learn what the Mayor was planning.

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“Did you hear about what happened?”

Yeah, can you believe it?” Xander looked up as Buffy plunked down next to him on the couch in the lounge. He was still reeling from the news himself, the gossip about the near miss had swept through the school with its usual speed.

“It’s crazy. Larry and Jonathan making out? It’s got to be a sign that the world is going to end.”

He blinked. “Umm… actually, I was talking about the part where they caught the cook putting rat poison in the cafeteria food.”

Buffy waived that off. “I always knew that woman was crazy,” she said impatiently. “I mean, did you ever see the way she’d look at you when you took a second desert? It was like she thought you were an ax-murderer or something. No sense of proportion.”
Xander’s jaw literally dropped. She thought two guys kissing was more significant than an attempted mass poisoning and she thought the cook had no sense of proportion? Aware he was staring at her like one of them had lost their mind, he closed his mouth with a snap and shook his head. “Buffy…” he began and then stopped, not really knowing what to say.

“Lighten up, Xander. I’m kidding.” Buffy grinned at him, obviously pleased at having messed with his head and Xander laughed.

“Oh, man, I thought you were serious.”

“Hey, Larry and Jonathan, so didn’t see that coming, but give me a break - cafeteria lady is the bigger story.”

“I still can’t believe that Jonathan took her out.” From what Xander had heard, Jonathan and Larry had snuck into the kitchen for a little clandestine nookie with a jello chaser and surprised the cook in the act of pouring rat poison into the food. Larry had run out into the cafeteria to warn people not to eat anything and, when the cook grabbed a meat cleaver and chased after him, Jonathan had thrown a frying pan at her and knocked her cold.

Jonathan was currently the embarrassed hero of the hour and he and Larry were officially out as a couple. Only in Sunnydale, Xander thought, not for the first time.

“I just hope Spike never hears about it,” he said. “He’s got this crazy home-schooling plan he keeps bringing up because he thinks Sunnydale High is too dangerous.”

“Whatever gave him that idea?” After a moment, Buffy’s smile died and she looked wistful. “Must be nice to have someone who worries about you like that.”

Xander looked at her, caught off guard by the sudden change in mood. Her eyes were sad and she looked lonely and uncharacteristically vulnerable as she stared off into the distance. After a long, awkward pause, he finally said: “You know, there’s a lot of people who love you and worry about you. Your mom, Giles, Willow, even Angel. You don’t have to be in a relationship to have that.”


“I know I am,” he answered simply.

After a moment she shook off her introspective mood and turned to him with a speculative gleam in her eyes. “So, I hear you’re the one who fixed them up. Spill.”

Grinning, Xander told her how Larry’s doing Xander a favor had turned into Larry and Jonathan becoming a couple.

And when had life in Sunnydale become so strange that attempted mass murder by a human was less newsworthy than who was dating whom?
Chapter 42

Spike regarded the vampire hanging in chains in the center of the crypt with mock sympathy. “Working for the Mayor,” he said, shaking his head. “Trust you got something out of it up front. Don’t see him showin’ up here to save you. Doesn’t seem the type somehow.”

After several nights on watch outside City Hall, Spike was sure he’d identified most of the vampires working for the Mayor. While none of them were a threat by themselves, the sheer number of minions the Mayor had gathered around him was cause for concern. The Mayor was obviously recruiting cannon fodder. Generally, when someone started gathering expendable troops around them, it meant they were preparing for war.

If the Mayor had been a vampire, Spike would have challenged him for setting up a rival Court in Spike’s Territory. Well, if the Mayor was a vampire and didn’t happen to be invulnerable, he thought sourly.

Separating one of the Mayor’s vampires from the pack had been absurdly easy. The twit hanging in chains was actually working as the Mayor’s night chauffeur. Spike had chosen him because he’d driven up to the courthouse the previous night with a tattooed human wearing cowboy boots in the back of the limo. The vampire chauffeur had gotten out and opened the door for the human - something Spike objected to on general principles - in full game face. The human had climbed out of the car, indifferent to the yellow eyes and demonic features of his driver, and carried a large metal box inside City Hall. Looking closely, Spike had rolled his eyes in disgust when he saw that the box was handcuffed to the human’s wrist.

Moron. Like that stunt wasn’t just asking to get your hand amputated.

He was disappointed when the human left a short time later without the box, looking pleased in the way someone who’d just made a lot of money tended to. Spike had rather been looking forward to teaching the human a lesson about handcuffing yourself to a goody box. He was sure Xander wouldn’t mind a little educational maiming. Not that he’d really expected the human to leave with the box, but pleasant thoughts helped pass the time.

A human in the know about vampires, delivering something valuable to the Mayor of Sunnydale, certainly merited investigation. Accordingly, Spike had returned to City Hall tonight and snatched the chauffeur from the garage as he reported for duty, knocking him unconscious with a tire iron and carrying him to this crypt, which Spike had set up in advance, ready for a little question and answer session.

“What do you want?” The vampire had cursed loudly and repetitively, struggling against the chains, when he’d first woken up, his dangling feet kicking futilely inches above the stone floor. Spike had just sat silently, perched on a sarcophagus, smoking and watching until the initial struggles had gone still and the vampire began to look around him, his eyes going wide and frightened as he saw the items Spike had strewed artfully over the stone sarcophagus the vampire was facing.

“Want to hear you scream,” Spike told him in a matter-of-fact voice that was far more chilling than any angry threats. “Then I want you to tell me everything you know.” His lips quirked up in a smile that had nothing to do with reassurance. “Can start by telling me about the box.”

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Wiping his hands off on a rag, Spike strode out of the crypt, leaving the ashes behind.
The Mayor obviously wasn’t being choosy about who he hired. The vampire had shown no stamina under torture: crying, pleading, screaming, practically begging to tell anything he knew before Spike had barely gotten started.

Not that he knew much. Didn’t know what was in the box. Didn’t know the Mayor’s ultimate plans. Had never heard the word Ascension. Just knew the Mayor was going to become “really powerful” and anyone who worked for him would be rewarded.

Wanker. Hadn’t even bothered to get his reward spelled out. Just following someone he recognized as being stronger.

Certain he’d gotten every scrap of information the vampire possessed, little as it was, Spike had considered leaving him hanging there as a lesson to other vampires about working for the Mayor. In the end, though, Spike had staked him. Not worth the risk of someone finding and rescuing the idiot.

Standing outside the crypt and lighting up a cigarette, Spike leaned against an elaborately carved tombstone and considered his options. Chances were, going back for a second dip in the information pool wouldn’t get him much. Mayor seemed to be playing this game close to the chest. On the other hand, it wouldn’t hurt and a spot of torture on minions who’d signed up to work for the thing that had threatened his Claimed gave Spike more satisfaction than it probably should. He couldn’t get at the true source of the anger still roiling inside him at the unavenged insult, but hearing one of the Mayor’s lackeys screaming had felt a lot better than doing nothing at all.

Glancing up at the barely risen moon, Spike took a final drag and flicked his cigarette away. One more, he decided. He’d find a likely candidate and see if they knew anything more than the lack-brain he’d just dusted. He’d still make it back to the library long before Xander started to worry.

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“Mayor’s got something called the Box of Gavrock.” Spike informed the group. “Dunno what’s in it, but it’s supposed to house some ‘great demonic energy’ or summat. Doesn’t take a bloody genius to know it’s for the Ascension.”

“Well done, Spike,” Giles congratulated him, looking very pleased. “That may just be the information we need. There can’t be that many Ascension rituals that call for that precise object.”

“On it,” Willow said, already searching her database. “Anyone know how to spell ‘Gavrock’?” she asked, fingers already tapping the enquiry into the computer.

Trying the various suggested spellings only took a moment and Willow looked up from her monitor. “Only three rituals call for any ingredient sounding at all like ‘Gavrock’, she reported. “The Ascension rituals for the demons Daratuu, Olvikan, and Wa-russ-ka,” she read, stumbling over the last name.

“Perhaps W’rruss’kha,” Wesley suggested, rolling the syllables into a liquid sound but not looking any less blank for all that his pronunciation was more certain. “Mr. Giles?”

Giles was also looking at the highlighted names on the screen. “I’ve not heard of any of them,” he confessed. “Still, researching three demons is significantly easier than the task we have faced up ‘til now.”

“What are the time periods between invulnerability and Ascension?” Elizabeth asked, having just shaken her head at the inquiring looks thrown in her direction by Giles and Wesley.

“Why don’t I print out all the information we have on all three,” Willow suggested, already hitting
“Where’s the box now?” Buffy asked. “If we can get it away from the Mayor, he can’t do the Ascension, right?”

“Under guard in a conference room on the top floor of City Hall,” Spike answered. That had completely justified going back for a second information source, he thought smugly to himself. The second vampire, a tall, weedy looking female, had known where the Mayor had put the box he’d just obtained from the demon. Heaven forbid either one of the vampires he’d questioned should have known something really useful, like what was inside the bloody box. “Thinking of stormin’ the place?”

“Anyone have any better ideas?”

“Let’s take a look at the three rituals,” Wesley suggested. He and Giles huddled over the pages Willow had printed and she hastily printed out several more copies, handing them around to the group as they came off the printer.

“All three call for a ritual consumption of the contents of the Box to take place within days of the actual Ascension,” Giles said after a moment. “One moment.” He went to his office and returned immediately with a calendar. “If the Mayor is attempting to become Daratuu, the Ascension will take place on…” he paused briefly as he finished calculating. “May 30th. For Olvikan, Ascension will occur on May 25th. Finally, W’rruss’kha would be May 16th.”

“Ten days from now,” Buffy said.

“Fortunately, we have at least a week before the Ritual of Gavrock will occur, even in the earliest of these scenarios,” Wesley said, consulting the notes on the three rituals, “in each case, it appears that the ritual involving the box does not take place until the day before the Ascension.” He looked up with a relieved smile. “That gives us time to research the box, discover its contents, and how to destroy it.”

“It also gives us a chance to come up with a plan for getting the box,” Buffy pointed out. “Willow, can you get the building plans?”

“I’ll try,” Willow answered, already beginning a search for the records.

“We might be able to find the plans in the Records Office,” Oz suggested.

“If Willow doesn’t turn them up on-line, can you try there?” Buffy asked.

Oz nodded and Xander quietly offered to help, pleased that Oz was gradually acting more like his old self. Although he still avoided talking to Willow, he was no longer completely silent, just his previous quiet self, not saying much but speaking up readily when he had something to contribute.

“The rest of us can begin researching the Box,” Giles said. “Finding a way to destroy it needs to be our first priority.”

There was no disagreement and the group settled down to research. Xander was just grateful they weren’t fishing blindly anymore. Having a goal would make this much less frustrating.

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Reconnaissance outside City Hall was not going well.
“Bloody hell,” Spike muttered. “When did the Mayor call out the army?”

“The missing vampires must have tipped them off that something was up,” Angelus said, his eyes surveying the vampires on the roof, and on watch on the perimeter.

“Why would he miss a couple of useless minions?” Spike grumbled half-heartedly but he had already reached the same conclusion and was furious with himself. This stepped-up security was his fault and he knew it. The chauffeur had been an easy and useful information source, and it hadn’t occurred to him that anyone would miss the second vampire either. They were just a pair of bloody minions. In hindsight, taking two of the Mayor’s flunkies, especially the chauffeur who’d just delivered the key ingredient in the Mayor’s Ascension, had been an idiotic move, an amateur’s mistake of the kind that Spike scorned others for making. He’d tipped the enemy off that they were watching and the Mayor had guessed they were going after the box. Damn thing was the key to his plans, of course he was being careful with it, Spike thought in disgust for not having foreseen this development.

Even in the short time they’d been there, Spike had spotted three vampires he didn’t recognize from his previous watches outside City Hall. Either the Mayor had already recruited more vampires or had others he could call in as needed.

“I count an even dozen on the grounds and the roof,” Angelus was saying as Spike jerked his thoughts back to the situation at hand. “We have to assume he has others inside in the same room as the box.”

“Yeah,” Spike agreed. He, Angelus and the Slayer could handle a dozen ordinary vampires without much trouble, but any chance of surprise would be long gone before they got anywhere near the bloody box, and surprise was their only hope. The Mayor would most likely have the box magically guarded as well and those safeguards would take a bit of time and caution to deal with - things that tended to be scarce when the enemy knew you were coming. He signaled to Angelus and they retreated as silently as they had come.

Once they were clear of the area, Spike suggested: “All the guards were vampires. They’re not going to be guarding the place during the day.”

“Place is full of people during the day, a raid would be a bit conspicuous,” Angelus objected, though Spike could tell he was thinking about it.

“Maybe, but the Mayor doesn’t want a lot of attention on what he’s doing.”

“If he has any sense, he’ll move the box to someplace more secure,” Angelus countered. “Let’s see what Giles wants to do, we won’t be the ones at risk in a daylight raid.”

“Dunno about you, but I know how to use sewers,” Spike pointed out. “Man with that many vampires workin’ for him has to have sewer access.”

“You really think the sewer entrance won’t be either guarded or blocked or both?”

Refusing to admit his Sire had a good point, Spike strode along in silence, turning various plans over in his mind and looking for flaws.

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“Don’t concern yourself, Spike,” Wesley said calmly when Spike and Angel reported the results of their reconnaissance. “Knowing of the box’s existence has proved extremely useful in narrowing our search down and telling us when the Ascension is likely to happen. With luck, the Mayor will not
have anticipated a daytime attack.”

Xander was grateful that everyone had taken the news of the stepped-up security so well. He could tell that Spike was blaming himself but Wesley wasn’t just being comforting, they really were making progress now.

While Angel and Spike had been out casing City Hall, Oz and he had gone to the Water and Power Building for a little breaking and entering, leaving the others researching the Box of Gavrock.

The others had still been chasing will-o-the-wisp references to mystical boxes through musty, hand-written volumes when he and Oz returned triumphantly from the Records Office with the plans to City Hall and they had all turned their attention to the more productive venue of planning an attack on the building and researching which spells were best for destroying mystical objects, origin unknown.

During their absence, the others had apparently learned almost nothing about the Box of Gavrock itself although Elizabeth had found a reference to a spider demon called Gavrock, that might or might not be related to the box. No one else had found much of anything. According to the Books of Ascension, the rituals called for little in the way of ceremony, the person just “consumed” the contents of the box, whatever it was.

All of which had kept them usefully occupied and feeling like they were actually getting somewhere for the first time in a long time. That is, until Spike and Angel returned to tell them that a night assault had just gone from risky to dangerously impractical.

“Ok, I’ll check it out in the morning,” Buffy said, recovering first from the disappointment. “See what it looks like when the vamps aren’t around.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Giles said. “The Mayor knows you. It might be better to send someone unknown.”

Xander felt Spike tense besides him as he opened his mouth to volunteer but Giles continued before Xander could get the words out. “Xander and I are out for similar reasons, perhaps Wesley and Elizabeth are the least likely to be recognized?”

They agreed that Wesley and Elizabeth would spend the day tomorrow scoping out City Hall. Willow had produced a list of Departments they could visit for various forms and applications, if they thought it was safe to go inside the building, and the group broke up for the night, agreeing to meet back at sunset tomorrow.

Spike disappeared immediately down the back stairs as soon as they reached the apartment and Xander was left to pace the apartment, wondering just what kind of urgent business Spike had in the Court. He’d been unusually terse on the subject, just saying there was something he wanted to take care of and Xander was regretting not pushing him on the subject.

Spike was obviously upset about his miscalculation of the Mayor’s reaction to losing a couple of minions and Xander was worried that he was going to do something stupid to make up for it. There was nothing Spike hated more than having someone outsmart him, not that Xander thought that that was what had happened, but Spike despised amateur mistakes and obviously thought he’d made one.

Xander debated going down to the factory floor and eavesdropping to find out what Spike was doing. He was seriously tempted but reluctantly decided against it, knowing it was a bad idea. He
hadn’t forgotten his talk with Spike about how Xander showing Spike disrespect - what vampires saw as disrespect - hurt Spike’s status. Getting caught eavesdropping on the Master of the Hellmouth would undoubtedly been seen as disrespectful by the Court. No, he’d have to trust that Spike would be back up shortly and ready to talk about what was going on.

Flopping down on the couch, he switched the TV on and began restlessly channel surfing, looking for something that might hold his attention as he waited, although half his attention remained on the back entrance leading to the factory.

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“What’s going on, Spike?”

Ok, as casual inquiries go, that wasn’t his best effort. Spike vaulted over the couch to sit next to him, giving him a sideways glance.

“Sent the Lieutenants out on a job,” he explained, without actually explaining anything at all.

“What job?” Ordinarily, Xander didn’t pay much attention to Spike’s business with his Court, but this had something to do with the Mayor, he could tell.

Spike sighed and put his arm around Xander’s shoulders. “Nothing to worry about, luv. Sent the boys out on a fact-finding job.” His eyes narrowed in speculation as he stared at the TV but Xander knew it wasn’t Aliens 2 that held his attention - although Spike admitted he thought Ripley had style. Xander waited, eyes steady on Spike’s profile, until Spike was ready to talk again.

“I want to find out how the Mayor’s recruiting, what he’s telling people. If it’s just vampires, how much he’s paying, whether it’s temporary and permanent, everything. If we can dry up the pool of recruits, get the word out that being hired by the Mayor is the key to quick, permanent death, maybe we can whittle down the number of vampires he’s got working for him.” He turned intensely blue eyes on Xander, worry lurking in their depths. “Don’t like how many vampires he’s recruited, luv. Got enough for a small scale army. Feels like this is building towards all-out war come the Ascension.”

Xander felt a shiver pass over him at Spike’s grim foreboding. If there was one thing Spike wasn’t, it was an alarmist.

Instantly, Spike was pulling him into his arms, leaning them back into the corner of the sofa and Xander shifted with him until he was lying full-length, cradled in Spike’s arms as they both pretended to watch the movie. Spike carded absently through the dark waves of Xander’s hair, his thoughts elsewhere and Xander wrapped his arms around his lover, letting Spike feel his warmth and the steady beat of his heart, just being there for him as Spike wrestled with his responsibility to keep Xander and his Territory safe from the threat posed by the Mayor.

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“The Mayor is a step ahead of us again, I’m afraid,” Wesley reported gloomily the next evening. “There are police and private security guards everywhere at City Hall.”

“The official story is that it’s temporary security due to a valuable museum exhibit on loan from somewhere and not yet able to be installed at the museum,” Elizabeth filled in. “It’s obvious the security guards are genuine and have no idea of the actual circumstances.”

“But it pretty much rules out a daylight assault because of the high casualty rate for civilians,” Buffy summed up.
“Yes,” Wesley said flatly. “we cannot hope to successfully infiltrate City Hall and there are too many innocent bystanders present in the building for an all-out assault during the day.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“For now, we continue our research and wait. If we are lucky, the Mayor will relax his security and we can attempt to seize the box.” Wesley didn’t sound very optimistic about that possibility.

“So our choices are: attacking now with very little chance of success in an attempt to stop the Mayor, or waiting until he turns into an invulnerable demon on Ascension day?” Xander asked, just to be sure he wasn’t missing something. “We really need a third option.”

“That out of town vacation in Outer Mongolia is sounding better and better,” Buffy muttered. She jumped to her feet restlessly. “I’m going to patrol. I need to do something to feel like I’m still doing my job.” She glanced at Angel and Spike. “Are you two in?”

Angel shook his head before Spike could answer. “I have something I need to do tonight,” he said. He slid a glance at Spike that Xander couldn’t read and Spike nodded.

“Takin’ my boy home,” was all he said. “He’s tired.”

Xander shook his head in amusement at Spike and waved to the group. “Guess I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he said as Spike’s firm grip closed around his wrist.

The bar was quieter than normal, enough so that Spike found himself wondering if the word was out, if demons had begun slipping out of town, rats deserting the ship before it went down in the storm. With luck, his Lieutenants would have a report for him when he got back to the factory this morning.

‘Course, it could just be a quiet Tuesday.

Swallowing his whiskey, feeling the pleasant burn as it slid down his throat, Spike signaled for another round for both of them. Angelus was being quieter than usual and Spike wondered what was on his Sire’s mind. Angelus was staring into the depths of his glass, avoiding Spike’s curious gaze and Spike was tired of waiting for Angelus to get to the point. His Sire was the one who’d asked to meet him here tonight.

“What’s on your mind, Angelus?”

“I’m thinking about leaving town.”

Surprised by the instant desire to protest, Spike hid his reaction behind a sip of his drink. “Any special reason?”

“Buffy.”

“‘What’s the Slayer done now?’ he growled, incensed that the chit still controlled his Sire the way she did. That his Sire let her.

“Nothing,” Angelus looked up, meeting his eyes long enough for Spike to read the truth there. “There’s nothing for me here. You’re Master. Buffy doesn’t need me to help her anymore. I need something more than just being a side-kick.”

‘bout time you figured that out. What do you have in mind?”
Angelus shrugged, his shoulders moving fractionally under the leather coat. “Maybe Los Angeles. If I stay here, there will always be the temptation…” his voice trailed off, but Spike knew what he meant. His Sire was still fixated on the Slayer. And her on him. One day, one of them would slip. A bad enough slip and goodbye soul, hello chaos.

And just when had that become something that Spike didn’t look forward to?

“Welcome in my Court any time,” he offered. “You told the Slayer yet?”

It wasn’t just idle curiosity; telling the Slayer was going to throw her seriously off her game. Buffy never had dealt well with Angelus, whether as lover, enemy, or friend. She’d always reacted to him like a schoolgirl and not the Slayer, letting him control her emotions and mess with her head. In her eyes, Angelus was still her star-crossed love, the fairy tale that was somehow supposed to wind up in a happy ending. Knights in shining armor weren’t supposed to tell their lady loves they were blowing town rather than sticking around, even when staying just meant hovering in a doomed, lovelorn orbit around their fair princess forever. The Slayer was not going to take the news well.

Angelus was still finding the bottom of his glass surprisingly interesting. “Was going to tell her after the prom,” he muttered.

“The what?”

“Big dance at the end of school,” Angelus explained. “I gather it’s as important as being presented at Court used to be.”

For a moment, Spike stared blankly, then realized that Angelus wasn’t talking about a vampire Court. He was referring to the custom from their human lives, when young ladies made their debut at the sovereign’s Court before the King and Queen. Even bookish William had been aware of the importance of that rite of passage.

“Servin’ as her escort, yeah?” he guessed.

“Yes.” Angelus sounded resigned. “Apparently, it’s social death if a senior doesn’t go.” He hesitated, then clarified voluntarily: “Buffy understands that we’re not a couple but she didn’t have a date and asked if I would take her.”

Spike was surprised to find he wasn’t angry with Angelus for putting himself in that situation. Somewhere along the line, he must have learned to trust that Angelus, at least, had truly come to understand that he and the Slayer could never be involved again. For the moment, he was far more concerned over the timing.

“Don’t tell her ‘til after the Ascension,” he ordered.

Angelus narrowed his eyes, his only sign of resentment at his Childe giving him orders. “Why not?”

“Think, for just one bloody second. We both know she’s still in love with you. You plannin’ on breaking her heart just before what may be the biggest fight of her life?” Angelus nodded thoughtfully, accepting his reasoning, and Spike added callously, with a smirk: “‘Sides, if either or both of you die in the fight, won’t have to tell her at all, will you?”

Angelus just shook his head, but appeared relieved by the prospect of delay and Spike knew he would follow Spike’s order, even if he wouldn’t admit it. A worrying thought suddenly struck him.

“This dance something all seniors are expected to go to?” he asked. “Even the boys?”
Dawn was not far off when Spike strode back into the factory after his talk with Angelus, entering through the Court rather than the private stairs to their apartment. Members of the Court were gathered on the main floor as they always did as the night drew to a close: gossiping, sparring, swapping stories about the night’s events. They stopped what they were doing, nodding in respect to Spike as he entered but had long ago learned he didn’t need or want a lot of fawning and kowtowing when he was at the Court informally. It was enough that they were alert to his presence and not disrespectful. His four Lieutenants were waiting for him and he jerked his head, signaling them to follow him up to the second floor where they could talk privately.

“What did you learn?”

“There are several vampires working the bars. They’re keeping it fairly quiet but they’re targeting vampires not attached to the Court, pulling them aside to talk to them. Vampires only. We didn’t see them approaching any other demons,” Anthony summed up crisply.

“Anyone else realize what’s going on?”

“Doesn’t look like it. You know how it is: ‘Just vampires talking’.” There was a hint of bitterness in Michael’s voice and Spike repressed a grin. Michael was still young enough to resent that vampires were frequently shunned by other demons; not demon enough for them because vampires could, and did, pass for human. In time, Michael would learn that the opinions of lesser demons were meaningless and stop being bothered by it. It was envy really. Not like a slime-spattered chaos demon could shift shape at will to hunt its chosen prey. It was mostly the demons who couldn’t hide their natures who looked down on vampires who could.

Spike found he was tapping one foot in a nervous tic he hadn’t had since he was a human and immediately stilled it, not wanting his agitation to show. Vampire or not, the Mayor was setting up a rival Court and Spike couldn’t let this kind of challenge to his authority go unpunished. His eyes rested thoughtfully on Marc, his newest Lieutenant as he considered his options. He’d promoted Marc only recently as the Court had continued to expand and he needed a fourth Lieutenant. He didn’t have the same track record with Marc as he did with the others. Resolving to keep a close eye on him, Spike set it aside for now. Marc would prove himself or be dust shortly.

“Spread the word,” he ordered. “Any vampire workin’ for the Mayor is to be killed, even if it’s your long-lost brother turned by your own Sire. Get the word out to every vampire in town not associated with the Court: I don’t give a rat’s arse what they do, so long as it’s not workin’ for the Mayor.” His Lieutenants all nodded quickly and he gave them an approving look. “I want the full Court in attendance Monday night. Anyone not there better be too far out of town to be punished.”

His Lieutenants nodded their understanding again and Spike added: “Good work. I’ll tell the rest of the Court myself on Monday but, you’re all smart enough to have figured it out already: war’s coming. Anthony, Marc, I want a complete inventory of the weapons in the Court and I want every weapon inspected to make sure it’s in battle-ready condition. Jose, Michael, same for the minions: I need a listing of strengths, weaknesses and skills. Anyone you think would be a liability, stake them now. No one new is admitted to the Court until after this is over.”

He didn’t need to add anything to make them understand how serious his orders were. They all were regarding him with alert intelligence and he was again pleased with his choice of Lieutenants. Giving them a respectful nod in turn, he strode off towards the private back entrance to his apartment without saying anything further. He’d meet with them later during the week and get their private
assessments of the situation.

Xander would have his prom. He’d deliberately set the full Court session for after the dance and only partly because he wanted the results of the inventory of weapons and minions first. Xander deserved the chance to be shown off before his classmates, give them all a chance to see exactly how prized his Claimed was. The Mayor wasn’t ready to make his move yet and a delay of a few days wouldn’t matter.

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Xander was eating his lunch in the school’s main courtyard, leaning up against the trunk and staring off into the distance. The school was buzzing with prom talk: dresses and makeup and hairstyles, and he obviously knew way too many girls. The guys were just nodding and receiving instructions about the proper corsages to buy and the color of their cummerbunds and keeping their mouths shut for the most part. Larry had mentioned that he and Jonathan were going together but hadn’t felt the need to share details of clothing or shoes, thank god.

Larry had tried to persuade Xander to go but Xander just told him that his boyfriend wasn’t great in crowds and left it at that. He was pretty sure that Larry assumed he’d meant his boyfriend was shy - and Xander could just picture Spike’s reaction to being called shy - but he hadn’t ever come out to Larry as dating a vampire and hadn’t been up to the conversation right then so he hadn’t bothered to explain that what he’d meant was that Spike tended to slam people against walls and snarl at them when they offended him. A whole gymnasium full of teenagers was too much to ask Spike to put up with.

Buffy was being unbelievably girly about the whole prom thing. She had convinced Willow to go to the prom even if she didn’t have a date, pointing out that Angel, Wesley, and Giles would all dance with her and that it was an experience not to be missed. Xander had been amused by the death glares she sent the two Watchers as she promised their help in making Willow’s prom special.

He’d been surprised by Willow’s decision to go. Even a year ago, Willow wouldn’t have had the nerve to go to a major school function by herself. There was a time when Willow wouldn’t even go to the Bronze by herself but she had grown in self-confidence over the last few months. He couldn’t help thinking that it was a good thing: if Willow had become more firmly grounded, less dependent on others, hopefully she wouldn’t need to resort to desperate measures in her attempts to keep things from changing.

“Hey.”

Oz’s voice intruded on his thoughts and Xander looked up with a smile. “Hey,” he greeted in return.

Oz settled down on the lawn beside him and Xander grinned at him. “So, Oz, are you wearing the blue taffeta or the red silk to the prom?” he asked. He wasn’t exactly sure what taffeta was but knew it was some kind of fabric from the movie ‘Young Frankenstein’.

“Taffeta makes me itch,” Oz deadpanned back at him and Xander was glad that Oz really seemed to be his old self again. “Dress talk getting to be too much?” Oz guessed.

Oz was skipping the prom, having arranged to join the demon band he’d become friendly with that night. Xander thought he might take Spike to the bar that night. He didn’t care if he missed the prom but it still felt like he should do something to mark the occasion and watching Oz on stage with the band would be interesting.

“I am a male in hiding. Talk to me about manly things,” Xander ordered.
Oz’s lips quirked up slightly, his eyes crinkling at the corners with amusement. “As a modern man, you’re supposed to be able to handle it. Something about sensitivity,” he suggested.

“Hey, I’m a semi-openly gay man,” Xander protested. “I think that gives me a free pass on dress talk.”

“I’m pretty sure you only get a pass when you’re actually wearing a gay pride button.”

“Damn, I knew there was a catch,” Xander said with mock gloom.

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Spike had seen the shop before, of course, but it wasn’t anything that generally interested him. An exclusive formalwear shop on the town’s main business street, he’d noted in passing that they had classy clothes but formal clothes weren’t something he had much cause to wear these days.

There had been a time when Angelus and Darla, Spike and Drusilla had regularly dressed to the nines and gone out on the town with the fashionable elite of Europe. Dining, dancing, flirting, feeding, the ton had kept them entertained and fed and wealthy for months at a time. He didn’t miss it, but there was something to be said for, every once in awhile, getting dressed in the finest clothing and strutting yourself before the masses.

Xander still didn’t have the knack of strutting but Spike figured he could teach his boy.

Settling his duster and his attitude in place, Spike strode into the shop with the unmistakable arrogance of someone who had the taste and the means to shop in any store they chose. As he’d known it would, he immediately attracted the attention of the manager, who left the paperwork she was sorting through to approach him with a subservient smile.

“May I help you?”

“Here to check out your tuxes,” he informed her, his tone leaving no doubt of his skepticism that she had anything worthy of his time.

“Of course, sir.” Waving him in the direction of the racks of tuxedos, she said: “I’ll send Miss Chase to help you. She has an eye for the best of our men’s line.”

Bestowing a bright smile on him, she crossed the room to swap customers with a dark-haired sales clerk attempted to help a fussy matron.

The salesgirl turned around and Spike blinked in shock as she arrived at his side.

“Cheerleader?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” she hissed, flicking a quick glance in the direction of her boss to check that she hadn’t overheard the cheerleader being less than cordial to a customer.

Spike smirked. “Ask you the same question, ‘cept it’s obvious, innit?” His raised brow and pointed stare at her nametag actually caused her to flush.

“I’m working here and if you spread it around, I will personally find a tiny tuxedo to wrap your ashes in,” she said with soft vehemence, glaring at him threateningly.

He grinned, amused by the threat and the imagery. “Not going to get much in commissions with that attitude,” he warned mockingly.
“We don’t work on commission, lame-brain,” she shot back. Which explained why the manager had swapped a promising lead for a difficult client.

“Minimum wage, cheerleader? I’m shocked. This some sort of community service requirement for graduation?”

“If you must know, I need a dress for the prom.” At Spike’s raised eyebrow and silence, she finally sighed heavily and continued. “Daddy had a little problem with his taxes. For twelve years. Now are we through discussing the soap opera that is my life?”

He was going soft, no question. The humiliation that lurked barely below the surface of her angry pride sparked a hint of sympathy. “Need tuxes for me and Xander,” he said, dropping the subject as she so obviously wanted.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You have money?”

Spike gave her an exasperated look. “Not planning on buying anything, princess,” he replied witheringly.

“Then why am I wasting my time on you?”

“’cause you want to live ‘til the prom,” he pointed out.

“Like I’m worried,” she snapped. A quick glance at her manager and she sighed again. “Oh, very well.” Somehow she managed to make it seem like she was doing him an enormous favor as she began pulling tuxes out for him to inspect.

Spike left half an hour later, having thoroughly enjoyed the snarky exchanges with the cheerleader. She knew his fashions too and Spike had found the tuxes he wanted for both himself and Xander. He’d be back after hours tomorrow for a little smash and grab.

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Xander found he was eating lunch alone again regularly, although it was by choice. Everyone was talking about either the prom or college, neither of which he had more than a passing interest in. Having long decided that he wasn’t going to college, Xander had little to contribute to the discussions. Sure, he was interested in where everyone ended up but not in the protracted discussions about whether to accept one school or another. Plus, it was the source of some friction in the library.

Willow had, of course, been accepted by every college on the face of the earth and Buffy was starry-eyed over the half-dozen acceptance letters that she’d received. Wesley was coming down fairly hard on her about her duty as the Slayer and the two of them had had several arguments about why she couldn’t be a college student as well as the Slayer. Apparently it ‘wasn’t done’.

Xander thought Wesley was being too literal. He didn’t see why Buffy couldn’t slay vampires in Chicago or New York as well as she could here, it wasn’t like every Slayer had been Called on a Hell mouth - even Buffy had started her career in Los Angeles, not Sunnydale. But Wesley had responded stiffly that it was the Council’s decree that the Slayer must remain on the Hellmouth, since it was currently in such an active phase. And yeah, he could understand that but Buffy could fly back in a few hours for a crisis, this wasn’t the 17th Century.

They had finally agreed to shelve the issue until after the Ascension but Wesley’s adamant stance had done a lot of damage to his slowly improving relationship with Buffy and Xander thought Wesley should tell the Council to go stuff themselves and work with Buffy on making it happen. Granted, he hadn’t actually said that to Wesley. He was opting out of this conflict because he
couldn’t see any way it was going to end well.

“Xander? Can I talk to you?”

He looked up at Willow’s quiet voice and swallowed the last bite of his apple, hiding his surprise. Willow had been scrupulous about giving him the distance he’d asked for and they hadn’t talked much outside of class and the library. Although things were slowly becoming more normal between them, he still wasn’t able to put everything behind him. His stomach no longer twisted into knots when he heard her voice unexpectedly and he had no problem being civil with her, so he supposed that was progress. “Sure, Willow. What’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know that I’ve decided I’m going to go to college in Oxford.” She smiled at his shocked surprise and shrugged. “It’s near the coven - fairly near,” she qualified, “and it seems like the best choice. The Hellmouth isn’t the best place to learn magic, because of the influence it has on spells and I think it would be better for everyone if I wasn’t around so much.” Her eyes met his sadly. “I’m hoping we can keep in touch by letter.”

“I’d like that.” It wasn’t just a polite fiction. Writing to Willow had been a safe way to explore whether they still had anything to re-build their friendship on. He was astonished that she was willing to go to school in England but he couldn’t deny it made sense. He wasn’t going to try and talk her out of it, even though a small voice inside him said he probably should. He squashed the voice. He didn’t owe Willow what she wanted from him. Some day, maybe they could rebuild but distance would help that more than proximity right now.

“Oxford’s a really good school,” he said finally, when the silence had stretched out to an uncomfortable length.

Willow smiled at him, and for a moment, he caught a glimpse of the gently mocking laughter that used to light her eyes when he and Jesse had said something particularly dumb. “So I hear.”

They sat there silently for awhile longer, but the silence was no longer uncomfortable.

Glancing around to make sure he was alone, Spike slammed his booted foot against the glass door of the shop and smashed it open. Stepping inside, his feet crunching on the shattered glass littering the floor, he ignored the alarm going straight to the section where the tuxedos he’d picked out for himself and Xander were hanging.

Draping them over his arm, he turned to leave and saw the dress the cheerleader’s eyes had lingered on wistfully every time she looked around the shop. It would look good on her: a shimmering black strapless job that would look sensational on her lush figure. On impulse, Spike folded it over his arm with the tuxes then paused just long enough to rifle the cash register as a cover, not surprised to find it was empty, and slipped out the back door and vanished into the shadows of the alleys behind main street just as the red and blue lights of the police pulled up to the front.

He’d leave the dress on her doorstep in a day or two. Chit probably would quit the second she had the dress - Spike had no concerns she’d have pangs of conscience about returning it - but he was worried she would quit immediately after she had the dress she wanted without thinking about how suspicious it would appear if she left immediately after a burglary. She obviously hated working at the store and wouldn’t stay a moment longer than she had to, so Spike would keep her safe from herself by waiting a bit before giving her the dress.

With a grin, Spike decided he might just have to drop by the store once or twice to taunt her about
being a working girl before giving her the dress.

CORDelia pushed open the library doors and entered, her heels tapping imperiously on the linoleum as she crossed to the table where they were researching the three demons, still hoping to find a clue as to which one was the Mayor’s goal.

“I have something for you.”

“Miss Chase?” Wesley looked up and was immediately flustered by Cordelia’s flirtatious smile.

“Wesley, I just knew you were the person who could help me.”

“Oh?” Wesley adjusted his tie like it was the reason he was having trouble swallowing.

“Yes. This… thing attacked me in the shop… in the shop I was in.”

“Are you alright?” From his tone, Giles obviously wasn’t that concerned, in fact, Xander detected a hint of sarcasm, like he thought she was making something up to have a reason to talk to Wesley. Which was totally possible.

“Yes, thank goodness, but one of the customers was shredded.” Cordy made a face, wrinkling her nose in attractive disgust. “I think it was going to eat him.”

“What did it look like?” The skepticism around the table was fading. Cordy could be overdramatic and self-centered, but she didn’t generally make things up out of whole cloth.

“Ugly and hairy,” Cordy reported.

“Anything more than that?” Buffy shook her head at Cordy’s lack of detail, which was good considering Buffy’s own descriptions weren’t usually much better.

“Of course.” Cordy had obviously caught the implication of incompetence. She reached into her bag and triumphantly pulled out a videotape. “The store security video. I knew you’d want to be thorough,” she purred in Wesley’s direction.

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The video was awful. The thing, which really was ugly and hairy, also rope-tailed, bat-eared and with way too many teeth and claws, had burst through the front window and almost immediately attacked a customer.

“Is he ok?” Xander asked, watching in fascinated horror at the thing left its victim and retreated back through the front window.

“He got sliced up pretty good but he was still alive when they took him to the hospital.”

“Why is the door boarded up?” Giles asked, studying the video closely. “Had the creature been there before?”

“No, that was an ordinary burglary two days ago,” Cordelia said impatiently. “Good thing, too, it’s the reason the owner installed the security camera.” As Giles rewound the tape to watch again, she continued. “You know the part that totally weirded me out? That thing had good taste. Watch, right there. See how he originally went for the manager? Then he abandoned her to go for the guy in formal wear.”
Oddly, that almost seemed right. They all leaned closer as the thing first menaced a woman in a business suit, then suddenly left her just as it had her backed into a corner, turning on a customer coming out of the changing room.

“If I’m not mistaken, this is a hellhound,” Wesley said, not sounding happy about the identification.

“Yes,” Giles agreed. For the benefit of the others, he added: “They’re particularly vicious. They’re a sort of demon foot soldier bred during the Machash Wars. Trained solely to kill. They feed off the brains of their foes.”

“Look! Right there, zoom in on that,” Cordy exclaimed suddenly.

“It’s a videotape,” Xander reminded her.

“So? They do it on television all the time.”

“Not with a regular VCR they don’t,” Xander pointed out. “This isn’t Mission Impossible, this is Sunnydale High’s 10 year old Sony.”

“Wait. Pause it.”

Xander hit the pause button, wondering when he’d been elected Audio-Visual Boy, and saw what Oz and Cordy had been pointing to. Someone was outside the shattered window of the store, holding something in his hands and watching the Hellhound intently.

“Isn’t that Tucker Wells?” Oz asked.

He looked around the circle of equally blank faces. “Tucker Wells. He’s in my chem lab.”

“Xander, you didn’t tell me this was movie night.”

Xander twisted around to look at Spike, just emerging from the back of the upper stacks. “Hey, Spike. Hellhounds in Sunnydale is tonight’s movie of the week.”


When everyone turned to look at him, he just shrugged. “Can generally smell them from a block away.”

Wesley looked interested. “Your sense of smell is that much more acute than a human’s?”

“Just another of the things they don’t put in books,” Xander said with a grin.

Wesley smiled back at the reminder. “Yes.”

“Why would someone want one of these things, anyway?” Cordelia asked and Spike gave her a withering look.

“To kill lots of people.”

Cordy shot a blistering look right back at him. “Well, duh. But why my dress shop?”

“Your dress shop?” Willow asked.

Unaccountably, Cordy flushed. “I, I mean, I shop there a lot.”
Spike smirked at her discomfort. “Like a second home to you, is it?” he asked with an underlying meaning that Xander didn’t get. He looked back and forth between the two of them, wondering what they weren’t saying.

“Perhaps we should get back to the subject,” Giles suggested.

“Right, Hellhounds in a formal wear shop,” Xander said.

“On the day before the prom,” Cordy reminded them. “It’s our busiest week.”

Xander’s surprise at Cordy’s description was forgotten almost instantly in a wave of sickening certainty. “Does that strike anyone else as being a nasty coincidence?”

Buffy sat up alertly. “Yes, it does. Like maybe this was a practice run for a devil dog trained to attack people in formal wear?”

“The prom,” Willow said faintly, looking sick.

“Oh, dear lord,” Giles exclaimed.

“And once again, Sunnydale puts the special in special occasion,” Oz murmured.

“Not to worry,” Spike said breezily. “Angelus and I can take care of these things tonight.” He glanced at Buffy. “You can come along if you want, Slayer,” he added magnanimously.

“Spike,” Wesley began, “we don’t even know…”

“Watcher, it’s like I told you. Can smell these things from way off,” Spike said impatiently. “Plus, they’re noisy. They’re not been’ kept in any of the heavily populated areas and your teenager,” he gestured towards the image still frozen on the screen, “isn’t going to be drivin’ thirty miles a day to feed them. If we don’t turn them up in a quick sweep, we’ll check the butcher’s. Hellhounds only eat brains and someone’s been feeding them. ’s not like the old days when you had a peasant village near your castle for that sort of thing.”

Wesley’s eyebrows had almost hit his hairline by the end of Spike’s speech and he looked shocked at the casual reference to eating peasants but managed to pull himself together. “Ah, yes, that… that is actually quite a sensible plan.”

“Don’t fret, cheerleader.” Spike smirked at her and Xander wondered again what was going on with the two of them. “You won’t have to miss your prom. You comin’, Slayer?”

Xander hated waiting for Spike when he was out hunting things. Granted, it happened almost every night but it was always worse when it was a specific target he was hunting. They were the ones most likely to kill or hurt Spike and he didn’t like the sound of something bred to kill, as Giles had said.

Spike and Buffy had walked Xander home at Spike’s insistence, before going Hellhound hunting. Spike had turned down Xander’s offer to help, as he’d known Spike would, telling Xander that the three of them were more than a match for one Hellhound and the Slayer was just tagging along because she hadn’t seen one before. Buffy hadn’t appreciated that remark but it made Xander laugh, as Spike had known it would. On that cheerful note, Spike had left, and Xander had resignedly turned on the TV, hoping to distract himself.

“Xander?”
“Mmmm?” he asked sleepily.

“Fell asleep on the couch, luv.”

“Spike?” Xander’s eyes shot open as he suddenly remembered and he sat up, stiff muscles protesting the movement. “How’d it go?”

“Prat had four of the beasties,” Spike said, looking very satisfied. “Keeping ‘em in an old house on the edge of town, training ‘em with movies about school proms.” He grinned suddenly. “Not a half bad plan actually. Brainwashed the Hounds into goin’ crazy whenever they saw someone dressed in formalwear.”

“Everyone ok?” Spike looked completely unruffled, his clothing not mussed or damaged at all that Xander could see.

“Bit of a disappointment actually,” Spike admitted. “I was all for turning ‘em loose and giving the Hellhounds a fair shot at us, but the Slayer and Angelus insisted on shooting them while they were still inside their cages. Not really sporting.” He shook his head in disapproval.

Xander chuckled and pulled him down for a kiss. “Yeah, they’re like that,” he agreed. “So, vampire mine, why are there two tuxedos hanging on the closet door?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Takin’ you to the prom,” Spike answered casually, swinging over the back of the sofa to settle next to Xander.

“Spike, that’s… that’s really sweet but are you sure you want to do that?” Xander really was touched. He’d suspected that was what Spike was planning ever since he saw the two tuxes hanging on the closet door when he’d gotten home tonight. It was just that his mind couldn’t really wrap itself around the idea of Spike at a high school dance.

“Want to see you in a tux, luv,” Spike purred, pulling him close.

“Well, yeah, I’ve been thinking about you in one too,” Xander admitted. “I mean its sort of one of those high school things you’re really supposed to do but I don’t want you to have to go just because of me. I mean, you’ll hate the music, and the people, and the goofy awards…” He looked anxiously at Spike who seemed remarkably undisturbed.

“Promise not to kill any of your classmates,” he said flippantly, then added more seriously. “I want to do this for you, luv. You deserve it.” He grinned cheekily. “Won’t hurt that you’ll have the best lookin’ date there.”

“Well, that goes without saying.” Leaning over, Xander kissed him warmly. “Thanks, Spike.”

“Let’s take this to bed where you can thank me properly,” Spike suggested.

“Good plan.”
Spike looked... amazing. Xander had always thought tuxes made people look old-fashioned, in a
good way but still, a little like they were from an earlier decade. Spike looked sleek, and dangerous,
and hot.

“You look amazing.”

“Not bad yourself, pet.” And Spike was looking at him like he thought Xander was pretty good
looking too, which made Xander almost regret the dance.

“So,” he asked, sliding his hands under Spike’s jacket letting his hands linger over lean, silk-covered
muscle, “wanna stay home and shag instead?”

Spike pulled him in for a hard kiss, plundering his mouth for a long, breathless moment, then stepped
back. “Dance first,” he answered. “Shagging afterwards, when we have all night.”

Xander had always known Spike was brilliant.

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Stepping inside the gymnasium, Spike winced at the music pouring through the doors. It wasn’t the
volume, he’d been in plenty of noisier bars, it was the poor-quality band and their abysmal taste in
music he objected to.

Xander was looking around, obviously admiring the cheap decorations and the balloon arches and
his fingers tightened on Spike’s in a quick, grateful squeeze. Looking across at his boy, Spike
thought that a couple of hours of dreadful music and sentimental foolishness were a small price to
pay for the happiness on Xander’s face.

Xander looked drop-dead gorgeous in his tux. Spike had chosen well - the cut fit Xander’s tall, lean
figure perfectly, emphasizing his broad shoulders and strong legs. His dark hair just brushed his
shoulders, the tousled waves tempting Spike, as always, to bury his hands in the dark curls and feel
the silken warmth around his fingers.

They made a striking couple and Spike saw people turning to stare at them. Whether they were
staring because they were two guys or because they looked good, Spike didn’t care. He hoped no
one would say anything to their faces that would require a response and he was prepared to overlook
any behind their back slights for Xander’s sake.

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Cordelia entered the gym like a queen gracing the peasant class with her presence and Xander
suppressed a smile, remember when Spike had once told him that all you had to do was act like you
own a place to be half way to owning it. Cordelia had obviously learned that lesson in the cradle.
She’d come alone, he realized with surprise, but was clearly untroubled by the lack of an escort.
Seeing Xander and Spike, she veered towards them and her eyebrows rose mockingly as she arrived
next to them, her gaze going to their tuxedos.

“I see you got your tuxes the same place I got my dress,” she said archly, her eyes full of hidden
meaning as she looked at Spike. “I won’t be shopping there any more now anyway, thanks to your
visit.” She favored Spike with a brilliant smile that looked almost... grateful? Watching them
exchange mocking looks, Xander had the feeling again that the two of them were sharing a secret
that amused both of them. Given the way they related to one another, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know what was going on.

“You look great, Cordy,” he said sincerely, blithely ignoring the subtext. And she did. She was wearing a shimmering black dress that had a slit up the side almost to her hip and which clung to her curves. She looked like a movie star.

Spike looked her up and down assessingly. “Seen better,” he judged and Xander elbowed him. “Seen worse too,” he conceded.

“Like I’m worried about fashion criticism from leather-fetish boy,” Cordelia responded but it lacked a little of her usual bite. “You boys have fun. I’m going to mingle,” she said brightly, and moved off through the crowd, taking the admiring looks as no more than her due.

“Still think she’d make a good vampire,” Spike said, almost as if he was considering the idea seriously.

“Spike, we have enough problems without Cordelia, Queen of the Damned. Just no.”

Spike laughed.

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“Xander! You came after all, that’s great!” Larry yelled at him over the music. Xander turned and saw Larry grinning at him. Jonathan was slightly behind him, looking just as pleased to see Xander. He grinned back at them.

“Larry, Jonathan, this is Spike.”

Larry stuck out a hand and Spike looked at it quizzically for a fraction of a second before reaching out to clasp it.

“Whoa! Cold hands, you really are nervous.”

Spike shot a quick look at Xander but didn't say anything as Xander hastily changed the subject before Spike had time to wonder why Larry assumed he was nervous. “Nice dance, huh?”

“Yeah, the band’s great and the food’s really good.” Larry shifted his attention to Spike again, obviously trying to make him feel welcome. “So, Spike, are you in school?”

“Ah, no. Spike's a little older than we are. He left school a while ago,” Xander explained nervously.

“Working man, huh? What do you do?” Larry was trying hard to draw out Xander's ‘shy’ boyfriend and Xander thought he might just shoot himself now.

“Um, well…,” he stammered, when Spike interrupted him smoothly.

“I’m what used to be called a ‘man of leisure’,” he said, his lips quirking up slightly and his eyes gleaming with mischief. “I run a small…” the hesitation was so fractional that Xander was sure no one else even heard it, “organization here in town but it doesn’t take up much of my time.”

His accent was different, Xander realized. More refined, more... Giles. Larry looked impressed and it was obvious he'd gotten the impression that Spike was rich. Jonathan had been watching the three of them with bright curious eyes. Now he said, “That sounds great. Part-time work?”

“Something like that.”
“Spike, how ‘bout we check out the buffet?” Xander wondered why he hadn’t planned a vampire cover story. Stupid, but somehow he hadn’t ever thought about Spike actually talking to anyone at the dance. At least anyone who didn’t know he was a vampire. “Larry, Jonathan, we’ll see you in a bit.”

Tugging Spike after him, Xander retreated while they were still ahead. “So,” he asked suspiciously, “does everyone from England use their accents like that?”

Spike didn’t even pretend he didn’t know what Xander was talking about, his smile becoming a smirk. “Only with Americans. You all are complete gits about British accents.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Xander warned darkly. “after all, it was the first thing that attracted me to you.”

“Yeah, but my fabulous body keeps you by my side,” Spike purred, pressing close so Xander could feel certain favorite portions of Spike’s anatomy.

“Well, there is that,” he conceded, grinning at his lover.

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With Spike nibbling distractingly at his neck, Xander hadn’t really been paying much attention to the titles being handed out by the prom committee. He just closed his eyes and tilted his head a little to the side, giving Spike more room to work and waiting for the music to start up again.

He hadn’t realized how much fun the prom would be.

They’d danced and visited the buffet and Xander had introduced Spike to dozens of people. Spike had been attentive and charming and hadn’t threatened anyone but Cordelia and that didn’t count, she’d threatened Spike first. Xander kept pulling Spike into corners where they could make out in peace. He couldn’t believe Spike had been willing to put up with this for him and it made him feel embarrassingly sappy every time Spike put on his BBC accent and made nice with some teenager that he just knew Spike was mentally dismembering.

And how weird was he that he got romantic and horny at the thought of Spike imagining killing the people he was chatting with, with every outward appearance of friendliness.

Jonathan’s voice at the microphone had surprised him out of the blissful trance Spike had put him in. Jonathan wasn’t a member of the prom committee and Xander stirred and began paying attention as Jonathan asked: “Is Buffy Summers here?”

Curious, Xander opened his eyes and listened, his attention sharpening rapidly as Jonathan began talking about how Sunnydale wasn’t like other towns.

As Jonathan continued, the hazy bliss fell away and he straightened in Spike’s embrace, listening intently. Jonathan was up on the stage in front of the entire school breaking Sunnydale’s biggest taboo. He was openly talking about the kind of things that no one ever talked about and everyone was agreeing, even calling out examples from the crowd of things that had happened over the last three years. Xander heard people mention the zombies and hyena-people - he vaguely recalled Willow telling him something about some kids getting possessed by the spirit of a hyena the first year Buffy was in town. Jonathan continued calmly, coming right out and saying that their graduating class had the lowest mortality rate of any class in Sunnydale history and crediting Buffy for having had a lot to do with that.

Jonathan finished by saying the committee had created a new category in response to receiving a lot
of write-in votes. He held up a decorated umbrella and read the small plaque: Buffy Summers, Class Protector. Other than the fact that the title sounded a bit like a condom, it was a really nice gesture and Xander regretted not having thought about writing in something like that himself. She’d earned it.

Buffy looked surprised and unbelievably happy as she moved forward through the applauding crowd to receive the rainbow-colored parasol that shimmered like soap bubbles under the colored lights. She didn’t say anything, just turned and smiled at everyone in a way Xander had never seen her smile: touched and pleased and almost shy. Xander thought she’d never looked prettier than she did at that moment.

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“May I have this dance?”

He held out his hand to Willow and she looked up with a smile. The impulse to ask her to dance was born of the nostalgia that was so much a flavor of these last days of school. Everyone was in a “remember when” mood and he was as susceptible as the next person. Seeing Willow sitting alone, looking wistfully at the dance floor had reminded Xander of less complicated days and sent him across the floor to her side.

After the awards had been handed out, the music changed and slow dances followed, one after the other. He’d discovered that Spike was a really good dancer, having been trained in a previous century when people learned ballroom dancing as part of their education, and closing his eyes and following Spike’s lead had proved surprisingly easy. Their bodies fit together and the chaperones were being good about overlooking kissing in the middle of the dance floor.

Spike had asked if he would mind Spike asking Cordelia to dance. Amused at the bizarre friendship, Xander had encouraged him and gone to get a glass of punch. Finishing the glass and looking around idly, he’d noticed Willow sitting off to one side.

As they moved onto the dance floor, Xander took Willow into his arms and began the shuffling step that passed for slow dancing with him when he didn’t have Spike’s lead to follow. “You look beautiful, Willow.” It was something he knew he was supposed to say and she looked pretty in her dress but she’d bundled her hair up on top of her head with some sort of clip and it looked odd to him. He preferred her with her red hair swinging around her face, shining and beautiful and seeming to catch all the light in a room. It had always been her best feature and he was sorry she hadn’t left it down.

“You’re pretty handsome yourself in a tux,” she said admiringly and he laughed.

“Everyone looks good in a tux,” Xander replied with a grin.

“Remember 7th grade?” Willow asked, looking up at him, smiling reminiscently. “The Spring Dance when you, me and Jesse went together?”

“Yeah. That was when Jesse fell for Cordelia. He kept talking about that red dress she wore for weeks.”

Willow laughed, “I think it was the first time he really saw her cleavage. I don’t think his eyes left her chest all night.”

“Well, the power of Cordelia’s breasts is probably a side effect from the Hellmouth,” Xander postulated with mock seriousness. “Giles is researching it.”
“Giles wouldn’t research something like that!” Her smile turned impish. “Wesley, on the other hand…”

“No,” Xander disagreed. “He’s fallen under the spell of her breasts. He doesn’t retain the will to research their demonic origin.”

Willow was giggling helplessly now, not because the conversation was that funny but because, like Xander, she had been briefly transported back to junior high and their shared amusement at Jesse’s helpless infatuation with the oblivious and disdainful Cordelia.

They fell silent, both lost in memories of Jesse and less complicated days, letting the music guide their movement around the floor.

“I’ve missed you, Xander.” Willow said it simply, not looking for reciprocation and that was new. Willow used to need validation of her feelings by the immediate return sentiment. Now, she didn’t look anxiously at him for a similar statement, instead, her gaze went to the other couples dancing, watching the people they had known since grade school, a little nostalgic smile playing on her lips.

Xander thought that maybe that this was the whole point of a prom: a magic night outside time where only good memories were allowed. Something to look back on and remember with happiness rather than the awfulness that made up so much of high school. It didn’t change anything between Willow and himself, but for the length of one dance, they could pretend to be the inseparable friends they once had been.

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“Just rip it off, pet,” Spike growled.

“It’s a tux! I’m not ripping it off.”

Knowing he was driving Spike crazy, Xander continued to slowly unbutton Spike’s silk shirt one button at a time. His lips explored every inch of the smooth flesh he was uncovering with such agonizing slowness, kissing, nibbling, and licking before his hands moved down, paused and carefully eased the next button through its buttonhole.

Despite having joked and fantasized all evening about tearing Spike’s clothes off and making hot passionate love right there in the gym, now that they were home and in their own bedroom, Xander found the romantic, nostalgic glow of the evening was still with him and he resisted Spike’s efforts to hurry things along.

Spike groaned as Xander dropped to his knees in front of him as his hands finally reached the waistband of Spike’s trousers and began unfastening them slowly, his fingers spending far more time stroking over the hardness beneath the fabric than was strictly necessary. He looked up into the impatient blue eyes with a teasing smile as he stroked over Spike’s burgeoning erection. “Someone’s been thinking about me.”

Sliding the zipper down with deliberate slowness, Xander chuckled as Spike’s erect penis pushed free through the opening. Kneeling at Spike’s feet, never taking his eyes off Spike’s, he opened his mouth and breathed warm air out, blowing it over Spike’s eager cock.

“Bloody hell!” Spike jerked hard as Xander’s heated breath feathered along the length of his throbbing erection.

Laughing, Xander slid his hands up Spike’s legs, wrapping them around the top of the muscled thighs and holding him as he began licking Spike’s cock; tiny cat-licks, barely touching the sensitive
skin, feeling Spike pushing closer, wanting more. Gradually, he began licking with harder, longer strokes, letting his tongue drag across the foreskin, exploring every inch of his lover as Spike cursed and demanded he “get on with it, luv.”

Spike’s fingers threaded through his hair and Xander relented, running his tongue once along the length of Spike’s erection before concentrating on the head: swirling his tongue teasingly around it, then laving directly over the end, tasting the pre-cum and teasing at the weeping slit with the tip of his tongue.

His hands tightened to hold Spike still as Spike threw his head back with a sharp intake of unneeded breath, his hips pushing forward against Xander’s hold as he tried for more stimulation. Hollowing his mouth, Xander slid it around the head of Spike’s cock and then stopped again, ignoring Spike’s hands in his hair, urging him on.

For a long moment, he held their position, his lips not quite touching Spike’s cock, just inhaling through his nose and exhaling hot breath along the length, feeling Spike trembling under the exquisite sensation, until Spike’s hands tightened in his hair almost to the point of pain and he cursed loudly, his hips bucking forward.

Xander gave in, closing his lips around the head of Spike’s cock and then stopped again, ignoring Spike’s hands in his hair, urging him on. For a long moment, he held their position, his lips not quite touching Spike’s cock, just inhaling through his nose and exhaling hot breath along the length, feeling Spike trembling under the exquisite sensation, until Spike’s hands tightened in his hair almost to the point of pain and he cursed loudly, his hips bucking forward.

Xander gave in, closing his lips and taking Spike into this mouth, his tongue swirling around the throbbing flesh, stroking over it, running his tongue along the veins as he swallowed as much as he could of Spike’s hard length. Spike was holding himself back with an effort, muscles tensed as he fought to keep from thrusting too hard into Xander’s mouth. Pulling back a little, Xander closed his lips around the head and began sucking hard, loving the way Spike bucked and cried out as he did. He dropped one hand from its grip on Spike’s thigh and reached up to begin playing with Spike’s balls, cupping them in his warm palm, rolling them in the sac, and rubbing teasingly at the sensitive flesh behind them.

Spike swore and came hard, shooting his release down Xander’s throat, his hips bucking in Xander’s grip as he cried out sharply. Xander didn’t let up, pulling the orgasm out of Spike, sucking and licking and swallowing Spike’s offering until Spike sagged, utterly spent.

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The tension flowed out of Spike’s muscles and he folded over Xander, wrapping his strong arms around Xander’s shoulders and holding him, resting his forehead against Xander’s as Xander let his spent cock slip from his mouth. They stayed that way for a long moment, then Spike pulled Xander gently to his feet.

“Let’s see about these tuxes then,” he said, beginning to strip Xander quickly and efficiently. Taking his cue from Xander, he took the time to unfasten and unzip, even as Xander helped him shoulder out of his own unfastened clothes. Tossing the last items over a chair, Spike took a minute to just admire his boy.

Xander’s lean, coltish body was filling in beautifully, muscles from his work and training with Spike giving breadth to his shoulders. He had a swimmer’s physique: broad shoulders, narrow waist and strong thighs and he was gorgeous as he stood there, admiring Spike even as Spike admired him. “Beautiful, luv,” he said and pulled Xander into his arms, kissing him with gentle thoroughness.

Xander pulled back after a long moment and looked at Spike so lovingly it made Spike’s unbeatting heart lurch. “Thank you for tonight,” he said simply and Spike thought again that it was worth anything to have put that shining happiness in Xander’s eyes.

“Anything for you, luv,” he answered, and knew it was true.
Their lips met again and they tumbled onto the bed, still kissing; long, lazy kisses that gradually grew more frantic and passionate: tongues dueling, nipping, tasting, teasing and Spike let his hands roam over Xander’s strong back, feeling the sun-kissed skin smooth and warm under his hands.

Xander lay on top of him, his larger frame surrounding Spike with the warmth and smell of his Claimed. Xander’s erection pushed eagerly against him and Xander ground their hips together. Spike’s own arousal had returned and their hard cocks slid against each other as they kissed and rubbed against each other.

Rolling them over so he was on top, Spike sat up, looking down into Xander’s flushed cheeks and passion-glazed eyes. He slid his hands down the length of Xander’s arms and pulled them over his head, pinning them down against the mattress, leaning forward to kiss him again as he pressed down against him, jerking his hips sharply against Xander’s as Xander gasped and bucked up into him.

He released his hold on Xander’s wrists and buried his hands in Xander’s hair, holding him as he kissed him fiercely, his hips rocking against Xander’s until Xander was moaning and writhing beneath him.

Spike groped sideways for the lube without lifting his lips from Xander’s and slicked his hand quickly, reaching down to pump his own cock ensuring he was slicked and ready, even as he spread the lube generously over his fingers.

He eased one slick finger inside Xander, moving with aching slowness until it was fully seated, then began thrusting slowly in and out, circling his finger with each movement to stretch the entrance. After long moments, he slid a second finger inside and pushed in sharply, searching for and finding the prostate as Xander arched up off the bed, crying out as Spike stimulated the sensitive gland.

“Spike!”

Spike chuckled, continuing to brush his finger over his sweet spot, until Xander was thrashing beneath him, eyes glazed, his whole body shaking with need, broken pleas for more coming to his lips.

One last thrust and Spike pulled his fingers out, pushing Xander’s legs up towards his chest and centering himself. He eased his cock inside Xander with excruciating slowness, nearly shaking with the effort of holding back, feeling Xander’s body relax and allow him inside. He pressed forward slowly until he was fully seated and lay there for a long moment, lips trailing over Xander’s chest as he waited for Xander’s body to adjust.

When Xander’s hips began to twitch, seeking more, Spike let his mouth slide up to Xander’s throat, licking and nibbling along the veins throbbing just below the surface. Xander gasped, “Spike please!” and Spike thrust hard, burying his fangs in Xander’s exposed throat at the same moment.

Thrusting inside the heated channel, hot blood filling his mouth, Spike exploded into orgasm, hips pumping hard into Xander who screamed and came, his hot cum pulsing between their bodies as he came over and over again, overwhelmed by the dual penetration.

Spike forced himself to raise his head, to stop drinking, even as his hips continued to thrust, loving the feel of Xander’s pleasure as Xander tightened around him. So tight, so hot, so good. He dipped his head and lapped at the renewed Claim mark, savoring the last drops of blood as he shot the remaining evidence of his own orgasm inside his Claimed, feeling Xander go limp beneath him.

He relaxed against Xander’s body, feeling Xander’s warm breath panting against his cheek, burying his nose in Xander’s neck and inhaling the mingled odors of sex and sweat and Xander.
They lay there, entwined and sated, for long minutes before Spike made himself move, easing out of his boy and shifting them to a more comfortable position. Sighing contently, hearing Xander’s breathing slow into the rhythms of sleep, Spike let himself fall asleep, wrapped securely in the arms of his Claimed.
Chapter 45

Xander untangled himself from Spike’s arms and slipped out of the bed, unable to ignore the demands of his bladder any longer. After taking care of necessity, he hesitated over his choices then opted for returning to bed rather than studying for finals. Opportunities to spend lazy mornings in bed with his vampire were far too infrequent.

Sliding back under the covers, Xander wasn’t surprised when Spike stirred without opening his eyes and pulled Xander firmly back into the curve of his body. Even mostly asleep, Spike was aware of Xander’s presence and his movements around their apartment. Spike had tried to explain how he did it, but it was one of those things that, if you didn’t have vampire senses, you couldn’t really understand. Xander had long ago decided that Spike’s ability to sense his surroundings even while asleep was the origin of the phrase ‘sleeping with one eye open’ and had stopped trying to understand the mechanics of being both awake and asleep at the same time.

Two hours later, when Xander woke again and reluctantly decided he couldn’t put off studying for finals any longer, he was prevented from leaving the bed by Spike’s arms tightening around him. Turning in Spike’s embrace, he found Spike fully awake, which was unusual enough at this time of day to be worth comment.

“Spike?”

“Need to talk to you, Xander,” Spike said, and released his hold, letting them both sit up. Xander took a moment to stretch and work the kinks out, before settling back against the headboard to listen to what Spike had to say.

“What’s up?”

“You remember when I sent the boys out the other night to see what the Mayor was up to?” Xander nodded and Spike continued. “Mayor’s recruiting a lot of vampires. He’s got 30 or so working for him already and he’s trying to get more.” Spike grinned with feral satisfaction. “He’s not havin’ much luck getting more recruits because we’ve got the word out that it’s final death to work for him.” The grin died as he admitted: “Problem is, we haven’t been able to take out the ones he’s already got because he’s keeping ‘em close and they aren’t showing themselves around town much so we can’t get at ‘em.”

Xander nodded. Spike had told him all this already and the rest of them had been keeping an eye on City Hall during the days themselves, hoping the Mayor’s would let his security lapse and they could get at the Box of Gavrock, so they were aware the place still swarmed with police and human security by day and with vampires at night.

“Him having that many vampires workin’ for him; it’s a direct challenge to my authority, luv. Can’t let it go on much longer or I’ll look weak.”

“What are you planning on doing?” Xander felt his stomach tie in knots and the worry must have shown on his face because Spike slid his arm around Xander’s shoulders and pulled him close. Leaning into the comforting strength of his lover’s cool body, Xander listened as Spike explained.

“’m declaring war, Xander. Nothing else to do. If the Mayor was a vampire, we’d have been at war the day after I found out what he was doin’. Since he’s not a vampire, I could overlook a couple vampires workin’ for him but he’s gone way past that.”
“What does declaring war mean, exactly?” Xander asked warily, not liking the sound of it.

Spike sighed. “Bit difficult in this case,” he admitted. “Usually, I’d just challenge the vampire settin’ up the rival Court and we’d settle it one on one.”

“But the Mayor…” Alarmed, Xander struggled to sit up but Spike tightened his arm, holding Xander in place, his other arm running soothingly over the bare leg Xander had draped comfortably over Spike’s leg.

“Don’t fret, luv. I don’t have to challenge the Mayor directly.” Spike shrugged as Xander relaxed again at that reassurance. “Because he’s not a vampire, I can get away with not fighting him one on one. Means we’ll do it the way it was done in the Middle Ages: minions against minions. I’ll take my Court up against the vampires working for him.”

“When are you planning on doing this?”

“I’m meeting with the full Court tomorrow night and telling them what I’m doing. Probably the night after unless I learn something from the boys tonight to change my mind.”

“You’re just going to attack City Hall?” Xander asked, wishing his voice didn’t sound so faint.

“Probably. Not worried about it, pet, we more than double their numbers and none of them are much of anything to worry about. When we’re done, I’ll have a try for the Box but we’re not going to be exactly subtle about moving in, so I’m not real optimistic about the Box still being there by the end of the fight.”

Xander digested that for a long moment. Spike was right, the Court had nearly 100 vampires, which should make taking on the Mayor’s vampires pretty easy. Except for the Mayor who was definitely the wild card in the game. “Why do you think he’s got that many vampires working for him?”

Spike shook his head. “Dunno, luv. Don’t think it’s just to guard the Box, feels like more somehow.”

“Something to do with the Ascension?”

“Probably, timing’s right. Question is: what?”

“We know so much about the Ascension but none of the important bits,” Xander exclaimed in frustration his hands tightening around Spike. “Not where, when, or why he needs 30 or so vampires.”

“Knowing only part of the riddle is the way the game is played, luv,” Spike said comfortably. In the same way that Spike lived in the moment without a lot of worrying about what happened yesterday, so he was far less nervous and tense than any of the humans were about the impending Ascension. Spike had a way of dealing with the variables in front of him and not spending a lot of time fretting about the intangibles. Xander really envied him that ability.

“We cannot make an attempt to retrieve the Box while it remains so heavily guarded,” Wesley was insisting as Xander entered the library, Oz on his heels.

Buffy was there with the two Watchers and it was obvious that she and Wesley had been arguing again. As both the Ascension and the end of school got closer, they were all showing classic signs of stress. Between preparing for finals and worrying about imminent death, all of them had said things they regretted on more than one occasion. The friction between Buffy and Wesley had been
noticeably increasing as they remained deadlocked on the issue of Buffy going to college. It hadn’t helped that Buffy had made what she thought was a compromise decision: she had accepted her admission at UC Sunnydale, allowing her to both stay on the Hellmouth and attend college. The problem was going to college at all was against the Council’s orders and she hadn’t told Wesley before sending off her acceptance. Wesley obviously sympathized with her wish to continue her education but felt he had to be the voice of the Council in this situation. Giles, having been fired, felt no such obligation to back the Council and was whole-heartedly supporting Buffy’s right to attend college.

Now Buffy said heatedly to Wesley: “We can’t just sit around doing nothing, waiting for the Mayor to change. We have to do something and the Box is our best shot.”

“Buffy, you know the Mayor is still keeping the box heavily guarded day and night.” Giles glanced down at the newspaper in front of him, frowning in distaste at the lurid headline about the brutal murder of a professor in his own home. “Despite the increase in crime due to the lack of police presence, he is keeping nearly the entire police force at City Hall guarding the box. You simply cannot take on the police directly.”

“I know,” Buffy snapped impatiently, “we need to reconsider going in at night.”

“With 30-some vampires…” Wesley began.

Xander interrupted: “That won’t be an issue for long.”

“Yes, Xander,” Giles said testily. “We all know the Ascension is rapidly approaching.”

Xander ignored the flicker of hurt at Giles’ reproof. He knew Giles hadn’t really meant to imply that Xander was wasting their time, he was just tired and stressed out and had been snapping at everyone. “Maybe more rapidly than we’d hoped. Guess who our commencement speaker is this year?”

Alerted by his tone, the three of them gave him their full attention.

“I’m guessing it’s not somebody young and cute?” Buffy answered.

“Neither of the above. Correct me if I’m wrong but I don’t think that, in his entire 80-some years in office, Mayor Wilkins has ever spoken at a high school graduation before. Anyone taking bets that this year’s graduation date of May 25th isn’t just a coincidence?”

“Bloody hell!” Giles exploded, for one second sounding remarkably like Spike. “No wonder they’ve been keeping the identity of the Commencement speaker a secret.” He braced his hands against the table and visibly fought for calm. “May 25th is the Ascension date for the demon Olvikan,” he said, regaining control. “It makes a horrible kind of sense. The Books of Ascension mention that the newly created demon must feed heavily immediately after the transformation so as to replenish their energy.”

“And a graduation crowd would be a guaranteed meal,” Buffy finished grimly.

“Olvikan’s the big snake, right?” Oz asked. He and Xander had been in the student lounge when Snyder and the woman in charge of the commencement ceremony had walked by, discussing the Mayor’s requirements as this year’s keynote speaker.

“Right, Tutu is the one with all the heads and Warussky is the horns and slime,” Buffy confirmed.

“Daratuu and W’rruss’kha,” Giles murmured, rubbing at his eyes, distracted as always by Buffy’s nicknames for the demons.
Wesley came out of his frozen shock, saying urgently: “We cannot allow this to happen. Can we cancel the ceremony? Starve the Mayor by depriving him of his food source?” Even as he said it, he winced apologetically for labeling the students a ‘food source’.

Giles shook his head, slipping his glasses back on. “Not without giving away the fact that we know what’s happening and when. As far as we know, the Mayor doesn’t realize that we have the Books of Ascension, so hopefully he assumes we are working blind: knowing he is up to something but not knowing exactly what it is,” he answered slowly.

“Sounds like what we are doing.” Xander wasn’t actually sure where that sotto-voice mutter had come from but it sure summed up their situation.

“They’re really pushing attendance this year,” Buffy said thoughtfully. “Caps and gowns aren’t usually free and they are this year because of an anonymous donation.” She brightened a little bit, looking around at them. “This is good. Unless it’s a coincidence, then we now know where and when it’s happening.”

“The ceremony is mid-afternoon,” Oz said. “Spike and Angel won’t be able to help.”

“Actually, that might not be a problem,” Giles said. “There are repeated references in the Books of Ascension to ‘darkness falling’ and ‘day becoming night’ during the transformation.”

Wesley nodded, adding: “It appears that an eclipse is standard procedure for an Ascension. That will leave Angel and Spike free to help.”

“Well, thank god something is finally going our way,” Buffy said, “but, unless we can get the Box from the Mayor before then, we have less than a week to find a way to kill a big snake.”

“Wesley and I will redouble our efforts to learn more about Olvikan but the Mayor’s invulnerability remains the key problem. We cannot assume he won’t remain invulnerable past the transformation and the Books of Ascension are silent on that point. I’m afraid we must continue to seek a way to deal with an invulnerable demon.”

“We’ve got to find a way to make the Mayor killable, either now or post-demon,” Buffy said, frustrated by the seemingly insolvable problem. “Are you sure there isn’t a spell to reverse his invulnerability?”

“We have been looking into it but we’ve found nothing,” Giles reminded her tiredly. He, Wesley and Elizabeth had been researching non-stop, spending hours in the library desperately searching for anything that could help and mostly coming up blank. Giles was so tired that sometimes his usually urbane demeanor deserted him, Xander had overheard him complaining waspishly one morning that they had ‘sod all’ to show for it after pulling yet another all-nighter in the library.

“If we can’t kill him, can we control him?” Xander asked. Seeing the questioning glances, he continued, thinking out loud. “Snakes just have fangs, right? You pick them up by their heads and they can’t do anything to you.”

“Olvikan will be much bigger, of course,” Giles answered, looking interested. “But it might be possible to get some sort of rope around its neck.” He sighed, shaking his head. “I doubt that even a Slayer will be strong enough to hold the demon.”

“Tie the rope off. Lots of trees in the courtyard,” Oz contributed.

“I’m not sure that would work, even if we could put some sort of spell on the rope,” Wesley said, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on the table. “But it’s an interesting idea. We must all try and think of
any plan, no matter how insane or desperate, if we are going to stop the Mayor.”

“We attack the Mayor with hummus,” Oz suggested with a completely straight face.

For one moment, Wesley stared at him like Oz had lost his mind, until Giles let out a short bark of surprised laughter and Wesley belatedly smiled, realizing it was a joke. Oz could be hard to read that way, Xander thought in amusement, glad for the momentary break in the tension.

“Perhaps not quite that insane,” Giles said, the laughter reaching his eyes for the first time in days. He glanced at the clock. “Wesley and I will check the security at City Hall and see if there has been any change.”

“About that,” Xander began slowly, thinking furiously. “Spike decided this morning that he needs to take out the Mayor’s vampires,” he said, editing things slightly.

“What?!” The exclamations came from all sides and Xander held up his hands.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. Spike told me this morning that the Mayor has essentially set up a rival Court because of the number of vampires he has working for him. Spike intends to attack the Mayor’s vampires and kill them all.”

Buffy looked torn, like she wasn’t sure if she was pleased or seriously ticked off. Giles and Wesley were both thinking hard, Oz was unreadable but Xander didn’t sense any disapproval from him. “I’m going to call him and let him know about Saturday and see if that changes his mind. He was planning on making a try for the Box after he’s killed all the Mayor’s vampires but doesn’t really expect to be successful. But if the vampire guards are gone that means we can try again at night.”

“The Ascension Ritual for Olvikan calls for the Mayor to consume the contents of the Box 24 hours before the Ascension,” Giles said slowly, obviously working it out in his head as he spoke. “When does Spike plan on attacking?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Tuesday,” Wesley mused, “that would give us Wednesday and Thursday nights to make our own attempts.”

“Why not simultaneous attacks?” Buffy suggested. “We go in while Spike is taking out the vampires. If Angel and I go in and make directly for the Box, maybe we can get to it before the Mayor knows what’s happening.”

“That’s probably our best chance,” Wesley agreed.

“We need time to plan,” Buffy said. “Xander, can you ask Spike to hold off his attack one night? We need to coordinate things with him before going in.”

Buffy really had learned about not holding out on your allies. Remembering the disastrous events last year when Buffy had held back crucial information about a supposedly joint attack on Acathla, Xander smiled at her. “Sounds good. I’ll call him and let him know.” Spike shouldn’t mind Buffy and Angel using Spike’s attack as cover for one of their own, he thought hopefully.

“Much as I hate to say it,” Giles said, glancing at the clock. “I suspect you all have exams waiting for you. Let’s meet again tomorrow after sunset.”

Buffy grabbed her book bag and swung it over her shoulder. “All right, but if I graduate posthumously, I’m going to regret wasting last night studying.”
Xander said flippantly as he and Oz followed her out of the library: “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want ‘high school dropout’ carved on my tombstone.”

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Xander left school immediately after last period and his second final exam for the day. Three more finals over the next two days and he was done with classes. Despite the looming Ascension and the fact that he wasn’t going to college, he wanted to do well on his exams. It was the same need to prove himself that had made him study like a nutcase for the SAT tests, despite the fact that they were meaningless if you weren’t planning on going to college.

Sighing at his own ridiculous insecurities, he knocked on the familiar door, regretting how long it had been since he’d had a chance to visit. As the door swung open, he said cheerfully: “Hey, Mr. Olsen, long time.”

“Xander. It’s good to see you. Come on in.”

He stepped inside readily, following Mr. Olsen into the living room. “Is Mrs. Olsen here?”

“Out shopping, I’m afraid. I may have to go back to work soon,” Mr. Olsen answered mournfully. It was a running joke between the two elderly people that Mrs. Olsen’s spendthrift ways were going to require Mr. Olsen to spend his twilight years working.

Xander grinned. “Not more shoes,” he said with mock horror, settling down on the worn couch to catch up on the news.

Twenty minutes later, having covered all the non-life-threatening updates on his life under Mr. Olsen’s interested questions, Xander plunged into the reason for his visit: “Mr. Olsen, I need your help.”

The old man smiled. “Of course, Xander. What do you need?”

Xander had thought about this off and on all day, ever since he’d learned the probable date for the Ascension. He didn’t want to spread false alarms but he didn’t want to just sit on the information either. What had finally decided him was the thought that he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t tell people something that could maybe help save their lives. If they chose not to act on it, at least he would have done all he could.

“Have you ever heard of something called an Ascension?” he asked without preamble.

Mr. Olsen shook his head. “It doesn’t ring any bells.”

“We don’t know everything about it yet but we know that it’s going to be big. Like possibly the whole town being destroyed big. The Mayor is doing this spell to change himself into a demon.”

“Although it may seem a little odd coming from me, that doesn’t sound good,” Mr. Olsen said after a moment. “On the other hand, he’s been Mayor for nearly a century, so he can’t be fully human.”

“You know about that?”

Mr. Olsen smiled impishly at him. “I’ve lived in Sunnydale for over 70 years, Xander. No one with any sense ever believed that Mayor Wilkins the III wasn’t the same as Mayor Wilkins I and II.” He shrugged, looking remarkably unperturbed. “He’s been a good Mayor. It never really bothered anyone that he was passing himself as human. There are a lot of demons and demon-hybrids who do that.” He smile broadened and for a moment he looked like a mischievous boy despite the thinning
Xander shook his head, not letting himself be put off track. “We’re not really sure why, but this is more than just an ordinary evil demon. We’re still researching it but, from what we’ve learned, the Mayor’s going to do a lot of damage when he changes.” Xander told Mr. Olsen what they knew, which took depressingly little time. There was so much about the Ascension they were still guessing at, including the date but graduation remained their best guess. It was just too much of a coincidence otherwise.

Mr. Olsen listened in silence, although his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed in a silent whistle when Xander mentioned the coven in Devonshire sensing the rise of a dark power in Sunnydale. “That far away,” he murmured, almost to himself. Shaking off whatever he was thinking, he looked at Xander, sharply focused again. “What do you need?”

“Can you get the word out, quietly, in the demon community to get as many people as possible out of town before graduation day?” Xander looked anxiously at the old man. “I wish we could somehow evacuate the entire town but, if the Mayor gets wind of that happening, it could blow our one chance to stop him. You know just about everyone in the demon community. If you can warn the friendly demons and the humans who know about demons to get out of town before graduation, I’d feel a lot better about what’s coming. Any evacuation has to be quiet so no one knows it’s happening. People who don’t know about Sunnydale and what goes on here will never believe us if we try and warn them and we can’t risk anyone telling the authorities about a mass exodus because the Mayor will hear about it. But the demon community knows it’s a Hellmouth and that bad stuff happens here. If we can’t stop the Ascension, we want as many people out of town that day as possible.”

That was stretching it, because he hadn’t told anyone what he was doing here but he was sure, pretty sure anyway, that no one would object. He studied his clasped hands for a second before looking up anxiously. “It could be for nothing. It might not be as bad as we think, or we could have the wrong day, but…”

“Better safe than sorry, don’t you think?”

“That’s pretty much what I’ve been thinking.”

Mr. Olsen ran a hand through his thinning hair, looking thoughtful and worried. “I’ll get the word out, Xander,” he promised. “Quietly. Graduation is this Saturday, right? That gives us almost a week to organize things.”

“Thanks, Mr. Olsen,” Xander said gratefully. “I really hope this is a false alarm.”

“I agree. Still, it is a Hellmouth we live on. Having an organized evacuation plan for emergencies is probably a good idea in general. If this is a false alarm, we’ll consider it a practice run and be ready for the real thing.” Mr. Olsen studied him for a minute, his faded blue eyes intent on Xander’s. “Will you be coming with us?”

Xander shook his head. “We’re working on a plan to fight the Mayor. We’ve got Buffy and Angel and Spike on our side, so we should be fine,” he lied, knowing that they didn’t have a hope in hell of stopping the Mayor if he remained invulnerable after becoming a demon.

Mr. Olsen looked skeptical but didn’t call him on it, just saying: “Be careful. I would hate it if anything happened to you.”

He felt much better as he left Mr. Olsen’s house, as if a little of the weight had slipped off his
shoulders. Even if they all died this Saturday, maybe he’d helped save the lives of other people by what he’d just done.

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Spike let his eyes sweep the Court as he stood silently just long enough for anticipation to build up in the crowd. His four Lieutenants were standing spread out in a line across the back of the room, more for show than any real concern that anyone would try to leave, but the unusual arrangement had been noted and was causing a stir.

Good, Spike wanted them to take this seriously.

Meeting with his Lieutenants yesterday, he’d gotten their reports on the Court’s state of readiness. His Lieutenants had felt it necessary to stake only three minions, which boded well for the battle to come. The weapons inventory had pleased Spike, they had more weapons on hand than he’d realized. Anthony and Marc had reported that the weapons were in good condition and Spike was glad to learn that they’d assigned a couple of minions to the job of sharpening anything that looked even mildly in need of it. Jose and Michael’s report had given Spike a clear idea of what skills he could rely on and which minions had them. Most of the minions had at least moderate skill with one or more weapons but there were a few who had specialized in one weapon or another and Spike had noted their names for future reference.

Xander’s information that the Ascension was most likely going to occur on Saturday at the High School Commencement ceremony was the one point of uncertainty for Spike and he wished he’d had a bit more time to consider what that meant. Since he’d heard the news, he had been assessing his options: whether to delay the attack until Graduation and fight the Mayor and his vampires then or to go ahead and attack before then as he’d planned. Involving the Slayer and Angelus in a side-job was also something he needed to think about. Moving the attack back one day was a good idea for that reason alone.

The eclipse Xander had mentioned finally decided him. If the Mayor could count on enough darkness to allow his vampires to move freely, then the most likely reason he’d been recruiting was to use them as a perimeter line at the Ascension. The Mayor would keep his vampires behind the students and use them to pin the students between himself and the vampires. No way out and the students would be eaten whichever way they ran.

“Right,” he said loudly. “Got a piece of business we need to take care of. There’s a human in town recruiting vampires. Now, ordinarily, I don’t give a piss what humans do: they’re food, not equals but this one has convinced a bunch of idiots to follow him. He’s got thirty or so vampires takin’ orders from him and that is something I’m not going to put up with.”

He paused, letting the slight growls from a number of minions fill the room. Good, they were irritated at the idea of vampires working for a human.

“The vampires who are working for this human are giving all vampires a bad name. We kill humans, we don’t work for them.” There was a rising tide of agreement in the room and Spike let them mutter to each other for a moment before continuing, his voice rising. “If it was another vampire, I’d challenge ‘em and that would be the end of it. But I am not giving a human the status of a vampire, so we’re going to handle this a bit differently.” He let his eyes sweep the Court again and saw he had their eager attention, many obviously sensing what was coming.

“We’re going to kill every one of the idiots who are working for this human. We’re doing it two nights from now and we’re doing it as a Court. Night after tomorrow night, I want every one of you armed and ready to go one hour after sunset. Make no mistake, people, I want this cold and business-

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like. No playing with your victims, just kill ‘em and move on. I realize that means that a lot of you won’t get a chance to kill one of them because we outnumber them, but this isn’t sport, it’s war. Humans don’t own or control vampires and vampires who act like they do deserve nothing more than a quick, final death.”

He saw nods of agreement around the hall and gave his final orders: “The Court is in lockdown until the attack. No one goes in or out. If you haven’t fed, too bloody bad, you’ll have to wait until after the attack. That’s all, people.”

He didn’t wait for questions or comments, simply striding forward rapidly through the crowd, which parted to let him through, heading for the main door. His Lieutenants would see his orders were followed and the Court would be ready to go as scheduled. In the meantime, it didn’t hurt to remind them that he was Master here and not confined to the bloody Court like a minion.
Chapter 46

Xander had slept poorly all night, his sleep troubled by dreams and Spike finally took action when his restless movements started up again not long before dawn.

“Xander, wake up,” he said quietly in his boy’s ear, shaking him gently as he spoke.

Xander’s eyes opened, coming awake and aware in an instant, unlike his usual slow waking in the morning.

“What’s wrong, luv?”

“Nothing really,” Xander answered but he looked away, unable to meet Spike’s eyes.

“Tell me.”

Xander sighed, wrapping his arms around Spike and resting his head on Spike’s chest. “I talked to Mr. Olsen last night, warned him about the Ascension,” he said.

Spike smiled and kissed the top of Xander’s head. “That was a good thought, luv,” he said encouragingly, understanding now what had been troubling Xander. His boy had been worried that Spike would be upset because Xander hadn’t cleared it with him first. Well, telling a friend to get out of town before a disaster struck was just common sense.

“It’s a bit bigger than that,” Xander admitted. “I asked him to warn the demon community too. He’s going to spread the word and get as many people out of town as possible.” Xander lifted his head and looked at Spike, his brown eyes troubled. “Don’t worry, they’re going to keep it quiet.”

“Still not a problem, luv. The fewer civilians around the better.”

Spike couldn’t help smiling mockingly to himself. Not long ago, it would never have occurred to him to think about the safety of anyone but himself and his family. In fact, screaming mobs of civilians had once been somewhat of a specialty of his and Dru’s. The scent of mass panic perfuming the air second only to the rich aroma of fresh Slayer blood on the list of his favorite smells.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Xander seemed no less troubled despite Spike’s approval, so obviously they hadn’t gotten to the real issue yet.

“Then what’s the problem, Xander?”

“What kind of a person am I, Spike?” Xander asked, his voice full of self-loathing. “I warn a friend, and ask them to tell a bunch of strangers and it didn’t even occur to me to warn my own parents that they could be in danger.”

Spike opened his mouth, more in shock than preparatory to saying something comforting but Xander’s harsh tones overrode his: “And when it did occur to me - hours later - that maybe I should tell my parents what was happening and try to save their lives, I decided against it.” Devastated brown eyes met Spike’s blue ones. “What kind of a person am I that I can deliberately decide not to warn my parents that they could die if they don’t leave town.”

“Oh, luv.” Spike pulled Xander tighter into his arms, rocking him gently as he struggled to find the right words. A diatribe on his parents’ shortcomings was not what Xander needed to hear. “You’re someone strong enough to do the right thing, even when it hurts. If you told your parents, would it
do any good?”

“No.” The single syllable carried an astonishing variety of emotions: bitterness, regret, anger and sorrow all twisted together. “They wouldn’t believe me.”

Sensing the hurt and the years of disappointments behind that admission, Spike fought against giving in to his own outrage that Xander’s parents were so unworthy of this wonderful human they had somehow managed to give birth to. How Xander had turned out the way he had with those two wastes of space for parents, Spike would never understand. “They wouldn’t act on your warning, would they?” he asked softly.

Xander’s shaggy hair brushed across Spike’s bare chest as he shook his head. “No. And then they’d either tell everyone they know about how their screw-up son had finally completely lost it or, if they actually believed there was some truth to what I was telling them and they or their house might be in danger, they’d just call the police. That’s why I didn’t contact them when I finally thought about it,” he admitted.

“Did the right thing, luv. I know it’s hard, but telling them wouldn’t save them and might tip off the Mayor. You did the right thing,” he said again, emphatically. And it would almost be worth the Mayor becoming an unkillable demon if Spike could just point him the way to the Harris household.

After a long silence, Xander looked up, his face set in stubborn lines. “I’m telling Mrs. Summers to get out,” he announced. “I’ll give Buffy a heads up before I do, because it’s her mom, but I’m making her leave town even if I have to tie her up to get her to go.”

“I’ll help you,” Spike promised, wishing he’d thought of it himself. “We’ll go talk to her together.” After a second, he added generously. “Slayer can come with us if she wants.”

He was rewarded by Xander’s wan smile.

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“Have you completely lost your mind?” Spike asked incredulously after hearing Buffy’s proposal. “Slayer’s got no place in vampire business.”

When Xander had told him that the Slayer wanted to make another try for the Box of Gavrock, it hadn’t occurred to him that she meant during the attack. He’d assumed she meant either after it was over or the next night, before the Mayor had a chance to get new non-human guards. Later the same night, after things had calmed down was probably the Slayer’s best shot. Even the next night was promising, as the Mayor’s only option would be to split his day guards into two shifts, which would drastically reduce the manpower around the building. The Mayor didn’t have a hope in hell of recruiting any more vampires after the attack. But no sooner had Spike outlined his intention to take out the vampires working for the Mayor than the Slayer had chimed in saying they could kill two birds with one stone and she’d go with him.

“Why not? It’s perfect.” Buffy folded her arms stubbornly. “Your little war would be the perfect diversion.”

The entire group settled back to listen, Oz with a hint of a smile at the corner of his eyes. Buffy and Spike’s arguments tended to be both volatile and entertaining. Once they’d grudgingly started working together, their different natures and viewpoints often led to arguments, but strangely enough, their arguments often ended up with good suggestions as the two of them succeeded in hashing out all sides of the issue.
Spike rolled his eyes. “We’re talkin’ close to a hundred vampires, all armed, and all of ‘em thinking that finishin’ off a Slayer would pretty much be the highlight of their unlife.” Spike couldn’t believe they were even talking about this. The Slayer wanted to put herself smack in the middle of things, as usual, without considering the fact that she wasn’t exactly inconspicuous. Not even his position as Master gave him enough control to ensure her safety in the middle of a crowd of armed vampires and it irked him that the Slayer was forcing him to admit that.

Hastily moving on to the other flaws in her brilliant idea, he pointed out caustically: “If the Mayor gets wind that the Slayer’s part of this raid, you’ll bloody well bollocks up any chance we have of taking the Mayor by surprise come Ascension Day. Right now, he doesn’t know for sure that we know he’s got the Box of Gavrock or what it means. You go knocking on his door asking for it, you’ll tip your hand.”

“We’re way past surprising him,” Buffy argued. “He’s Ascending at my graduation ceremony. It’s not like he doesn’t know I’m going to be there when it happens.”

“Knowing you’re there and knowing you know what’s coming are two different things,” Spike shot back, exasperated by her obtuseness. “Me attacking him isn’t going to set off any alarms. I’m just a vampire doing what vampires do. If you’re there, he’ll know we’ve twigged his game.”

“Fun as it’s been,” Buffy retorted. “It’s worth giving up our mutual game of blind-man’s-bluff to actually get our hands on the Box. Our best chance is if I’m there.”

“Please, you’re not that good.”

Buffy glared at him indignantly but Angel’s voice stopped her before she could respond with something equally sarcastic.

“Buffy, he’s right. If the attack is seen as just a vampire power struggle, Spike and I have a much better chance at getting the Box than if the rest of you go in.”

“You?” Buffy questioned.

“I am a vampire,” Angel pointed out the obvious.

“But…”

“Buffy, unless I’m mistaken, Spike will have told the Court this is about politics.” Angel glanced at Spike who gave him a reluctant nod, not liking that they were discussing vampire business so openly. “As a vampire, I can join in the attack without anyone thinking about it twice. If you are there, every vampire on both sides is going to be wondering what the Slayer is doing there and a lot of them are going to want to see if they can take you down.”

“He’s right, Buffy,” Giles said quietly. He’d been listening silently to the exchange, his eyes moving between the speakers, obviously weighing the points each were making. Now he straightened from where he’d been leaning against the bookshelf. “Even if only a handful of the vampires recognize you on sight,” and Spike was grateful to the Watcher for cutting off the Slayer’s utterly predictable argument about how no one would recognize her before she could begin, “word will spread like wildfire in a vampire mob. Every fledgling who doesn’t feel up to tackling you by themselves will gain courage from the crowd. You’d be swarmed.”

Angel added persuasively: “Spike and I can get inside City Hall as soon as the attack begins. If we’re lucky, we’ll get there before the Mayor has a chance to move the Box somewhere safer.”

Wesley shook his head dubiously. “The Mayor will almost certainly have placed magical safeguards
on the Box in addition to the physical guards.”

Spike hadn’t considered that and he cursed himself for overlooking the obvious. Not like they didn’t know the Mayor could work mojo.

“I might be able to help with that,” Elizabeth said.

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In the end, they worked out a plan for a joint attack after all. Spike and Angel would go in first, then immediately leave Spike’s Lieutenants to finish the job while they did a quick sweep to locate the Box. If they were successful and there were magical safeguards, they’d call Elizabeth, who would be waiting near by, on Spike’s cell phone.

Spike’s glare had dared any of them to comment on the fact that he carried a cell phone. Xander was just grateful that no one else even understood what a concession it was for Spike to have one and he’d given Spike a private smile that caused the flickers of gold to disappear and Spike’s eyes to return to their human blue.

If it looked clear, Buffy would bring Elizabeth and Willow in to see if they could get through any magical barriers and, if successful, they would grab the Box and get the hell out of City Hall.

It sounded simple, Xander thought uneasily, but a lot could go wrong. And usually did.

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Outside City Hall, Spike crouched beside Angelus, studying the movement of the Mayor’s guards and waiting for the right moment. As the guards moved away, turning their back on his position, he waved a quick signal to Marc, who was closest to him. The signal passed silently between the groups waiting around the perimeter and suddenly the air was filled with the sound of crossbow bolts being fired and the slight hiss of displaced air as they sped towards their targets as a handful of marksmen stepped into the open and fired with deadly accuracy.

Listening carefully, Spike heard similar sounds coming from the sides of the building and knew the coordinated attack had begun as planned, taking out nearly all the exterior guards before they even knew they were under attack. Of the six guards he could see from his position, five were already small clouds of dust and the sixth was staggering, too shocked to scream, clutching at the crossbow bolt in his chest that had landed just a hair off target. Even as Spike watched, three more bolts landed and the vampire exploded into dust.

Spike signaled to advance and the crowd of minions pressed forward, moving quickly but silently as ordered, closing in on the front entrance of the building. Running swiftly, Spike and Angelus reached the door first and Spike yanked on the handle, cursing under his breath when he found it was locked. Angelus shoved his fist through the decorative stained glass panels and reached inside to open the door.

Stealth gone, Spike smashed the window on the second door and both of them heaved on the heavy panels, forcing the doors open as metal screamed in protest and tore under their combined strength.

“You boys know what to do,” Spike said sharply and Anthony and Marc nodded. The two Lieutenants stepped back from the doors, the majority of the vampires moving back with them, only a picked handful stepping inside with the two Masters.

“Remember,” Spike ordered. “Vampires only. No mistakes. Any humans workin’ late, leave ‘em be.” The vampires chosen for the inside sweep were all older, reliable, and they met his stern glance
with nods and quietly voiced agreement and not a hint of rebellion.

“Spread out,” he ordered. “Check every room and don’t just use your eyes, people. I want every one of these wankers dust and us out of here in ten minutes.”

The picked squads raced up the stairs, following the orders Spike had given them before leaving the factory. They would start at the top and work down, flushing out any vampires they didn’t kill themselves into the arms of the rest of the Court, now waiting in a ring that completely encircled the building. Jose and a large group of minions were in the sewers below the building, blocking that means of escape.

Spike and Angelus glanced at each other and Angelus nodded his readiness. Then Angelus was sprinting up the stairs, following the minions up to the third floor. Spike ran beside him to the first landing then branched off, headed for the Mayor’s office. Angelus would search the building for the Box while Spike confronted the Mayor.

Xander was not going to be happy when he found out that Spike had decided to improvise a little rather than sticking to the original plan.

He’d known from the beginning that it was likely the Mayor would be at City Hall. From what he’d been able to observe, the Mayor rarely left the building these days. Discussing it with Angelus, they’d agreed that Spike should distract the Mayor while Angelus searched the building. Angelus had offered to go instead but Spike refused, wanting to confront the Mayor himself. Just his good luck that it made more sense for the Master who ordered the attack to have a word with his opponent.

Not bothering to knock, Spike announced his presence in the Mayor’s office by the simple expedient of kicking the door in. The Mayor swung around at the noisy entrance, looking remarkably unconcerned by the sounds of struggle clearly audible now in the building. Firmly closing the doors of the large cabinet he was standing at, the Mayor crossed the room to stand by his desk.

“Good evening, Mr. Spike.” He might have been at a cocktail party for all the worry he showed. “I assume you are here to explain what’s going on?”

“Thinking about explaining it with my axe,” Spike answered, lifting the weapon as he spoke.

The Mayor spread his hands in invitation. “Be my guest.”

Spike’s knuckles tightened on the handle and he had to forcibly hold himself back from taking the Mayor up on his offer. “You need work done - hire humans. Vampires are off limits,” he said flatly. “My people are handing out pink slips as we speak.”

The Mayor leaned back against his desk, hands in his pockets, as calm as if he wasn’t standing defenselessly with an armed predator in front of him. Like he knew he was invulnerable. “That’s a rather narrow attitude, Mr. Spike. After all, it wasn’t long ago that we were working together.”

Spike growled at the implication that he had ever worked for the Mayor. They had cooperated briefly when it was in Spike’s interests, that’s all. “Not having you settin’ up a rival court,” he snarled. The Mayor’s tone of fatherly scolding was seriously pissing him off.

“Fair enough, I really had no intention of stepping on your toes. I just needed a few guards who wouldn’t fall asleep on the night shift.” The Mayor had one of his smarmy smiles on his face and Spike really wanted to test how good his invulnerability was. Just another minute or two for his people to finish up and he could end this irritating conversation. “But I can tell it’s a sensitive point with you, and I always like to keep my constituents happy.”
“Not one of your bloody constituents,” Spike growled dangerously.

“Of course not. I’ve known for some time that you’re a rather impatient young man. I doubt politics is your style.”

Spike cocked his head, hearing the noise of battle moving down the stairs to the first floor. Almost done. He gave his axe a showy swirl. “This is vampire politics,” he pointed out. “Don’t interfere again.”

The smile dropped off the Mayor’s face and Spike caught a glimpse of the dangerous predator lurking beneath the genial mask. The Mayor’s voice hardened as he spoke: “Mr. Spike, I don’t care for your attitude. A little respect for your elders is not too much to ask. I would hate to have to reinforce that lesson in a way you wouldn’t like.”

Spike’s fragile hold on his temper snapped at the veiled threat. He was moving before he even realized what he was doing, swinging the axe with every ounce of his strength behind the blow. The blade sank deeply into the Mayor’s neck, cutting through flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter then stopped with such shocking abruptness that the handle was almost jarred loose from his grip. The wickedly sharp axe had come to a halt less than an inch away from severing the Mayor’s head from his body, stopping as suddenly as if it had run into a barrier of solid steel. Spike pulled the weapon back reflexively, all thought of having a second go at beheading the man driven from his mind by what he was seeing.

The Mayor’s head was hanging to one side at an impossible angle, held on only by a thin flap of tissue and skin. There was no blood. Not a drop. Instead of the red of human meat and blood, the exposed inside of the Mayor’s neck was black, almost gelatinous looking. As he watched, stunned, despite the fact that he hadn’t really expected his attack to be successful, the Mayor’s head tilted back into place by itself, as if pulled together by an aberrant flare of gravity, the skin sealing together again until no trace of the injury remained.

“Whoa! Well, that was a bit rude.” Completely unfazed by what had happened, the Mayor just looked at him reproachfully. “I expected better from you, Mr. Spike.”

Spike gaped at him speechlessly and the Mayor smiled smugly at him. “It would be a fairly useless invulnerability spell if I could be chopped into bits and have the bits separated, now wouldn’t it? After all, it’s difficult to accomplish anything when your head is in South America and your body is in California. I’m afraid you’ll just have to accept that invulnerable means invulnerable, Mr. Spike.” His genial smile firmly intact, he asked politely: “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Spike decided it was time for a tactical retreat. Knowing the Mayor was invulnerable was one thing. Seeing it so graphically demonstrated was another. Despite Angelus’ lack of success in stabbing the Mayor when he’d tried it earlier, Spike had held out hope that cutting the Mayor to pieces would work. Scattering the pieces, at least the important ones, in several widely separated locations had been a pleasant thought. He’d enjoyed thinking about the Mayor, still able to think and feel, but unable to do anything as separated, dismembered pieces.

Time to re-group and think about their next step, Spike decided, hoping Angelus had found the Box. “Invulnerable or not, I’m Master of this Territory.” he said flatly, no trace of his disquiet showing in his face or eyes.

The Mayor studied him for a moment. “You know, we may just have to have a talk about who is the power in this town,” he said finally. “I’m rather busy this week but keep in mind that I’m an equal opportunity employer, Mr. Spike. I’ve had vampires working for me in the past and may very well
do so again in the future. Perhaps we should plan to talk again about our mutual interests next week when my schedule clears a bit.”

Spike gave him a yellow-eyed glare like he was reluctantly considering bowing to necessity. “Send your boys to tell me when you want a sit-down,” he agreed, as if he didn’t know that it would be a whole new game next week after the Ascension.

He left without waiting for the Mayor’s response. He’d learned early in their acquaintance that the Mayor liked to have the last word and they could stand there all night one-upping each other if he let it go on.

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He met up with Angelus outside the building. A rapid check showed the last of the Court leaving the area, heading back for the factory as instructed. Angelus shook his head as Spike glanced at him.

“Nothing,” he said. “I couldn’t find it.”

“Bit of an anti-climax,” Spike commented as they walked to where Xander and the rest were waiting three blocks away, far enough to keep them out of the way of the battle outside City Hall but near enough to get there quickly if they were needed.

Seeing Xander running towards him, Spike quickened his pace and let himself be swept into Xander’s arms as they closed tightly around him in relief. Xander pushed away almost immediately, scanning him for any signs of injury. “You ok?”

“Fine, luv.”

“How’d it go?” Buffy emerged from the shadows as she spoke.

“Vampires are mostly dead. Can’t swear we got ‘em all because some might not have been there, but the rest are dust.” Spike shrugged. “Doubt any survivors will return. Slip out of town tomorrow, more likely.”

“I couldn’t find the Box,” Angel admitted and Spike saw the shoulders slump on all the humans present. “I went through every room in the building but I didn’t see it.”

Xander tightened his arms around Spike, offering silent comfort which Spike appreciated but didn’t really need. The humans were the ones who looked crushed by the failure, having obviously had far more hope than Spike had ever had about the likelihood of success in getting control of the Box. For Spike, the Box had always been a side job to this mission, something to do if they had time. Stealing the Box would have been nice but it wasn’t the point of the night’s activities, not for him.

“I was afraid of that,” Elizabeth was the first to speak. “There are spells that can hide objects from sight, either the box itself or the door to the room in which it is being kept.”

“Can we do some kind of ‘show me the Box’ spell?” Buffy asked, although it sounded like she knew she was grasping at straws.

Elizabeth shook his head. “That kind of magic takes time and concentration. Not the sort of thing one can perform in the middle of the enemy camp, I’m afraid.”

“Mayor will have some kind of replacements in by tomorrow, even if it’s just humans,” Spike said. “Think we’re going to have to give up on the Box.”
“On the bright side,” Willow offered to fill the grim silence. “We only have the Mayor to worry about on Graduation, not the Mayor and 30 or so vampires.”

“Great, only one unkillable demon. What have we been worried about?” Buffy muttered gloomily.

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Xander found himself staring out the window, unable to concentrate on his last final exam, wondering if he was really spending one of the last days of his life sitting in a classroom mechanically filling in answers with a number 2 pencil. Ever since Spike and Angel had been unable to find the Box of Gavrock last night, he’d felt numb inside, like his emotions were shutting down in preparation for death.

Not even making love passionately, almost violently, after they’d returned home last night had been able to bridge the barrier he felt growing between himself and the world and afterwards, he’d lain awake for hours in Spike’s arms, staring at the darkness and wondering if this was the end.

The sense of hopelessness had been growing in them all, the failure to get the Box just the last straw. Xander could see it in Buffy’s eyes, even as they still discussed ways and means to stop the Mayor. Could hear it in Oz’s silences and Willow’s frantic tapping at her keyboard as she ran the same searches over and over again, hoping to find something she’d missed. Could taste it in the despair that was seeping through the library like an invisible mist, filling the air and choking them as their meetings began to feel less and less productive, like they were simply going through the motions, knowing that they couldn’t win this fight.

“Five minutes.”

Mrs. Sundstrom’s voice pulled him from his bleak thoughts and Xander stared blankly down at the test questions in front of him. Quickly answering the last few questions, he closed his book as the bell rang and stood. Moving with the flow of the crowd of laughing, relieved classmates spilling out into the hall, celebrating the end of finals, he handed in his test booklet and found his eyes meeting Buffy’s. Falling in step together, they walked down the hall side by side, two quiet mourners in the jubilant crowd.

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“Giles, I’ll need every possible weapon stashed somewhere I can get my hands on it quickly. Even if they don’t hurt him, some of them will have to slow him down. If we’re lucky and he’s no longer invulnerable, then I can use them to kill him.” Buffy said, turning to the librarian. She looked frightened and desperate and determined. “If nothing else, I have to slow him down enough to give everyone a chance to get out of there.”

They were meeting in the library again after school, Spike and Angel having just joined them, and finalizing their admittedly thin plans for Graduation. Xander was staring off into the distance, toying with a thought that had been on his mind since the prom, wondering if he should suggest it or if it was just his desperation that made it seem like a workable idea. A familiar voice snapped him out of his musings.

“We may be able to help with that.”

The voice from the door had them all spinning around, half out of their chairs, hearts pounding, half-afraid they’d been discovered by the Mayor. Xander was the first to recover.

“Mr. Olsen,” he said, getting the rest of the way to his feet. “What are you doing here?”
Mr. Olsen stepped inside the library and everyone else at the table rose to their feet as about a dozen people followed him into the room. Xander’s brows knitted together as he recognized some of them: a couple were his customers, one or two he recognized from the new year’s party he and Spike had gone to, most of the rest were vaguely familiar faces from around town. All of them looked grim and determined, but beneath the resolve, they also looked nervous, like they weren’t sure of their reception.

“They’re demons,” Spike identified as he studied them.

“What!?” Buffy asked sharply, her whole body tensing as she went on battle alert.

Xander’s hand shot out to block her forward motion. “They’re friends.”

“Xander’s right, we’re friends. Master Spike is also correct. We’re all demons, or part demons. All except Bob, there.” Mr. Olsen nodded towards a burly, middle-aged man in jeans and work boots off to his right, who grinned back at him.

Mr. Olsen was probably the calmest person in the room. Buffy and Giles and Wesley were tense and shocked and looked ready to attack at the first wrong move and Xander was terrified that someone would inadvertently do something to cause the situation to explode into violence.

“Mr. Olsen, I thought you were warning people to get out of town,” he couldn’t help saying reproachfully.

“I did. People have already begun leaving quietly so the exodus isn’t obvious. On the morning of graduation day, the rest will leave town at dawn in several buses we’ve acquired. Several hundred people will be out of town on graduation day, thanks to your warning.”

Xander was relieved and met the astonished and slightly accusing stares of Buffy and the two Watchers with a calm certainty. He’d made the right decision and he wasn’t going to apologize for it. Giles nodded first, accepting his decision, and neither Buffy nor Wesley said anything, although they continued to look slightly disapproving.

“Who cared? It was way too late to worry about keeping secrets.”

“Then, why are you here?” Wesley asked. He’d relaxed and was studying the demons curiously. Xander was reminded of when he’d first learned that Mr. Olsen was a demon and couldn’t help looking for signs of his demonic ancestry.

“Xander told us about the Ascension and we have some information for you. One of the members of our community is Teer’ah, on his father’s side.”

Giles straightened, looking fascinated. “They’re immortal, aren’t they?”

“Very close to it,” Mr. Olsen replied, with an approving smile for Giles’ familiarity with the obscure species. “Being only a half-breed, he is mortal, but has lived for nearly 400 years. He’s the only member of our community who had heard of an Ascension and he had a critical piece of information that I believe you are not aware of.”

“What?” Buffy demanded, looking apprehensive.

“When a person achieves Ascension, they become pure demon. They’re different.” Mr. Olsen looked around at the puzzled faces and explained. “What you think of as demons are all hybrids. Pure demons don’t exist any more.”

Giles looked like his worst nightmare was about to come true. “Different?” he asked faintly, as if he
was dreading the answer. “How?”

“For starters, they’re a lot bigger. They’re stronger and have much greater powers than any demon hybrid possesses.”

“The original demons that walked the earth before mankind,” Wesley murmured, almost to himself.

“Precisely.” Mr. Olsen looked grim as he confirmed Wesley’s statement.

One of the demons who’d been listening silently behind him now stepped forward. “Sunnydale is our home,” the slender man said in a surprisingly deep voice. He looked fully human until you realized his limbs were just a trifle longer than one usually saw on humans and there was something odd about the way his fingers were spread. “Our lives, our families, our homes, our businesses are here. Some of us have lived here for longer than the town has existed. We are not about to allow the Mayor to destroy the town, nor are we prepared to let children fight our battles for us. We have 37 volunteers who will be there to fight the Mayor on Ascension Day.”

Buffy and Giles exchanged glances. “That could be extremely useful,” Giles murmured, shoulders straightening as if a weight had slipped off them. Then he shook his head, denying the hope that was hesitantly entering the room. “You should all know - the Mayor is invulnerable. We’re not even sure he can be harmed after the Ascension. And we have no idea of how to fight something that is invulnerable to harm.”

“Xander told us.” Mr. Olsen assured him. “According to…” there was the barest hesitation, “the Teer’ah member of our community, the invulnerability only lasts until the actual Ascension. Once the Mayor transforms, he can be harmed. Not invulnerable, although he will still be extremely difficult to kill.”

“Thank God,” Giles muttered, sitting down suddenly like his legs had collapsed under him. Xander knew exactly how he felt. Fighting something tough was one thing. Fighting something unkillable was what had been giving them all nightmares. Looking around, he could see they were all standing a little straighter and he found he was breathing a little easier, the fist that had been clenched around his insides easing its grip.

He hadn’t know it was possible to be so relieved and so worried at the same time. “Mr. Olsen, I don’t want anyone getting hurt because of us.”

Mr. Olsen gave him a warm smile. “Xander, because of your warning, our families will be safely out of town. And we will never forget what we owe you for that. But some of us are staying.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“You’re not…, you’re…”

“I’m too old to fight?” Mr. Olsen finished for him cheerfully, his eyes twinkling. Literally. They were doing the green and gold sparkly thing that Xander had only seen once or twice before. He shot a quick, worried glance at the others and saw that Buffy and Willow were entranced by the effect, as Xander had been when he first saw it, while Giles and Wesley were nodding thoughtfully.

“Lobarrrhyn demon?” Giles asked and Mr. Olsen gave him a smile, nodding.

“Well done. I see that Xander’s high opinion of you is deserved.”
Giles actually blushed slightly and cleared his throat. “So, you have the ability to spit venom?”

“So, you have the ability to spit venom?”

“Sadly, no, I did not inherit that ability. Xander’s right, I wouldn’t be of any use in a fight. I’m to act as liaison between our groups.”

“He’s only one-quarter Lobarrhyn, Giles,” Xander explained, feeling a wave of relief that Mr. Olsen wasn’t planning on being on the front lines.

“However, Geoff here is a drill sergeant at the local army base,” Mr. Olsen nodded towards a huge man standing near the back in a position Xander recognized from movies as “parade-rest”. “He can get us anything we need from the armory.”

Wesley straightened with a pleased exclamation and Buffy looked like she’d just been given the best Christmas present ever.

“That could prove extraordinarily useful. Geoff?” Wesley asked curiously.

The man, whom Xander vaguely remembered seeing around town a few times, stepped forward and thrust out a massive hand which Xander was pleased to see Wesley shook without hesitation. “Geoff Morgan,” he introduced himself, then smiled. “Otherwise known as Gr’affm’gan. I’m part Kobarien.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Mr. Morgan. We are extremely grateful for your help,” Wesley said, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

And just like that, the two groups relaxed. Xander and Spike moved forward, greeting the people they knew, while Mr. Olsen, Giles and Wesley began talking strategy and abilities.

For the first time since they hadn’t been able to get the Box of Gavrock, Xander found himself wondering if he might live through graduation after all.
Chapter 47

As the group of demons and demon hybrids filed out of the library, Xander lifted a hand in farewell to Mr. Olsen, still stunned and grateful that the old man had done this, had brought them desperately needed help against the Mayor. He turned back towards the others and found every eye fixed on him, Spike’s warm with approval, the others either unreadable or with mixed emotions.

“What?”

“Xander,” Buffy began, then stopped as if she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say.

“Look, I met Mr. Olsen last year and we became friends. I didn’t even know he was part demon for almost a year. And, hey, here’s an idea, why don’t we just put any trauma, issues, or accusations on the shelf for now. If we survive the Ascension, we can talk about my friends then. Ok?”

“Very sensible,” Wesley said approvingly. “We have a great deal to do and not a lot of time.”

“It’s not like I’m the only one here with demon friends,” Xander couldn’t help muttering under his breath even though he knew it would just lead to an argument. Fortunately, only Spike heard him, sliding him an amused sideways glance.

“We have less than two days before the Ascension,” Buffy said crisply, “that’s not enough time for us to get everything ready,” she gestured around at the nine of them. “We need more help. Who can we bring in on this who won’t freak?”

She’d obviously decided to let it go for now. Xander couldn’t tell if she was upset because there was a community of peaceful demons living and working in Sunnydale or because he hadn’t told her he knew about them. Probably both. As the Slayer, Buffy wasn’t big on grey areas as far as demons went. It had to be making her twitchy that there was a large group of demons that knew her supposedly secret identity and that she wasn’t going to be able to kill them. But she’d adjusted to Spike, Xander thought optimistically, she’d learn to deal.

As long as they were all still looking askance at him, he might as well go for broke. “I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “More help, I mean. We need to tell the entire senior class what’s going on.”

“Xander, we can’t,” Willow protested, startled by the suggestion.

“Why not? You all heard Jonathan at the Prom,” Xander looked at Oz, the only Sunnydaler who hadn’t been there. “Oz, it was incredible. Jonathan stood up in front of the entire senior class and talked about Sunnydale and how things weren’t normal here. And people were yelling out examples of things that have happened.” He turned back to the others. “Everyone knows there’s something wrong with this town even if they don’t talk about it. Let’s tell them what’s going on and get their help.”

Giles and Wesley exchanged glances. “Xander,” Wesley began slowly. “The Slayer works in secret, we can’t reveal her identity to dozens of people en mass.”

“Hello? ‘Class Protector’? Sounds a lot like Slayer to me.”

“Xander’s right,” Buffy said abruptly. “They’re going to be there at graduation, they have a right to know what’s coming. Besides, finals are over and a bunch of people helping would make things a lot easier. Maybe even possible.”
“I agree,” Oz said quietly.

Giles nodded. “We can certainly use the help in getting things ready.”

“How do we tell everyone without it taking all day?” Willow asked.

“You and I can take care of that,” Elizabeth said. “If you can stay a bit later tonight and work with me, we should be able to come up with something.”

Spike and Xander followed Buffy out of the library as the group broke up.

“Slayer, we need to talk.”

Buffy looked back at them tiredly. “I swear, if there’s something else you two have been hiding…” she began but Spike cut her off impatiently.

“It’s about Joyce.”

“What about her?”

“Get her out of town, Slayer,” Spike growled. “If you don’t, I will. Not having her at risk when this goes down.”

Buffy’s expression softened. “I’ve been thinking the same thing,” she said. “I can’t do this while if I have to worry about her.”

“Will she go?” Xander asked. Mrs. Summers was stubborn, she wasn’t going to like being told to leave.

“She’ll go,” Buffy promised. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“You tell her if she’s not gone by this time tomorrow, I’ll drag her out of town personally,” Spike said, without a hint of joking in his voice.

Buffy smiled involuntarily, obviously picturing that confrontation. “I’ll tell her.”

Spike nodded, satisfied. “See that you do,” he said shortly as they walked down the front steps of the school. He and Xander turned left, heading for the apartment, while Buffy turned in the opposite direction, heading towards her home.

“Guys?” she called after them. “Thanks.”

Xander turned and saw her smiling at them. He smiled back. “Tell your mom we’ll see her as soon as this is over,” he said, hoping they’d be able to keep that promise. He waved for both of them since Spike was staring intently at a clump of bushes that were completely devoid of anything interesting to look at. Spike hated being caught acting sentimental.

At school the next morning, things went off without a hitch. Willow and Elizabeth did something so that the school administration somehow didn’t notice that a mandatory senior class assembly on the last day of school wasn’t a normal yearly event. Giles simply used the PA system to announce the assembly and the senior class filed into the gym as ordered, looking curious but not in the least suspicious.
Once inside, Willow and Elizabeth cast a ward, sealing the doors and preventing anyone outside the room from hearing what went on inside. Buffy stood in front of the class, flanked by Angel, who’d entered through the sewer entrance in the locker room, Giles and Sgt. Morgan, who looked even bigger and more impressive dressed in his army fatigues than he had last night in the library. Xander had called Mr. Olsen last night and he’d agreed to ask Sgt. Morgan to meet with the senior class.

Buffy looked surprisingly nervous as she began speaking but Xander could relate. Public speaking was one of his least favorite things as well.

“Most of you were at the Prom,” she began. “And you heard Jonathan Levinson talk about how Sunnydale isn’t like other towns.” People automatically looked around for Jonathan, sitting off to one side next to Larry, and Jonathan blushed, looking like he wanted to crawl under the bleachers. Buffy smiled at him. “Jonathan was right. So it won’t surprise you to know that our graduation isn’t going to be like everyone else’s graduation. You’ve probably heard by now that the Mayor is going to be our graduation speaker. What you don’t know is why he’s going to be there.”

Xander watched the students as Buffy laid it out for them: the Ascension and the fact that they were all intended to die. There was disbelief, nervous laughter, denial, fear and reluctant acceptance showing on the faces of the students. People were shifting on the wooden bleachers, some looking on the edge of panic, when Buffy stopped speaking. Before they could recover from their shock enough to respond, Giles stepped up to the microphone, his familiar presence as a member of the school faculty quieting the students enough to keep them listening.

“We intend to fight the Mayor and we need your help,” he said, his voice carrying clearly to the back rows.

“This is bullshit!” a student shouted from the back. “You’re talking about the fucking Mayor. Is this some kind of sick joke? He’s a politician, not a demon.”

Angel stepped forward, having been volunteered for this. Xander had pointed out to the others that Spike would enjoy scaring people far too much and get carried away. He’d actually thought that Spike would be much better at this than Angel, whose guilt-meter wouldn’t allow him to make a very impressive display - terrifying students and little old ladies probably ranked high on his ‘given up because of his soul’ list. But Spike had done the show-and-tell thing once already for Joyce and Xander couldn’t ask him to do it again.

“You think you can always tell when someone’s a demon?” Angel asked quietly.

“What? You going to claim you’re a demon now?” the student scoffed. Xander couldn’t see who it was but suspected it was one of the jocks. Larry was looking seriously pissed off, the same way Cordelia did on the rare occasions when one of her minions disobeyed her.

Angel vamped out and a handful of students screamed, the ones in the front row scrambling backwards out of their seats, trying to get some distance from him. “Demons walk among you every day,” Angel said calmly. Yeah, Spike would have been much better at this, Xander thought critically. Angel was way too calm, not nearly enough snarl in his voice. “Not every one of them is someone you have to worry about, but the Mayor is.”

“Don’t be stupider than you have to be, Brad.” Unexpectedly, help came from another source. Cordelia’s voice rose scathingly, slicing cleanly through the frightened, arguing sounds of the crowd. “The Mayor’s planning on eating us to get more power. You ever known any politician who wouldn’t do just about anything to get and keep power? Well, the Mayor is a demon politician, the worst of both worlds combined.”
Xander found himself wondering what exactly Cordy and Spike had talked about while they were dancing at the prom. Cordy sounded like she already knew all about the Mayor’s Ascension. When graduation was over, he’d have to ask Spike.

Angel shifted back to human features and stepped back from the crowd before he caused a complete panic. Sgt. Morgan stepped forward.

“QUIET!”

The shouted command brought complete silence to the room. Xander could really believe he was a drill sergeant, not that he’d doubted it, but that impressive parade-ground voice had obviously been honed to perfection on unruly recruits.

“I’m Sergeant Morgan,” he introduced himself, now that he had everyone’s attention. “These people are telling you the truth. I’ve lived in Sunnydale my whole life and many of you know me. We need you to stay calm and to trust us. We’re telling you this because we need your help. If we work together, we can stop the Mayor.”

Larry stood up. “What do you need us to do?” he asked simply, his voice carrying to every corner of the now quiet room. After a moment, Jonathan stood up beside him.

“How can we help?”

Cordelia was next. “Just tell me it won’t mess up my hair and I’m in.”

The wave of laughter that followed was just what they needed and Xander grinned at Cordy as the fear and uncertainty drained out of the crowd at her words, knowing she’d said it for just that reason. Suddenly the gym was filled with students asking eagerly how they could help.

Sergeant Morgan let it go on for a minute, letting the students infect each other with willingness to help, before he held his hands up for silence.

“We appreciate your willingness and can use each and every one of you. But make no mistake.” He looked around the room and it was as if his eyes met and held the eyes of every person in the gym. Xander couldn’t help wondering if that was a demonic ability or if he was just really good with recruits. “You could die if you help. I want everyone to take a minute to think before we go further. There is no shame in deciding to stay home. All we ask is that you not tell anyone what is happening.”

Uneasy silence fell as the students slowly sat back down, having been shocked to seriousness by the mention of dying. Sgt. Morgan folded his arms over his chest and deliberately turned his gaze away from the bleachers, giving the students privacy to reconsider. Buffy and he exchanged a long look and Buffy nodded at something she saw in his face.

Buffy and Sergeant Morgan had connected immediately last night in the library, both recognizing that they were fellow warriors, although in very different ways. It was the same unspoken connection that she and Spike had, even back when they’d hated each other. Completely unrelated to their mutual antipathy back then, they had both recognized something in the other, something they shared, even if they never said it out loud.

If the students had any sense, they would unanimously vote to stay home, hiding under their beds until the Ascension was over. But Xander already knew, looking over at the students in the bleachers, some lost in thought, some talking quietly with their neighbors, that most would volunteer to help. His gaze roamed over the familiar faces, knowing some might die tomorrow. Would it be
Andy from shop class, who couldn’t cut a straight line to save his life but who had a knack for mixing stains and varnishes that gave his projects a finish that no one else in shop could come close to? Or Linda from his California History class who was actually interested in the subject and had made the class almost bearable by her in-depth questions that had embarrassed Mr. Newman when he didn’t know the answers? Could he stand it if Cordelia died? Larry? Jonathan? And that wasn’t even considering Oz, Buffy, and Willow who were already committed to this fight. He wasn’t responsible for them, not in the way he was for the others. They were here on their own and not because of Xander. But this meeting had been his idea and the demons had come to help because he’d talked to Mr. Olsen. If any of the students or demons died, it would be on his conscience.

Could he live with it if any of them died? Xander had an awful feeling he was going to find out. If they failed, it wouldn’t be an issue, unless guilt continued to bother you after you died. In failure, he would at least have the comfort of knowing that Mrs. Summers was leaving town tonight and that Mrs. Olsen and nearly 200 other people wouldn’t be at ground zero. If they succeeded, maybe the lives saved would balance their losses. He hoped so.

Reminding himself that he would not have chosen to go into the minefield of the Graduation ceremony without warning, he told himself that this was the right thing to do. At least this way, the students would know what was coming and have a chance to fight back. With that thought, he waited with the others for the Senior Class of 1999 to make their decision.

Xander stepped out of the bathroom, still toweling his hair dry, the steam from his long soak under the spray escaping past him into the room as he nearly collided with Spike who was waiting for him outside the bathroom door.

“Hi.” He yawned as he greeted his lover, tired from the over-long day to the point where he had almost fallen asleep under the spray and wanted nothing more than to collapse on the bed.

From Spike’s expression, that wasn’t going to happen in the immediate future.

“What’s this I hear about you bein’ on the front lines?” Spike growled, his hands tightening on Xander’s arms, yellow eyes glaring into Xander’s.

Damn Angel. Xander should never have trusted him to explain the tweaking of the plan to Spike. Probably hadn’t occurred to Mr. Diplomacy not to worry Spike unnecessarily. But Angel and Spike had spent the afternoon and evening making their own preparations for tomorrow and Xander hadn’t seen Spike since he’d left the apartment this morning, with Spike still asleep. Angel had been at the school first thing for the meeting with the senior class and had been there when they’d finalized their plan, so he had notified Spike of the final details.

“Only as a token sacrifice,” he answered flippantly, then could have kicked himself as Spike slid fully into game face, a low growl starting in his chest.

“Not sacrifice in the sense of actually being eaten, pretend sacrifice was what I meant,” he corrected himself hurriedly. Spike didn’t look appeased and Xander sighed, shrugging free of Spike’s grip and wrapping the towel around his waist. “Let’s sit down and I’ll explain, ok?”

He lead the way to the couch and collapsed onto it, too tired to deal with this but left with no choice. Spike refused to sit, pacing up and down in front of Xander, somehow managing to never take his eyes off Xander as he moved.

“Buffy has to be front and center when it begins,” he reminded Spike. “If the Mayor doesn’t see
students in the front row, he’s going to know something is up.” He reached up and caught Spike’s hand, stopping his agitated pacing. “I’m not going to ask someone to take my place, Spike. Not even for you. I couldn’t live with myself if someone died because they were standing in my place.”

“Don’t care if the whole bloody rest of your school dies so long as you live,” Spike growled. “Don’t want you there.”

“I know. But the Mayor will be looking for familiar faces. We can’t let him suspect anything until the last possible second because if he has a chance to think, this won’t work.”

The anger seemed to drain out of Spike and he allowed himself to be tugged down beside Xander. He pulled Xander into his arms and buried his face in the crook of Xander’s neck, where Xander could feel him inhaling deeply, drawing in Xander’s scent. He stroked Spike’s short, gelled hair soothingly. “You’re the one who’s in real danger, Spike. I’m just diversion guy, you’re the one who’s going to be in the thick of things.”

Spike didn’t answer and Xander knew his words weren’t as comforting as he’d hoped. They didn’t really know what to expect: just how big the Mayor was going to get, how fast, how deadly. They were still guessing about so many things. Spike had it even worse. If they were wrong about the eclipse, Spike would be condemned to sitting on the sidelines, unable to help because of the afternoon sun. They’d planned as best they could but Xander already knew from bitter experience that plans didn’t always work out the way they were supposed to.

Arms wrapped securely around his vampire, Xander leaned his head back against the couch and felt himself nodding off despite his efforts to remain awake for Spike’s sake. It had been a long day and tomorrow would be worse, but at least it would be over tomorrow, one way or another.
“Bloody hell!” Spike’s exclamation was full of shock and genuine outrage. “’m not wearing that.”

Xander glared at him, hefting the orange safety vest threateningly. “You’re wearing it or you’re not leaving this apartment.”

“Yeah? You and what army gonna stop me?”

“Spike, everyone who’s not a student is wearing one of these and you are too. I’m not having you killed because someone couldn’t tell the difference between a bad guy and a good guy.” Xander wasn’t going to budge on this. The vests were a good idea, extremely visible even to panicked students and parents, and Spike wasn’t going to get out of wearing one just because he thought it was tacky. It was tacky, but he wasn’t losing Spike to friendly fire.

“You saying I can’t defend myself against a bunch of high school kids?” Spike’s outrage cranked up a notch and Xander sighed.

“Of course not. But Spike, you know better than I do that things happen in battle. There’s going to be a hundred scared kids with weapons running around and I’m not having someone stake you from behind by mistake. So put it on.” He shoved the vest into Spike’s hands. Spike just looked at it with distaste and Xander had to keep hold or it would have fallen to the ground as Spike refused to actually close his fingers around the orange fabric.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. “Afterwards, I’ll wear it and nothing else for you,” he offered, trying to look sexy.

Spike shot him a disbelieving look. “You think I could get it up with you wearing that monstrosity? Please.”

Ok, bad plan. “Angel has to wear one too.” Ah, better, Spike’s lips looked like they were trying to form a smirk. “I promise, Spike. I will never mention it again. Not one joke. Ever. All the friendly demons are wearing them. We have to have a way to tell people apart in the heat of the moment.”

“Fine,” Spike grumbled reluctantly, knowing it made sense. He was going into battle with a bunch of amateurs sure to be frightened out of their tiny little minds and swinging at anything that moved. Even amateurs got lucky sometimes. “But we’re burnin’ it afterwards.”

Xander’s relieved smile rewarded him for his forbearance. Anything that kept Xander from worrying about him and kept his mind on his own safety was good. Even a fluorescent orange vest that Spike would almost rather be staked than caught wearing.

The Graduation committee had set up rows of folding chairs in the school’s central courtyard in two distinct groups: one for the graduating class in front and a larger section in the rear for family and friends. A wide gap separated the two groups and Xander couldn’t help smiling as he stood at the head of the line behind Buffy, waiting for the music that was their signal to begin filing into the courtyard. Obviously, the committee had felt it necessary to make clear the difference between the have’s and have not’s in this ceremony. Like the robes wouldn’t do that.

The music began and Xander took a deep, steadying breath as he followed Buffy up the red-carpeted center aisle, leading the members of their class towards the front. He couldn’t help thinking that any
sensible person would be running for the hills about now and he was stunned at how many of the graduates had shown up despite knowing what they were facing.

Buffy branched off to the left and sat down in the farthest left hand seat. Xander took the chair next to her, looking up at the stage and the people sitting in the single line of chairs behind the podium. Principal Snyder, a couple of administrators he barely recognized, a favored teacher or two, and the Mayor, looking completely at ease and beaming cheerfully at the audience. Not at all like someone who planned to kill everyone there in just a few minutes.

Xander dragged his eyes away from the Mayor and looked back at his classmates filling in the rows with orderly precision, looking astoundingly calm considering what was about to happen. He just hoped his own face was as resolved as their’s and not as sickly pale as he felt. He let his eyes sweep over the familiar faces as he wondered how many of them would survive the next hour. Cordelia flashed him her Hollywood smile, one of the few students who actually looked good in the red commencement gowns, and he smiled back at her. Larry gave him a thumbs up and Oz nodded at him, only a slight extra stillness to his face giving away his nervous tension.

Snyder advanced to the podium as the last of the graduating class sat down and spoke briefly and stiffly, saying that they had proved more or less adequate. Maybe he would change his mind before the day was over, Xander thought with a brief inward smile which vanished when the Mayor stood up and moved to the front of the stage to begin his speech.

Beside him, Buffy stirred restlessly as the Mayor greeted them and congratulated them, showing no sign of being anything other than another boring Commencement speaker. “Oh my God. He’s going to do the entire speech,” she whispered in disbelief as the Mayor pulled out a set of notecards.

Xander glanced sideways at her with a fleeting smile: “Well, we always knew he was evil,” he said under his breath and was rewarded with a brief answering smile.

As they listened to the Mayor drone on about journeys, Xander was hard pressed not to nervously check that everything was in place. Too much fidgeting would draw unwelcome attention so he gripped the edge of his chair and forced himself to remain still as the Mayor continued his speech, reading off his cue cards. You’d think someone who’d had as long to prepare for this as the Mayor had would have memorized his speech by now.

“Today is about change. Graduation doesn’t just mean your circumstances change, it means you do. You ascend - to a higher level. Nothing will ever be the same. Nothing.”

What the hell? Was the Mayor going to admit what was about to happen? Xander’s wandering attention sharpened and he began to listen closely, scrutinizing the Mayor for any sign that he was about to change. It was really annoying that no eclipse was actually predicted for today or they would have known exactly when during the ceremony the Mayor expected to transform.

Spike waited impatiently inside the school, only the threat of immolation keeping him inside the building as the ceremony dragged on and the Ascension grew closer. Spike could feel it in the air, crackling along his nerves like electricity - a magical storm rapidly building power. Xander was out there, waiting for the Mayor to transform, and Spike was prevented from being at his side by the deadly rays of the afternoon sunshine filling the courtyard where nearly 300 people waited to die. Oh, most of them didn’t know that’s what they were doing. But the entire graduating class did and Spike felt a reluctant admiration that so few of the students had chickened out. Only about a dozen in a class of nearly a hundred students had not shown up for the ceremony. The rest had simply arrived.
as scheduled, chose a weapon from the piles waiting for them and slipped it over their heads like it was a normal part of an ordinary Saturday. Their faces may have been as pale as Spike’s but they received their final instructions without fuss or panic, as determined as they were frightened.

Of course, those instructions had mostly been to stay alive, stay ready, and get themselves and their families out of harm’s way as quickly as possible, but it was still an impressive performance.

Waiting, watching the sky for the first sign of the promised eclipse that would free him to act, Spike glanced sideways at Angelus, who was standing beside him. A dozen of the more obvious demons who’d come to help were with them, all of them held in reserve in case the Mayor had a backup plan for the vampires Spike had killed. With two days in which to act, and a desperate need to keep his food supply from bolting, Spike was betting they would see action in the rear.

It was just the waiting that was killing him.

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A shadow moved across the courtyard and Xander looked up at the cloudless sky and caught a brief glimpse of the disc moving with unnatural speed across the face of the sun before he belatedly remembered you weren’t supposed to look directly at an eclipse. Dragging his gaze back to the stage, he saw the Mayor grimace as if struck by a sudden pain. He shook it off and continued speaking and Xander looked at Buffy who was poised on the edge of her seat, waiting tensely for the exact moment.

“...” - was that a flinch? - “...the events that brought us to this day...”

“Come on, come on,” Xander muttered, urging Buffy on, not the Mayor, barely able to stop himself from jumping up and giving the signal himself.

“We… we must all...” the Mayor’s voice broke off and he gave a stifled scream, doubling forward over the podium for a second before he recovered. An uneasy murmur was running through the audience behind the graduates as people asked each other what was happening. The graduates were silent, waiting tensely for the promised signal.

“Now!” Buffy shouted, her voice overriding the Mayor’s as, unbelievably, he continued speaking, saying something about his destiny beginning. He was clinging to the podium with both hands now, looking more like someone about to hurl than someone on the verge of becoming a different species.

The school’s fire alarm sounded in response to Buffy’s yell and the red-gowned graduates leapt to their feet and began tearing their commencement robes off. Underneath the concealing robes, every student had a weapon tied around their necks: battleaxes, maces, baseball bats; anything and everything they had been able to find that could be used without skill or training.

The front row was the exception. As their caps and gowns came off, the demons who’d been concealed beneath the robes bent to pick up the weapons taken from the military base that had been stashed under their chairs, waiting for this moment.

The Mayor screamed in what sounded like pain, his eyes rolling back in his head, totally focused on what was happening with his body and Xander prayed they had one more minute.

Sgt. Morgan’s magically enhanced voice boomed through the courtyard, overriding the shouts and exclamations of the audience, the alarm bell, and even Snyder’s shouts for order.

“Evacuate the school immediately. Move as quickly as you can off the school grounds. Do NOT take shelter in the school buildings. I repeat: Evacuate the area immediately.”
“Go!” Buffy yelled. She was standing on her chair to make herself visible above the crowd. “Go!” she commanded again. “Get them out of here!” She gestured with a small axe towards the spectators at the rear of the audience, the families and friends of the graduates who were now milling about uneasily, puzzled and frightened by the announcement and the actions of the graduates. Some were starting to leave in response to the announcement, beginning to move out into the aisles, but they were moving far too slowly, looking back, waiting for their family members and the students they had come to see graduate.

The graduates moved immediately as they had been ordered, running down the aisles towards the audience, hustling people along, urging them to move faster, to not look back, to go, go, go.

Turning back to the front, Xander saw the Mayor clinging white-knuckled to the podium, his body twisting and writhing, moving and stretching in ways impossible for human flesh and bone as his clothes shredded, unable to fit his rapidly changing contours. It was grotesque and terrifying and Xander froze, staring in fascinated horror at the sight.

“Xander!” Buffy’s voice snapped him out of his shock and he ran to join her as she stood at the edge of graduates’ area, clear of the chairs and off to the side just behind the line of demons, having moved while he gaped at the Mayor. The demons formed their first line of defense, hands working with hastily practiced skill on the triggers of the flame throwers taken from the military base.

Throwing a quick glance backwards to check the status of the crowd, Xander saw a handful of people riveted in place, staring stupidly at the Mayor, as frozen as he had been. Swearing, he ran back towards them, shoving chairs aside as he pushed directly through to the nearest person. “Harmony! Fred! Richard! Snap out of it! Get the hell out of here!”

Reaching Fred Nakamura three rows back, Xander grabbed his arm and forcibly turned him away from the sight of the Mayor in mid-change. “Fred!” he yelled again. “Get out of here.”

Fred snapped out of his frozen trance and took two steps backward, stumbling blindly over the scattered chairs, before scrambling to his feet and racing after the rest of the crowd. The other kids who’d frozen in place had also begun running for the rear and Xander turned back to the stage just as the transformation finished with shocking suddenness and a fanged serpent rose from behind the podium with a squealing roar as its head stretched towards the sky until it almost reached the tops of the palm trees lining the courtyard, 30 or more feet over their heads.

A dozen flamethrowers roared to life and spat fire into the still-darkening sky and Xander heard Sgt. Morgan’s voice in his head from his speech at their planning sessions: “Forget guns, crossbows, and anything else that requires precision aiming. You’re not going to kill this thing with projectile weapons. Most of the ammo isn’t even going to hit it and anything big enough to make a dent has the potential to kill people 10 blocks away.”

Xander could see he’d been right. The snake moved with a quick, fluid grace that was eerily beautiful even under the circumstances, its head weaving back and forth as it seemed to survey the area and its fleeing prey. The head darted down time and again snapping at the guests on the stage who’d been slow to move, only to rear back in frustration as the tongues of flame arced towards it.

“This is unacceptable!”

In disbelief, Xander heard Snyder’s voice. Showing all the survival instincts of a suicidal lemming, Principal Snyder was standing on the lawn near the edge of the stage, glaring up at the giant snake as if it was nothing more than another unruly student. “You’re on my campus, buddy!”

“Snyder! Don’t be such an idiot! Get the hell away from there!” he yelled desperately but Snyder
didn’t move.

“This is not orderly. This is not discipline! When I say I want quiet, I want…”

His ranting was cut off with shocking suddenness as the serpent moved with unbelievable speed, its enormous mouth completely engulfing Snyder before quickly rising again as the closest demons swung their flamethrowers around a fraction of a second too late. Where Snyder had stood, nothing was left but empty lawn.

Sickened, Xander wondered what the hell was wrong with him when the only thing he could think of was that he would never be able to watch Jurassic Park again. Shaking off his paralysis, he looked towards the rear. The graduates and their families were almost clear of the area but Xander could see there was a pitched battle going on in the rear. Unconsciously, he took a step in that direction but Buffy’s grip on his arm stopped him.

“No,” she said, but her eyes were worried as she looked back towards the fighting in the rear. “Stick with the plan.”

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The courtyard darkened and Spike moved forward instantly, only to be held back by Angelus. “Wait for it,” he said and Spike swore but forced himself to wait.

There were over a dozen demons waiting with Angelus and himself, gathered inside the school, all wearing Xander’s bloody orange vests. Sgt. Morgan looked as calm as if this was nothing more than a field exercise, only his hands tightening convulsively over and over on the handle of the enormous battleaxe he was carrying betrayed his tension. With his size and his short-cropped grey hair, he’d been condemned to wait here with the others who were too big, too old, too demonic looking, or too daylight-challenged to pass themselves off as students, even concealed beneath the ridiculous red gowns that the graduates were wearing.

“There!” One of the demons, a half-Ferschiff, exclaimed, the retractable claw on her finger extending and tapping against the glass as she pointed across the courtyard.

Emerging from the building on the opposite side of the courtyard, the Mayor’s replacement herd dogs were appearing: a dozen or so altogether; a mixed bag of vampires and other demons, including two Fyarl demons. Spike grip tightened on his own weapon, a small, wickedly sharp axe he’d somehow never gotten around to returning to the Watcher, and he swore bitterly.

“Who’s got a silver weapon?” he demanded, scanning their group.

“This is silver.” The blue-skinned Rhylto’k demon fumbled at his waist for a moment, then displayed a 4-inch dagger. Spike held out an imperious hand.

“Give it here.”

The Rhylto’k handed it to him wordlessly and Spike took a bare second to examine it. It was silver but that was about all that could be said for it. “Anything else?”

Seeing headshakes all around, Spike hefted the knife, checking its balance. “Right, then. I’ll handle the Fyarl demons since nothing but silver will kill them. The rest of you lot, concentrate on the others.”

Any reply was lost as the fire alarm sounded shrilly over their head and they moved as one, bursting through the doors and moving to intercept the Mayor’s demons who were heading for the stairs.
leading to the upper courtyard where the students and guests were assembled, even as the witches did their bit and the Sergeant’s previously recorded order filled the courtyard ordering the humans to evacuate.

“People respond to authority in a crisis,” the sergeant had pointed out yesterday. “If ordered to leave the area, at least half of them will start to move, which makes it easier to get the rest moving.”

Spike had just enough time to see that it was working and the humans were beginning to move in their direction, before turning his attention to the Fyarl demons. He concentrated on the nearer one, spinning and dodging to avoid the mucous it shot at him, his axe hammering at the demon from every angle as he darted back and forth in front of it. The steel blade wouldn’t kill the Fyarl but it would keep it off balance and unable to draw enough breath to spit the paralyzing mucous that was the characteristic of its kind.

A blow from one rock-like fist hammered into his side, lifting him off his feet and throwing him ten feet through the air to land with a pained grunt on the tile pavement. He ignored the pain and rolled to his feet in one swift movement, launching himself at the demon again.

There were people everywhere as students and the audience poured past them in blind panic, running from the giant serpent that Spike caught glimpses of out of the corner of his eye. The orange light of the flamethrowers added to a nightmare scene straight out of Dante’s Seventh Hell, as the serpent roared, the alarm bell continued to sound its shrill chorus, and humans ran screaming through the center of the demon battle that was taking place in the middle of their escape route.

It was like fighting to cross a river in spate and Spike swore and shoved his way through the flood towards where the Fyarl was growling and flailing enormous fists, knocking terrified, screaming humans off their feet where they were in danger of being trampled by the press of bodies struggling to reach safety.

Snarling, Spike reached down and yanked two people to their feet, a plump, grey-haired, grandmother-type and a short, dark-haired wildcat with a baseball bat who swung her weapon at him with deadly intent. He snatched the bat out of her hands before it smashed into his face and saw she was staring wild-eyed at his chest.

“Orange vest!” she gasped. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Just get out of here,” he growled, shoving the bat back into her hands and forgetting her immediately as he took another step against the current, then dove across the remaining distance in a rugger tackle that knocked the Fyarl back away from the student it was mauling. The Fyarl went down and Spike used the momentum of their fall to spring-board off the larger demon, landing on his feet, crouched and ready. As the Fyarl climbed back to its feet, Spike spun in a circle, bringing the silver knife around in a shining arc and slamming it into the center of the demon’s massive chest, piercing the tough hide and burying the blade to the hilt.

The demon roared and clawed at the blade but Spike ignored the scrabbling hands, yanking the knife out and slamming it in a second time, making doubly sure he’d gotten the heart. The Fyarl crumpled to its knees and Spike snatched the knife back, already searching the battle for the second Fyarl.

“Spike! Over here!”

Four demons had the Fyarl pinned to the ground but were unable to finish it off without a silver weapon. Spike sprinted to where the small clump of bodies heaved and twisted as the battered fighters struggled to keep the Fyarl pinned, dropping to his knees and bringing the knife down in a two-handed blow that landed hard enough to crack bones. Again, he yanked the weapon out and
stabbed for the heart a second time and the Fyarl died, its struggles ending as blood spurted over the small group.

Leaping to his feet, Spike looked around. The Fyarl was the last of the Mayor’s demons to die and only a handful of stragglers among the humans were still on this side of the street. His anxious gaze turned towards the stage only to see the line of demons drop their flamethrowers and begin running madly towards the rear as the snake’s body disappeared inside the school.

“Let’s go! Everyone fall back!”

Spike hesitated, his eyes scanning the area for Xander, praying he wasn’t among the wounded or, unthinkably, one of the handful of unmoving bodies scattered throughout the courtyard. Demons were racing past him, intent on clearing the area and Spike reluctantly ran with them, pausing only long enough to help a T’loncit demon with a leg wound who was falling behind, pulling the woman’s arm over his shoulder and taking most of her weight as they ran to reach minimum safe distance.

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“Stick with the plan.”

Right. The plan. It had seemed so easy when they’d laid it out yesterday. Step 1: Evacuate the area
Step 2: Contain the demon. Step 3: Kill the demon. Xander forced his eyes away from the struggle in the rear and nodded acknowledgement of Buffy’s words.

He and Buffy edged further towards the school, staying behind the line of flamethrowers as the demons kept the snake from moving towards the prey it needed. The serpent reared its head, black against the midnight sky and screamed in frustration, as time and again the flamethrowers roared and the fire licked across its skin, keeping it from closing with the puny defenders.

They were watching tensely, ready for their part, when disaster struck. The snake’s tail whipped forward, slamming into two of the defenders, sweeping them off their feet and flinging them high into the air, until they dropped a moment later, crumpling like smashed toys onto the pavement.

Xander heard a choked sound and wasn’t sure if it came from himself or Buffy. Her grip on his arm tightened to the point of pain as she bit her lip and blinked back tears. Urging him forward, she moved them up behind the closest demon, a guy named Jason that Xander had met at New Years, who was the far left flank of the defensive line. Once they were sheltered behind his weapon, she set the next phase in motion.

“Fall back!” Her voice carried above the continuing roar of the flamethrowers. “Fall back!”

The demons began a slow, orderly withdrawal, walking backwards, covering their retreat with the flamethrowers, still preventing the Mayor from closing with them as they swept the air with fire. The right flank lagged behind momentarily, one of the demons had dropped his weapon and, covered by three others, grabbed the two bodies with inhuman strength and began dragging them out of the area, refusing to leave them behind to become snake food.

Step by step the line retreated, cautious of the tangle of chairs and robes that made footing treacherous. Xander and Buffy sheltered behind Jason, relying on him and his weapon for cover.

Jason tripped suddenly, stumbling over a tangle of fabric and his hands flew out, the flamethrower clattering to the pavement and sliding out of reach. Buffy and Xander grabbed him, pulling him back upright before he could fall and become prey. In the process, the three of them dropped out of the
retreat formation, no longer behind the line but in front of it and the snake’s head swung towards them instantly.

“Run!” Buffy yelled and the three of them took off at an angle, aiming for the shelter of the building as the demon screamed in triumph and snapped at them, so close that Xander could feel the thing’s hot breath. The other demons were yelling after them but couldn’t break formation, the solid line of flamethrowers their only chance for survival as they continued to fall back through the courtyard.

Bursting through the school doors, Xander ran as fast as he could, Buffy and Jason at his side.

“He’s coming,” Buffy panted urgently and the three of them buckled down and ran harder, arms pumping, putting every ounce of energy into speed, hearing the snake smashing through the doors as it followed them, paralleling their course as it simply broke through concrete and masonry like it was tissue paper.

They ran through the familiar hallways, sprinting around corners as the serpent took the direct route, smashing through walls as it mindlessly pursued the only food available to it.

Bursting through the library doors, the three of them ran straight through the room without hesitation, vaulting up the stairs to the upper level. They tore through the stacks and out the other side where the windows had been broken open in preparation for their retreat. Buffy and Jason were ahead of him now and Xander concentrated on keeping up, hearing Buffy call to Giles who waited across the street, standing anxiously behind a hastily erected sandbag bunker: “Five seconds!”

Buffy and Jason dove behind the shelter of the sandbags as Giles squatted down again. Xander was two seconds behind, hurling himself over the edge with reckless disregard for anyone lying on the other side. As he cleared the barrier, landing in a belly-flop that drove the wind out of him on the ground inside the tiny shelter, the world exploded into fire behind him.

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Shoving his way roughly through the milling, awestruck crowd as the fireball from the enormous explosion grew and expanded, Spike raced around the building, ignoring the secondary explosions that still rocked the school. The library was on the far side of the building and Spike cursed the distance as he rounded the second side of the building, leaping over bits of concrete rubble that littered the area, making walking hazardous, never mind the flat-out sprint Spike was employing.

The far side of the school was almost quiet, only a handful of people there, all of whom were watching the fireball dissipating in the sky. Spike had eyes only for the tall, dark-haired form slowly rising from behind the sandbag bunker they had erected just before the ceremony. Xander bent over double and Spike’s unbeating heart lurched until he realized that Xander was still catching his breath from his dangerous sprint through the halls of the school.

“Xander!”

Xander stood and looked around, a grin splitting his face as he saw Spike running towards him. Spike caught his boy in his arms, feeling the ragged breath and the thumping heart as Xander clung to him in turn, holding Spike hard enough to bruise a mortal and Spike relished the strong hold that told him his Claimed had made it through the battle alive and unharmed.
Chapter 49

Burying his face in the crook of Spike’s neck, Xander stayed in his arms for a long moment, letting the familiar scent of cigarettes and leather and Spike drown out the reek of blood and smoke in the air, waiting as the adrenaline from his run through the school hallways burned itself out of his system, until his breathing returned to normal and the muscles in his legs no longer trembled and burned with fatigue. He was sick to death of dealing with the results of battle and wanted nothing more than to stay hiding in his lover’s arms without having to learn how many were wounded, how many had died.

It was the thought that he wished he could stay there in Spike’s arms forever that caused the sudden realization of imminent peril. Time was passing.

“Spike!” he yelped, reality returning in an unwelcome rush of stark fear. He pushed out of Spike’s embrace, catching the vampire by surprise with the sudden movement but all his attention was on the sky. “Spike, you need to get out of here. The sun’s gonna be out any second now.”

That got the vampire’s attention in a hurry and Spike looked up as well. Usually he was instinctively aware of the sun - no vampire could survive who wasn’t - but he’d been too preoccupied with the fact of Xander’s survival to worry about trivial details like the fact that it was still mid-afternoon. The sky was still unnaturally dark, even given a total eclipse, and the smoke from the explosion blanketed the area heavily, but the dark grey sky was already lightening and it would only be a few minutes before sunlight would break through the gradually dispersing smoke, endangering Spike.

“You’re right, pet, we need to go. I’ll just make sure Angelus is payin’ attention, then we’ll head home.”

Xander shook his head reluctantly, wishing he could just leave. “I can’t, Spike. I need to stay and help with the clean up.” He kissed Spike quickly. “See you at home in a couple hours?”

Spike looked unhappy and Xander made a helpless gesture hoping Spike understood he didn’t have a choice. Guilt would keep him from resting anyway if he just abandoned the others to the clean up. “I’m sorry,” he said and Spike sighed.

“Not really surprised, luv,” he acknowledged, glancing around the devastated area. “Keep safe.”

“Hey, the Mayor is toast, almost literally. I think the worst is over.”

“Still a Hellmouth.” Spike reminded him before abruptly striding off through the drifts of smoke in search of his Sire. Xander watched him until he was out of sight, then glanced anxiously at the sky again. Spike should have at least a couple more minutes before the sun became a real issue, he told himself reassuringly. Plenty of time to get to shelter.

Forcing himself to put his lover out of his mind, he looked around, wondering what came next. Less time must have passed than he’d thought, because Buffy, Giles and Jason were still talking in the makeshift bunker, watching the secondary explosions still occasionally going off in the building. Xander walked towards them, picking his way through the chunks of concrete and occasional gory blobs of stuff he really didn’t want to look at because he suspected it was snake meat.

Jason grinned at him and gave him a thumbs-up sign as he approached. “Dude, you should have gone out for track,” he said. Jason had been on the high school track team himself before he’d graduated three years ago. “You kept up with me and Buffy, not bad for a full human.”
“Well, I would have gone out for track,” Xander answered, grinning back at him, “but they said it was against the rules to have a giant snake chase me around the track during competitions, so what was the point?”

Jason gave a short bark of laughter and Giles smiled at the byplay. “Well done, all three of you.” Giles had begun hauling in the wires to the detonator he’d used to trigger the explosives and now bent to retrieve the main piece. “If you two would scatter the sandbags as best you can so they aren’t so frightfully conspicuous, I believe the authorities are on their way. Buffy, let’s see what needs doing around front.”

Xander could hear the wail of approaching sirens and realized they would have to move quickly to hide the evidence of what they’d done. They’d always known they wouldn’t be able to conceal all trace of what had happened but they were hoping that the usual Sunnydale blindness would cover anything they couldn’t hide. He and Jason bent down and each grabbed a sandbag, beginning to toss them into bushes and behind walls as Buffy and Giles moved around to the front of the building where most of the survivors would be. Tired as he was, Xander moved quickly until the sandbags were, if not completely concealed, at least inconspicuous to the casual eye. He needed to see his friends, reassure himself that they were alive, tally their losses and learn the full extent of the damage.

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Striding rapidly through the confusion, Spike searched quickly for his Sire, finding him helping carry the wounded to a central area where people were trying to set up a makeshift first aid station. Given the complete lack of any medical supplies, right now that consisted mostly of collecting the wounded and using torn bits of fabric as temporary bandages. The first fire engine was just pulling into the parking lot and he could hear other sirens approaching in the distance as he reached Angelus’ side.

“Let’s go,” he ordered, tugging on Angelus’ arm as the older vampire finished depositing a blond girl with a broken arm on the ground. She was white faced and crying, clinging to her arm in an effort to keep it from moving as his Sire gently lowered her to the ground. A middle-aged human moved to steady her, talking soothingly in a quiet voice.

“These people need help,” Angelus protested, straightening up and glaring at Spike.

“You plannin’ on helping them by doin’ your impersonation of a bonfire?”

Angelus started, glancing up automatically at the sky and Spike saw the instant realization in his eyes that the eclipse was over, the sun’s deadly rays blocked only by the thick clouds of smoke still blanketing the area. The smoke was slowly beginning to clear and the near night dark of the past 20 minutes was rapidly lightening.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Spike rolled his eyes. Like he hadn’t just said that himself. He didn’t waste time on sarcasm, breaking into a run as he darted through the milling crowd heading for the nearest entrance to the sewers.

They made it with not a lot of time to spare. The still faint sunlight was becoming uncomfortably hot, prickling along their skin with a foretaste of the immolation waiting for them as they dropped into the sheltering darkness of the sewer. Spike yanked the manhole cover shut behind them, cursing and pulling back mildly scorched fingers as he dropped lightly down to the floor beneath the access ladder.

Smirking at his Sire, he asked: “Fancy joining me at the factory? Or you prefer waiting in the tunnels
‘till sunset? It’s only about four hours from now.”

Angelus glared at him and Spike’s smirk deepened. Serve his Sire right if Spike left him to cool his heels in the sewers because the idiot insisted on living in a house with no tunnel access.

“I’ll stay until sunset,” Angelus said.

Side by side, the two moved off into the tunnels, heading for the factory.

“Good fight, eh?”

“No bad,” Angelus admitted.

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The final toll was five dead and 18 wounded.

Three bodies lay on the pavement, covered with blankets from the aid cars. There was nothing left of Snyder, and Scott Ubanya, the Rhythhken who’d been killed in the fight with the Mayor’s demons, had been hastily wrapped in a commencement robe and carried away by several of the demons who, like Scott, had visible differences that could not stand up to scrutiny by police and aid crews.

The bodies of the two demons killed by the snake were joined by a student who’d been killed by one of the Mayor’s demons, her skull crushed by a random blow as she’d run with the other fleeing humans through the center of the battle at the rear. Xander hated the fact that he wasn’t even sure he remembered her name. She’d played in the jazz band and she’d turned up for graduation, knowing the risks, and died holding a weapon she never got the chance to use. He thought her name was Sara.

Of the wounded, only a handful were seriously hurt, although Xander was only counting the people loaded into ambulances among the wounded. Dozens of others had bruises and cuts and other minor injuries that didn’t need hospital treatment. Wesley was limping badly from a kick by one of the Mayor’s vampires but he’d been able to behead the vampire with the sword he’d carried into the fight, even as he fell himself. He’d been in more danger of impaling himself on his own sword than anything he told Xander, with a forced cheerfulness.

They’d been lucky that no one had been trampled in the panicked rush for safety. The graduates had come through for them, hurrying the civilians out of the danger zone but keeping the evacuation from disintegrating into total panic and protecting the ones who fell. Half a dozen people were nursing twisted and sprained ankles but all of them had been gotten safely to their feet and out of the area, often by the graduates who’d linked arms and formed solid barriers between them and the crowd, forcing the crowd to go around until the person on the ground could be helped up and Xander blessed Sergeant Morgan who’d talked to them about watching out for and protecting fallen bodies in the crowd. The overwhelming majority of people had survived and Xander was relieved that their losses had been so relatively light even as he ached for the ones who hadn’t made it.

He and Jason had arrived at the front of the building just as Scott’s body was being carried away. Sergeant Morgan had pulled Jason to one side and broken the news to him that Scott was dead. As long as he lived, Xander thought he would never forget Jason’s heartbroken sobs as he learned of his friend’s death.

Silence had fallen over the people nearby, as the still dazed survivors heard the grief-stricken man’s sorrow and realized again how lucky they were to be alive. Family and friends embraced each other and wept, as Sergeant Morgan did his best to comfort Jason. Tears rose to Xander’s eyes as he was painfully reminded of Jesse’s death and his own sorrow was fresh and new for a moment as he
shared Jason’s grief.

Jason and Sergeant Morgan followed as the demons carrying Scott’s body moved off slowly, and Xander and the others turned to deal with the authorities.

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There was a sentry on duty at the tunnel entrance to the factory.

That wasn’t what was raising Spike’s eyebrow. He’d have been more than pissed if there wasn’t a sentry, since there were standing orders that guards be posted at all approaches to the factory at all times. No, what was surprising him was who the vampire on guard was. It was a very senior minion, a dark-skinned woman with a close-cropped afro. Guard duty was always delegated to middle-ranked minions, ones who had proven their loyalty and common sense but didn’t yet have enough rank to avoid the long boring hours of keeping watch.

“Master Spike,” she said quietly as soon as he stepped into view. She moved forward to meet him, acknowledging Angelus behind him with a quick head bob. “Master Angelus.”

“Jose asked if he could meet with you as soon as you returned. May I go get him?”

Spike narrowed his eyes. The fact that Jose had clearly told her he needed to meet with Spike before he entered the factory spoke volumes. Nodding curtly, Spike watched as she scrambled up the ladder.

“Trouble?”

“Dunno. Jose’s not an alarmist.” Spike resisted the urge to pace, not wanting to show his agitation in front of Angelus.

Jose appeared in a gratifyingly short time, without the guard minion who Spike could hear taking position above them at the entrance, keeping eavesdroppers away.

“Master Spike, I apologize for disturbing you but there is something you should know.” Jose was his usual unruffled self, nodding courteously to Angelus but keeping his attention on Spike.

“What is it?”

“A couple of troublemakers among the minions are spreading stories of a demon war in which you have taken the Slayer’s side.” Jose shrugged. “They aren’t being very successful in stirring things up, most of the minions are content with things as they are especially after the fight at City Hall, but a few are listening to them and grumbling.”

“How many’s a few?” Spike snapped, furious with himself for not anticipating this. Of course some members of the Court would have heard rumors of the Mayor’s last minute drive to recruit demons. Fyarls in particular tended to attract attention, bloody idiots didn’t know the meaning of the word subtle.

“A dozen, perhaps as many as 15, none with any seniority.”

Spike cursed, rapidly considering his options, then looked sharply at Jose. “You got ’em all marked?”

Jose nodded. “Yes, Master Spike. I have been keeping an eye on who is listening and who is walking away.”
“Right. Pull enough senior minions aside to cover them all and make each of them responsible for one of the troublemakers. When I give the signal, they’re to dust their assigned vampire. Tell them to use stakes, quick and clean, nothing flashy and no mistakes. Call a full Court session for one hour from now. You and the boys spread yourselves around the outside of the crowd, arm yourselves with hand-held crossbows but keep ‘em out of sight. Anyone misses their assigned target, take both of ‘em out with your crossbows. Any questions?”

“No, Master Spike. I’ll inform the other Lieutenants and begin choosing minions.”

“Who’s the chief troublemaker?”

Jose considered for a moment. “I would estimate that most of the trouble began with a minion who calls himself Louis.” Spike almost grinned at the faint distaste in his voice. Obviously Jose thought the name pretentious for some reason. “He joined the Court about six months ago. Tall, dark hair, flashy dresser.”

“I’ll take care of him myself. Good work, Jose.”

Jose inclined his head with dignity. “Thank you, Master Spike.”

Spike held back for a minute, letting Jose clear the area. Angelus had been silent during the discussion with Jose, now he spoke, quietly enough that his voice wouldn’t carry to the factory above. “Need any help?”

“Don’t need your bloody help to keep my own Court under control,” Spike snarled, furious at the suggestion.

Angelus held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “That’s not what I meant, Spike. All I meant was would it be more useful if I disappeared or if I backed you up?”

Feeling somewhat ashamed that he’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, Spike shrugged. “Might as well enjoy the show, long as you’re here already.”

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The fire department and aid crews had taken over care of the wounded and Xander had touched base with dozens of people. Willow had arrived in the grassy staging area with a swirl of red hair and a fast, relieved hug for Xander, Buffy and Giles, who had put aside his habitual reserve long enough to hug her back. Elizabeth arrived just behind her, the two of them had worked the spell that had enhanced Sergeant Morgan’s voice on the opposite side of the school from where the explosives had been laid, unable to see what was happening and connected to the action only by the walkie-talkie that had let them hear Buffy’s signal to begin.

Xander returned the hug without thought, transported for a moment to a time when Willow-hugs had been a frequent occurrence. Willow looked up at him almost shyly for a moment and he smiled at her as he stepped back. He’d never doubted that Willow loved him, but the emotion that had once been such a bedrock of his existence had gotten lost in the anger, hurt and recriminations of more recent times. Maybe someday they could find their way back to that once-simple truth, he thought with a tinge of optimism.

“Where’s Oz?” Willow asked, looking around anxiously.

Xander felt a jolt of worry as he realized he hadn’t seen him yet either. “I haven’t seen him,” he answered, scanning the crowd himself and wishing Oz was taller. He saw Larry grinning and waving his mace as he limped by, leaning his weight against Jonathan who had all his attention on
helping Larry.

Giles had seen Larry too. “We have to start collecting and hiding the weapons,” he exclaimed. “100 students walking around armed to the teeth is going to raise eyebrows.”

“Spread out,” Buffy ordered. “Collect as many of the weapons as you can and dump them in the bushes. Yell if anyone sees Oz.”

Nodding, they scattered and began collecting weapons still clutched by dazed students, hampered by congratulations and hugs as classmates celebrated their mutual survival.

Xander was beginning to seriously freak out when there was still no sign of Oz twenty minutes later as he was dumping his latest load of baseball bats, maces, and axes into the bushes. More and more police and ambulances had arrived and it was increasingly difficult to pass weapons discretely as the officers moved through the crowd, beginning to take statements.

“Xander.”

Oz’s quiet voice at his elbow made him jump and whirl around. “Oz!” he exclaimed, hugging the smaller man. “God, where have you been? We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Oz looked exhausted, his eyes haunted and he looked everywhere but at Xander. “Tell you later,” was all he said, though he returned Xander’s hug after a brief hesitation.

“Are you ok?” Xander looked him over anxiously but there was no obvious sign of injury.

“Yeah. Tell the others I’m ok, will you? I gotta bail.”

Oz looked as fidgety as Xander had ever seen him, almost as if he was about to bolt. Whatever was bothering him was big. Not that they all didn’t have reason to have their own, private breakdown after today. “I’ll tell them. Call me tomorrow?”

Oz nodded and walked off without another word, his small figure quickly vanishing into the crowd. Looking after his friend, Xander thought he’d never seen anyone who looked so alone.

Abandoning weapons duty, Xander set off to find the others and let them know Oz was alive and uninjured. At least physically, but that part he’d keep to himself for now.

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An hour before sunset, the Court was always full. It was a rare vampire that went out during the day by choice, and even rarer for any of them to have a reason to be out only an hour before the sun set. Night was their time and most vampires were content to leave it that way. Spike himself was only as active by day as he was because of Xander.

The low murmur of voices died as Spike strode to the front of the assembled Court. Angelus had taken up position that was well to the rear of Spike’s own chosen spot but still conspicuous, his normal self-effacing manner completely absent and Spike had to admit, the presence of a second Master, so clearly backing Spike up, added a certain something to the gathering as Angelus let his own Master persona out to play.

“Understand some of you have a problem with the way I’ve been running this territory,” he began abruptly. “That’s fine. You’re all entitled to your opinions.” He nodded sharply to Jose, who raised one arm and let it fall. Before his hand had dropped completely, explosions of dust began to appear in the assembled Court as the minions staked their assigned targets. Less than three seconds later,
before the majority of the Court had time to react, his Lieutenants signaled that the targets were all dead. Spike was pleased, none of the senior minions had missed their targets, not one crossbow had been fired.

The Court was muttering uneasily, shifting nervously away from the senior minions who were ignoring them, their eyes on Spike, stakes still held ready in their hands. Spike himself was staring at the tall vampire near the front, that Jose had discretely pointed out to him earlier.

“You. What’s your name?”

“Louis, Master Spike.” The minion was terrified and doing his best not to show it.

“I understand you have a problem with how I handled things today.”

“No, Master Spike.”

“No? You sayin’ you weren’t talking to all those idiots we’ll be sweepin’ up in a minute?”

Louis looked around desperately, the other vampires had drawn back like a human would from someone plague-infected, as if being near him was enough to bring death. Losing his head completely, he broke and ran, pushing his way through the crowd that parted instantly before him heading for the rear doors.

He only made it three steps. Spike sent a stake whistling down the cleared space in the crowd, striking him cleanly in the center of his back. The resulting cloud of dust was curiously elongated, as if his running body was still trying to escape final death even as it happened.

It wasn’t the death Spike had planned for him but it would do. When the crowd turned back, Spike was standing casually, both hands clasping his belt buckle.

“You got a problem, bring it to me. You don’t have the nerve to say it to my face, you shouldn’t even be thinking it.” He let the silence stretch out, his eyes meeting the eyes of every member of the Court in turn.

Once the message had sunk in, Spike continued. “I’m Master of this Territory. That means I’m smarter than you, stronger than you, and unlike most of you, I think more than five minutes ahead. And that means not wanting to share my town with an 80-foot demon scarin’ off all of our prey. So I recruited the Slayer to help me kill it. Somethin’ like that gets a toe-hold and you might as well pack your bags and follow the humans out of town, ’cause they aren’t gonna stay around to be eaten, not when the monster’s on the 6:00 news and they have to admit it’s real. Any of you have a problem with my decision, feel free to step up and say so. Otherwise, we’re done here.”

He waited, his scarred eyebrow lifted inquiringly. No one took him up on his offer to challenge him. Even better, the minions looked satisfied with the brief explanation. Clearly Louis had raised questions, even among those who’d had enough sense to walk away from him. The rapid elimination of the dissenters and a 30-second spot of logic they could understand and the Court was fully behind him again. As it should be.

“Right,” he said. “Class dismissed.”

Jerking his head towards the stairs, he signaled to Angelus and they left without another word, climbing the stairs together to the second floor apartment.
Xander dragged himself up the stairs to the apartment, the climb taking twice as long as usual as his tired legs protested every step. The door opened before he’d made it halfway up and Spike’s voice floated down to him. Xander smiled tiredly as Spike’s voice drifted down to him, complaining about the others leaving him to walk home alone when he was this tired.

The post-adrenaline crash was hitting him hard. He’d stayed at the school until the last of the wounded had been taken away in ambulances and the most obvious signs of their activities had been cleaned up or hidden. An hour before sunset, Giles had congratulated them and ordered them all to go home and rest, instructing them to gather at his apartment on Monday afternoon adding that, under no circumstances did he want to see any of them before then. Right now, the idea of a day and a half in bed sounded like the purest form of heaven.

Climbing the last of the stairs, Xander saw Spike waiting safely back from the last slanting rays of the sun that still imprisoned the vampire in the apartment. He stepped inside and pushed the door shut and fell into Spike’s arms, not even complaining when Spike scooped him up and carried him to the bedroom, depositing him gently on the bed.

He managed to stay awake long enough to open his eyes and see Spike bending anxiously over him. “Love you,” he mumbled. “Sleep now.”

He was asleep before Spike could answer.
Chapter 50

From the faint glow that dimly lightened the heavy fabric of the curtains, the sun was up and the day half gone when Xander surfaced slowly, awakened by the insistent growling of his stomach and an urgent message from his bladder. Reluctant to leave the comfort of the bed, he estimated the chances of being able to ignore the demands of his body for at least a little longer. He was just conceding that the experiment would be a disaster, when Spike’s amused voice sounded in his ear.

“Can’t sleep with the racket your insides are makin’. Best go get yourself summat to eat, luv.”

“mmm,” Xander answered drowsily, but shifted reluctantly towards the edge of the bed. “You hungry?” he asked, looking over his shoulder and meeting Spike’s sleepy gaze.

“Not enough to get up at this time of day.” Spike closed his eyes firmly against the early afternoon world.

“Hey, you’re making me get up,” Xander protested half-heartedly and even less truthfully, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and contemplating the risky notion of standing.

“Your human noises are keepin’ me awake,” Spike pulled the covers over his head and Xander snorted.

“If you’re basing demon superiority on the lack of stomach rumblings, I’d say you’ve hit a new low.”

Spike’s hand emerging from the blankets to proffer a 2-fingered salute was his only response and Xander laughed, going for it and standing up, more or less steadily.

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An hour later, having eaten, showered and pulled on a pair of his loose, comfy sweat pants, Xander perched on the edge of the bed and tugged the sheet down, exposing the rumpled white hair and mostly closed eyes of his lover. “Wake up, Spike. I need to talk to you.”

“Still daylight.”

“By like half an hour, you big baby.” Xander lied shamelessly, poking him. “This is important.”

Spike grumbled but reluctantly sat up and Xander repressed a smile at his sleep-mussed hair and customary afternoon grumpiness. “What?”

“I need you to ask Angel for a favor.”

That woke Spike up fully and he looked suspiciously at Xander. “What kind of favor?”

“Full moon’s in like three days,” he began when Spike interrupted him, comprehension spreading over his features.

“An’ you just blew up the wolf’s cage.”

“Yeah. Best place I can think of, at least for now, is Angel’s mansion. It’s pretty far from anywhere and we could put up something temporary for this moon cycle. Tell Angel we’ll figure something more permanent out by next month.”
“May not have to,” Spike said. He looked at Xander, his blue eyes full of conflicted emotions. “Angelus is leaving town.”

“What? Why?”

Spike shrugged. “No real place for him here, luv. He’s a Master Vampire. It galls him that his Childe is Master here, no matter that he don’t want the title himself. He needs more than just bein’ the Slayer’s sidekick. An’ living in the same town with her will always be a risk, long as he’s still moonin’ over her.”

“Hmmm. I’m guessing Buffy doesn’t know yet?”

“No point in tellin’ her if they’d both died yesterday, would there?”

“Man, I don’t want to be around for that conversation,” Xander said feelingly. “Despite everything, I don’t think Buffy’s ever given up on the idea that somehow, she and Angel will be able to get back together someday. She’s not going to be happy about him leaving.”

“Understatement, pet.” Spike tilted his head. “I’ll tell Angelus to set something up in his basement, you tell the wolf to be there when the time comes.” A slightly malicious smile curved his lips. “Angelus can baby-sit the wolf since you all will be busy.”

“You don’t even know if we are busy,” Xander said, looking curiously at his devious vampire.

“Neither will Angelus,” Spike pointed out, with a smirk.

Xander grinned, then put Oz and Angel out of his mind, as his gaze warmed on his lover. “You know, now that you’re awake…” he began.

“Wanna shag?”

“Oh yeah.”

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The sun had set and Spike regarded his Claimed, still sprawled across his chest, sated and content and nearly asleep. He debated waking Xander but knew that hunger would wake his boy soon anyway. He slipped out of the bed, ignoring the sleepy protest and padded naked into the kitchen.

He’d finished his second mug of blood when Xander followed him into the room. His boy had taken the time to pull on a pair of sweat pants and Spike leered at his exposed chest. Xander ignored him, making a beeline for the refrigerator and stood blinking sleepily inside it for long moments, brain clearly still on autopilot.

Finally, he shook his head, the cool air from the refrigerator waking him a bit and reached inside, emerging with a box of eggs and a container of orange juice. Five minutes later, he sat down across from Spike with a plate of fried eggs and toast and began eating hungrily.

Spike waited until he was done, not bothering to try and compete for his attention. It was humiliating to lose out to a couple of eggs over-easy.

“Gonna have to spend the next couple of nights at the Court,” he said casually, watching Xander chase the last bits of egg yolk with a piece of toast.

Xander looked up. “Anything wrong?”
He shook his head. “Nothing to worry about. Spot of dissention about how I handled the Mayor. Took care of it already but best to show myself around the Court a bit more than usual for the next few nights.”

Xander swallowed the last bite of toast and chewed slowly, to give himself a minute to think, Spike suspected. “Didn’t like the fact that you stopped the Mayor instead of joining with him?” he guessed and Spike nodded, pleased at Xander’s reading of the situation.

“Yeah. Idiots didn’t think about what would have happened if the Mayor had succeeded.” Spike shook his head in disgust. “Mayor would have left vampires alone, probably, but a demon that size is too big to miss. Every human in town would be aware of it and anyone who could, would leave. Dead or gone, doesn’t matter - with no humans, the town’s worthless to vampires.” He shrugged. “I explained it to them.”

Xander eyed him suspiciously. “Anyone survive your ‘explanation?’” he asked.

Spike grinned. “Most of ‘em. Just wanted you to know that I wouldn’t be around much the next couple of nights.”

Xander sighed. “And I’m going to be a bit busy during the days for awhile. You interested in going to the meeting at Giles’ tomorrow morning?”

“No likely. Not gonna be worth wakin’ up for. Watcher just wants to rehash what happened.”

“Probably,” Xander conceded. After a moment, he added: “I’m going to stop by Mr. Olsen’s after the meeting at Giles’. ” He looked down, studying his yellow-streaked plate as if it was an abstract painting. “We lost three demons in the fight. I want to ask him about where and when their funerals will be.”

“Not your fault, luv.”

“Yeah, it is. If I hadn’t told Mr. Olsen what was going on, they wouldn’t be dead.”

“No, they wouldn’t be.” He couldn’t lie to Xander, the truth of that fact was too obvious to even try to refute. “Instead, maybe a whole lot of your classmates would have died. And maybe we would have lost the battle and half the town would be dead now.”

“It’s a pretty easy answer, Spike.”

“No, it’s not. It’s the hard truth. At least the ones who died went into it with their eyes open and knowin’ what they were facing.” Xander didn’t look any less weighed down by guilt and Spike put a hand under his chin, forcing the brown eyes up to meet his own. “Warriors die, Xander. They want to live through the battle but they know goin’ in that they might not. Every one of them was a volunteer. Don’t make their sacrifice less than it is by blaming yourself for their choice.”

Xander’s brows knit together at that thought and he slowly nodded. Spike’s hold on his chin shifted until his palm cupped Xander’s face, his fingertips sliding into Xander’s dark hair. Xander turned his head and pressed a kiss into Spike’s palm and Spike thought quickly.

“Go with you to the funerals, luv,” he offered and was rewarded by Xander’s smile.

It wasn’t why he’d offered but he was willing to let Xander think he was doing it for him. It was a chance to cement the tentative ties between his Court and the demon community, a mark of respect for the fallen that would go over well and stronger ties with other demons would be useful right now.
Xander had well and truly outed the Slayer and her little band to the demons in town, and the Ascension had been so public, it might as well have been on the evening news. The balance of power in town was going to be tested by those two events. The fact that a bunch of generally inconspicuous demons had taken arms and fought other demons, including vampires, was something that was going to have to be dealt with in the Court. Rumor last night didn’t seem to have covered more than the Slayer’s involvement in the Ascension but that wouldn’t last. If he didn’t handle the situation proactively, he’d be facing another minor rebellion soon.

“Let me know when the funerals are and we’ll go together.”

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The Sunday paper was still stacked on Giles’ dining room table when Xander arrived at his apartment late Monday morning. He was deliberately early for the meeting Giles had scheduled, wanting to talk to Giles alone. The explosion at the high school was front page news but Xander was relieved to discover that a gas leak was being blamed for the explosion. He hadn’t been awake to watch the news yesterday, so he sat down to read the newspaper’s version of the events.

“It’s not really worth reading,” Giles commented from the kitchen, seeing Xander unfolding the paper. “Fortunately, Sunnydale’s investigative journalism standards remain abysmally low.” He lifted the teapot off the stove at the first hint of whistling and began pouring the boiling water into a cup.

Xander ignored the advice, quickly scanning the article. According to the paper, a “few” bystanders had experienced hallucinations because of the gas leak and the injuries all stemmed from the explosion.

Giles settled beside him, teacup in hand. “We should be grateful, I suppose. It wouldn’t do if the newspaper started reporting what actually happened.”

Xander turned curiously to the paper’s second major article, which talked about the flurry among astronomers over the unscheduled eclipse which had apparently only been visible in a limited area of southern California, centered around Sunnydale. Apparently astronomers were searching frenziedly and so far unsuccessfully, for the celestial body that had so briefly passed in front of the sun.

Folding the paper, Xander glanced briefly at Giles. “I wonder if it wouldn’t be better if everyone in town knew the score,” he said, concentrating on creasing the paper’s edges neatly. “Mr. Olsen’s working on setting up a permanent evacuation plan that they can use any time something like this happens. Wouldn’t it be better if everyone knew about vampires? Most people kind of know that Sunnydale isn’t a good place to go out at night alone but people are picked off all the time in bars and movie theaters and coming home with the groceries.”

“It never works, Xander,” Giles answered regretfully. “Modern society has progressed beyond the need to believe in magic and demons. Most people simply think you are mad when you try to explain what’s still out there.”

“It worked with the students.”

“The young are notoriously flexible in their belief systems and it still took proof vis-à-vis Angel even after a lifetime of residing on a Hellmouth. In five years time, many will have convinced themselves none of it really happened and the gas explosion was the real story.” Giles gestured towards the headline. “It is always easier to convince people individually then en mass, Xander,” he finished quietly.

There didn’t seem to be much to say to that, Giles was right. Even after watching Buffy stake a
vampire in front of him, Xander himself had tried desperately to come up with a rational explanation for what he’d seen. It had taken Jesse’s death to forever kill his own disbelief.

After a pause, during which Xander stared down at the photograph of the ruined school building and Giles sipped at his tea, he changed the subject. Gesturing at the boxes that were stacked everywhere, he asked: “Can I give you a hand cleaning up?”

The occult books had been hastily moved out of the library late Friday night by a group of volunteers in two trucks provided by Mr. Olsen’s people. Dozens of boxes of books had been dumped helter skelter on every flat surface in Giles’ apartment, haste having been far more necessary than neatness. Giles had obviously made some attempt at straightening up - the stacks of boxes had been pushed back to clear space to move around the apartment - but it was still fairly overwhelming.

“I confess I’m not quite sure what to do with them,” Giles admitted. “I may have to rent storage space.”

“I could build you some bookshelves,” Xander offered.

When the others arrived, they were deep in a discussion of how many bookshelves would fit in the apartment and how many of the most important books they could hold.

Spike had been right about the meeting being worthless. He was a little worried that Oz didn’t show, despite the message Oz had left on his phone saying he was fine and would talk to Xander in a few days. For the most part, he listened to the others with half an ear, most of his attention focused on the list of necessary materials he was jotting down for Giles’ new bookshelves, as the others outlined their plans for the summer.

Buffy was stuck in town this summer, Xander gathered that something had gone wrong with her plans to spend a month at her father’s house in LA. Elizabeth was returning to England and had already booked a flight for two days from now, saying with a laugh that she didn’t want to be a stereotype but she really missed her cats. To Xander’s surprise, Willow was going too, a few days later. She’d decided to spend the summer studying with the coven and go on to Oxford from there. Wesley hadn’t said much during the meeting, just listening quietly as the others discussed their plans.

They’d broken up early and headed out, Xander promising to return with a finished list of materials and an estimate. Giles was going to pay for the materials and was also insisting on paying for Xander’s labor, brushing aside Xander’s protests that it wasn’t necessary. Secretly, he was pleased with Giles’ insistence. It felt good to have Giles treat him like a professional and not a school kid hammering a few boards together in his spare time.

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Mr. Olsen was delighted to see him and caught him up on the news from the other half of the team. The evacuated demons had slipped back into town Sunday evening, reopening their business and in general, acting as if nothing had happened. He was glad to learn that they didn’t resent being evacuated unnecessarily. “Better safe than sorry,” Mr. Olsen repeated airily, then looked closely at Xander. “Xander,” he continued more seriously. “They were grateful for the warning. We’re working on putting a more concrete evacuation plan in place in case we ever need one again. Believe me, not one person who left would rather have not been told what was happening.”

Seeing the uncertainty and guilt on Xander’s face, he finished with quiet directness. “We’ve lived quietly here for a long time, Xander, and there have been many discussions over the years about whether we should worry less about keeping a low profile and instead get a bit more involved in keeping a lid on things here on the Hellmouth. No one who stayed did so because of you, Xander.
They fought for their families and their friends and their own lives. I like to believe they made a difference in the outcome.”

“They did,” Xander said immediately. “I don’t know what we would have done without them.”

“Every one of them was prepared to die if necessary, Xander. I wish that none of them had, but I believe that every single one of them would make the same decision again, even if they had known that they would not make it through the battle. They were all older than you, Xander, and to them, you are children. They couldn’t leave children to die, any more than you could the night I met you.”

Spike had said something similar and it helped. Neither Spike nor Mr. Olsen had ever been anything but straight with him when it mattered. The worst part of it was, they were both right. Without the help from the older, better equipped demons, a lot of students would have died and they might not have been able to kill the Mayor. Without the explosives from the army base, Xander didn’t know what they would have done. He sure as hell didn’t know how to rig a bomb, much less set off an explosion so that the force went where you wanted it to, killing the snake but not opening the Hellmouth; something he’d woken up in a sweat over more than once in the last couple days - a nightmare in which the explosion backfired and blew open the Hellmouth without killing the Mayor.

He’d felt more relaxed after that, knowing that the demon community didn’t blame him for how things had turned out. He and Mr. Olsen talked for a long time, Mr. Olsen’s quiet questions drawing him out about Buffy’s plans to go to college at UC Sunnydale and continue her life as a part-time student, part-time Slayer, Willow’s leaving and his mixed feelings about that, and his own hopes of finding a job with a construction company this summer.

Mr. Olsen, in turn, talked about his and Mrs. Olsen’s vacation plans for the summer. They were taking a month to drive across country and Xander was intrigued that they had no fixed plans. “Can’t get lost if you have no destination in mind,” Mr. Olsen joked, but their intent seemed to be to just drive wherever fancy took them. “Mrs. Olsen wants to visit every state and every National Park before she dies,” Mr. Olsen admitted. “Me, I’m happy going to the same places over and over again. I figure, if I liked them the first time, I’ll like them the second time, but she’s a bit more adventurous than me.” His eyes did that sparkling thing as he talked about the trip and Xander was glad to see him so happy. If nothing else, the Hellmouth taught you to take happiness where you could find it.

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Formal Court was dead boring for the most part. A few poseurs who weren’t content to present themselves to his Lieutenants, insisting on making a show of presenting themselves to the Master of the Hellmouth in person. All of them were trying to enhance their own importance by taking up his time and Spike had no patience for it.

Having seen over a dozen vampires who’d displeased him dusted before a single one of them could raise a hand to defend themselves, his minions were walking softly. The Court was heavily attended, mostly because the minions were too nervous after the show of power two nights ago not to be there, although they knew perfectly well that Spike made it clear which sessions were mandatory and this one wasn’t. The demons who entered and requested an audience caused a stir, as it always did when non-vampires approached the Court. Unusually, this time they asked if he would agree to meet with them privately to discuss an issue.

One sharp look stopped the curious muttering among the minions and Spike stood up. “Anyone got any more business? Then we’re done here,” he announced. He gestured for the demons to follow him and lead the small delegation to the second floor. A large, room with a long rectangular table that had once served as a conference room for the manufacturing firm had been left alone at his order and he brought the demons there now. Taking a seat at the head of the table, he waited for the four
demons to take their seats, studying them in turn.

He recognized all of them. Two of them had been to the Court before, representing the community of peaceful demons in town. A wispy, frail-looking man, who looked as if he could be blown over by the proverbial stiff wind, but who was in reality an incredibly powerful inajii demon that Spike himself wouldn’t cross without a bloody good reason. The woman who’d accompanied him each time was a half Nik’tashen demon, tall and lean, with waist-length red hair she wore loose down to her waist. Spike had thought upon meeting her for the first time that she wouldn’t have looked out of place in a Roman epic, wielding a spear and driving a war chariot. They were accompanied this time by Xander’s friend Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan.

“What can I do for you?” he asked curiously. They had never asked for a private meeting before.

“Master Spike, your Court is the first one we have ever had even a tentative relationship with,” the inajii began. “We appreciate what you have done in your short tenure as Master of Sunnydale. For the first time in over a century, the situation in town is being kept under control. In our judgment, you have at least as much to do with that as the arrival of the Slayer.”

Spike kept his face impassive, although he was pleased by the compliment, he remained wary, having no idea where they were going with this.

“Our two groups worked well together during the recent crisis,” the demon continued. “Some of our younger members,” he shot an amused look at Sergeant Morgan, “and some not so young, have expressed an interest in continuing to assist the Slayer. We have come to you to discuss how that would affect the status between our group and your Court.”

“Assist the Slayer, how?”

“We hope to work out a joint patrol schedule,” Sergeant Morgan answered the question, with an apologetic nod to the inajii for usurping his role.

“We understand that the Slayer will be attending university this fall,” Mr. Olsen put in. “We may perhaps work out a schedule that has our people patrolling on days when she is unavailable because of school obligations, or simply have regular days when we patrol in her stead. We will, of course, be discussing this with the Slayer and her Watcher before coming to a decision.”

“You want to know if I mind that you want to hunt members of my Court. That it?”

“Obviously, patrol does not exclusively cover vampires, but… yes,” Sergeant Morgan answered. Spike was amused to see that Mr. Olsen looked mildly embarrassed, as if he felt the answer, however truthful, was in poor taste.

“Any member of the Court who can’t take care of themselves doesn’t deserve to live,” Spike said flatly. “Long as you don’t mind that the vampires will be fighting back and might kill some of yours, you patrolling is not an issue.” His quick answer was from instinct and he immediately found himself second guessing himself, worrying at the problem from all angles, although he let none of it show in his face.

“I assure you, the individuals who would be involved would clearly understand the risk, as would their families. We promise that no vendettas would be started over any deaths.” Sergeant Morgan’s answer was calm and rock certain and Spike found he trusted him to keep a lid on the situation when, inevitably, some hothead got killed.

“One exception,” Spike said, surprising himself somewhat. “My senior Lieutenant, Jose, is off limits.
Anyone touching him will answer to me personally.” He shrugged diffidently. “My Claimed is fond of him,” he explained, wondering why he was bothering.

“Xander has mentioned Jose to me,” Mr. Olsen said. “He sounds like someone I’d like to meet, not someone who needs killing. We will spread the word but I suspect it won’t be necessary. From what I understand, he is not a vampire who is likely to attract the attention of anyone on patrol.”

“Got that right. Quiet sort. But he’s a good Lieutenant and I don’t want the trouble of havin’ to replace him.”

The Nik’tashen rose, straightening to her full, nearly seven foot height, and spoke for the first time. “I believe we have an agreement then.”

“’preciate the courtesy,” Spike answered, standing himself. To his surprise, each of the demons offered their hand, shaking his in turn. He suspected he’d just sealed a deal with the handshakes but the members of his Court didn’t usually run afoul of the Slayer and probably wouldn’t have much difficulty with demons hunting with the Slayer. All of the Court minions knew where the Slayer patrolled and, miraculously, most of them recognized they didn’t stand a chance against a Slayer unless they got lucky and consequently avoided the cemeteries for the most part. The Slayer primarily killed newly risen fledges and careless vampires, and Spike viewed her as any other predator, culling the herd of weak members at the fringes of the pack. Spike and Angelus currently accounted for most of the demon kills in town and Spike’s main concern about this development was that his own hunting might be curtailed if the demons were any better at hunting than the Slayer.

He’d have to prepare the Court for this turn of events. Vampires didn’t adapt to change well and this was a major shift in the power structure in town. Many of the vampires of the Court were already following Spike’s example, hunting without killing most of the time. Spike himself was bagging it far more frequently than he’d ever dreamed, thanks to Xander’s efforts to ensure the refrigerator was always stocked with fresh bags of human. Between killing demons and the endless supply of human blood at home, Spike had no need to hunt humans. Demons were much better sport than most humans anyway.

The number of vampires in town was down because of Spike’s rule about members of his Court not creating minions. The only fledges around had been turned by vampires not connected with the Court and the Slayer took care of most of them fairly quickly. The numbers of other types of demons was growing, as they moved into areas once teeming with the vampires that had been turned when the Master had been gathering forces, waiting for the Harvest.

Watching them leave, Spike hoped he hadn’t made a mistake. Like a chess player who suddenly couldn’t anticipate his opponent’s moves, he’d made a quick decision that he might come to regret three moves down the line. He wasn’t worried about the Court’s reaction, he could handle his Court, it was the other variables that concerned him: how would the vampires not attached to the Court react to this development? The more violent demon species? Life could suddenly get very interesting if this ended up in a war for control of the Hellmouth.

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“I have decided to take a leave of absence from the Council,” Wesley said calmly.

Surprised, Xander looked up from the measurements he was jotting down. He was drafting the final plans for the new bookshelves he’d discussed with Giles. He’d come by today to help Giles reclaim his apartment and found Wesley already there. He and the younger Watcher had assisted Giles in shifting the boxes from the living room into the spare bedroom upstairs, the boxes almost entirely filling the small room by the time they were done.
Afterwards, Wesley had followed Xander downstairs, looking a little lost, and sat watching while Xander made additions to his hasty sketches showing how shelves could be tucked into inconspicuous niches so that they wouldn’t take up much space while still creating space for at least the most fragile and valuable books in Giles’ collection.

“What, you mean like take the summer off?” he asked.

Wesley shook his head. “A little more extensive than that,” he answered. “I have informed the Council that I am taking an indefinite leave and will contact them if and when I am ready to return.”

Xander put his pencil down, this was a bit more important than bookshelves. “Will they accept that?”

Wesley shrugged. “I haven’t given them a choice.” His smile was nothing more than a wry twist of his lips. “I have already informed Buffy and Giles but I wanted you to know as well: I’ve resigned as Buffy’s Watcher and have urged the Council in the strongest possible terms to reinstate Mr. Giles as her official Watcher. As you once pointed out to me, Buffy thinks of Giles as a father. She will never work with another Watcher as well as she does with him.” His smile turned self-mocking. “Although I was in agreement with the Council when I arrived that Mr. Giles was not appropriate to be her Watcher, I have reassessed the situation. The bond between them is not a weakness. It is, in fact, one of the reasons for her success as a Slayer.” He looked thoughtfully at Xander. “I’m not sure if you are aware, but few Slayers live as long as four years once they are called.” Xander hadn’t known that and he was appalled, considering that Slayer’s were usually about 14 or 15 years old when they were called. “The Council needs to learn from the situation, not cling blindly to tradition.”

Xander nodded, impressed. He couldn’t help but think back on the know-it-all amateur, full of his own self-importance, who had shown up in the library just a couple of months ago. Wesley had changed unbelievably from that person. He’d learned that he wasn’t god’s gift to Slayers, or even the right man for this particular job.

“What will you do?” he asked quietly.

“I’m going to get some of that field experience that has proved so illuminating here,” Wesley smiled, looking both excited and terrified. “I intend to travel for awhile. I’ve been in school far too long.”

“I’m so with you on that,” Xander said, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He stuck out his hand and shook Wesley’s firmly, trying to convey friendship and admiration in the gesture. “Don’t forget you have friends here in town. We’ll come looking for you if you don’t keep in touch.”

“Thank you, Xander. I can’t say that it has been fun, but it has certainly been an eye opening experience.”

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Oz was in the garage/studio behind his house working on a song Xander hadn’t heard before. Seating himself quietly, he listened as Oz worked on the piece, his face intent as he concentrated on the unfamiliar fingering of chords that sounded weirdly atonal to Xander’s ears. When Oz finished the piece and lifted his head to look at Xander, he smiled and gestured at the sheet music.

“That’s one of Terry’s pieces, isn’t it?” Terry was the Yngana lead singer of the band that Oz had played with a few times now.

“Yeah. Tricky piece for a guitar but we’re going to see if we can make it work.” A shadow passed over Oz’s expression and he looked down, fingerling the strings idly.

“You got my message about the set up at Angel’s place?” Xander asked, wanting to fill the suddenly
awkward silence.

“Yeah. I checked it out yesterday, it looks like it’ll do.” Oz looked up from the guitar. “After the full moon, I’m leaving,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean ‘you’re leaving’,” Xander asked after a moment of stunned silence. This was beginning to feel like a theme for the summer and he didn’t like it. First Willow and Wesley, then Angel - and, well, ok, he didn’t really care if Angel left but Spike did - and now Oz?

Oz slid a sideways glance at him. “Something happened during graduation.”

For a long moment, Xander thought he wasn’t going to explain any further, but finally Oz stirred slightly, almost a shiver, and continued, his voice barely audible: “I was caught up in the crowd, running with everyone else and…” he turned his head for the first time, looking directly at Xander, fear lurking in the back of his eyes. “The wolf almost came out.”

“But it wasn’t night,” Xander argued, the first thought that came to his head. “That’s not even possible, is it?”

Oz shook his head, almost as if he was denying what had happened even as he answered. “I could feel the wolf trying to break free. Everything got really intense: scent, hearing; I could taste the fear in the air. All of a sudden, it was like the people around me weren’t people any more, they were prey.” A tremor shook his whole body. “I had to leave before I lost it completely.”

“My god, Oz,” Xander floundered for words, finally asking: “Did you change?”

“No. Once I was away from the crowd, the wolf settled down. But it’s still there inside me, Xander. Always. In that crowd, I almost lost track of the difference between me and it. I need to learn how to control it or next time…” he let his voice die without finishing the sentence, but the unspoken words lived in his haunted eyes. Oz’s worst nightmare was losing control of the wolf and people dying as a result.

As much as he wanted to reassure Oz that what had happened was a fluke, something born of the extraordinary circumstances, he didn’t have the right to say it, especially since he didn’t know if it was true. “Where will you go?” he asked unhappily and realized he’d accepted Oz’s decision with those words and fought back the urge to protest, to ask Oz to stay. He didn’t want to lose another friend but this wasn’t about him.

“I don’t know. Away.” Oz’s shrug barely moved his shoulders. “I talked to Giles and Elizabeth about what happened. Elizabeth knows a shaman in New Mexico who might have some answers for me. I’ll start there.”

“I’ll miss you.” He said it simply, a statement of fact, not a plea for Oz to stay.

Oz slid him another sideways glance, a hint of a smile softening the lines of his face. “If I can, I’ll keep in touch,” he said and Xander knew it wasn’t an empty promise.

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Knocking on the once familiar door, Xander found he was fidgeting nervously and having to wipe his hands on the back of his jeans to avoid getting sweat marks on the small, gift-wrapped package in his hand. The door swung open and Willow was there, staring at him through the screen door.

“Hi,” he said, feeling unbelievably awkward. He couldn’t remember ever knocking on her door and waiting for it to be answered. For years, he’d had family privileges, allowed to come and go freely
without having to knock.

“Xander,” Willow said, not hiding her surprise as she swung the screen door open to let him in. “Come in.”

The dimly lit interior hadn’t changed. Willow’s mother had always kept the front rooms uncomfortably formal and Willow, Jesse and he had always hung out in Willow’s room in the back.

“I just wanted to say goodbye and give you this,” he said, holding out the little package. It had been weird, having to ask Elizabeth for advice about buying a book for Willow. Once, he’d known her tastes so well he could always find a present she’d love.

He’d wanted to give her a peace offering, something that showed he accepted who she was now. He’d bought her a Wiccan book that Elizabeth had recommended. Not a how-to manual or a touchy-feely Wiccans-do-only-good sermon that might be taken as a comment on how she’d screwed up, but a book on the historical roots of the Wiccan religion and the groups and ideologies that preceded it.

Willow’s slightly wary look melted into a smile. “Thanks, Xander.” She automatically led the way back to her bedroom and Xander followed. He perched on a chair as Willow took a seat on the bed, still holding the package.

Looking around, Xander saw the open suitcase with clothes neatly tucked inside, a few last minute things draped neatly over the opened edge. “Almost packed?” he asked for something to say.

“Getting there,” Willow answered. “I got interrupted before I finished.”

“Your folks ok with the big move?”

Willow’s wry look took him back to a hundred discussions of her parents’ failings. “They’re thrilled. Their little girl going to Oxford has been the talk of the cocktail circuit apparently.” The thread of hurt at her parents’ inability to view her as anything other than an extension of themselves, the loneliness she’d never been able to hide was in her voice. In their own way, her parents had been always been as neglectful as his own parents, never able to see Willow as a child that needed love, never seeing anything but a small, intelligent adult whose mind they needed to encourage even as she starved for affection before their unseeing eyes.

“I’ll bet,” he responded sympathetically.

“It wasn’t them who interrupted me, though. Buffy spent half the night here crying.”

“What? What happened?”

“Angel’s leaving town.” Willow looked torn, like she didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Oh, yeah. Spike told me he was going to.” Buffy crying her eyes out over it spoke volumes about the fact that Angel leaving was the right call. She really had been harboring delusions about them riding off into the sunset together. Which would be fine, because Angel would burn up on the back of the white horse and that would be the end of that problem. And yeah, he was being petty, but hey, if you couldn’t be petty in your own thoughts, where could you be?

Willow slid further back on the bed and drew her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. “It was hard because it’s hurting Buffy so much right now, but I really think it’s for the best.”

“You do?” That surprised him.
“Well, with the curse and all…” Willow shrugged. “I don’t see any kind of future for them that doesn’t lead to badness and heartache.” She sighed. “I hate that I’m leaving when she needs a friend so much.” She looked apologetically at him. “I don’t mean that you’re not her friend,” she said hastily, “it’s just that…”

“It’s ok,” he interrupted. “You’re her best friend and a girl. That makes you twice as qualified in the giving comfort department.” He wondered when it had stopped hurting that Willow considered Buffy her best friend. So long ago that it was just an accepted fact now.

“She’s spending tonight here and going with me to the airport tomorrow.” Willow looked determined, like she was intending to cram all the sympathy and chocolate she could into the next 18 hours or so.

“And there’s email and letters, you’ll still be there for her.”

Willow nodded. “How about you?” she asked quietly.

“I’ve been thinking about setting up an email account,” Xander answered. “I understand I can check it at the library.” He’d thought about it ever since he’d learned she was going to go to Oxford. Underneath the relief at the news, there had been the surprising realization that he would miss her. Spending a year apart and keeping in touch by mail struck him as being the best possible solution. With time and distance, they might find their way back to some sort of friendship.

Willow smiled but didn’t say anything and Xander thought again that she was learning not to push people faster than they were ready to go.

“I should let you finish packing,” he said, standing up. He gestured at the package, “tuck that into your carry-on, if you have room. It’s something for the plane.”

Willow stood as well, looking awkward and Xander stepped forward and gave her a quick, hard hug. “Take care of yourself. I’ll send you my email address as soon as I have one.

Willow blinked back tears. “Goodbye, Xander. I’ll miss you.”

“Oxford has got to be full of Giles-es and Wesleys,” he predicted. “You’ll feel right at home.”

He was aware of Willow watching him as he walked away down the street but, after a final wave, he didn’t look back. He was glad he’d gone to see her, but it wasn’t the same. It never would be, they’d both changed too much. Someday though, maybe they could build something new from the wreckage of their past.

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The bookshelves were beginning to take form. Xander had finished staining the wood out in the courtyard of Giles’ apartment building and begun nailing the stained and varnished wood into place.

“I suppose you’ve heard?” Buffy sat down in one of the wooden chairs, dragging it over from the dining room table to where he was working. Xander finished hammering in the nail to give himself a minute, then lowered his hands and looked at her.

“About Angel leaving?” he guessed. “Yeah. How are you doing?”

“I’ve had better weeks,” she admitted. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she was blinking hard as she looked away from him. “I don’t see why he has to go,” she said after a long morose silence while Xander tried to think of something to say. “He just kept saying that we would never really get over
each other if he stayed and that he had to leave.” She flicked a quick glance at him. “We’re not together and I know we can’t ever really be together, so why does he have to leave?” Buffy sounded like she was hoping he could come up with an argument she hadn’t already thought of.

“I think it’s a bit more complicated than that.” Trust Angel to muff up breaking up with his non-girlfriend, he thought, exasperated. Carefully avoiding the real issue - Buffy and Angel - Xander went with the secondary problem. Who knew, maybe it really was the bigger problem of the two. “Angel doesn’t really think he fits in here.”

“He told me that but it’s stupid. This is the Hellmouth, where better to fight evil? That’s what his redemption is supposedly all about, isn’t it? Fighting evil.”

“It’s not just about the fighting evil,” Xander tried but Buffy interrupted.

“He patrols with Spike too, not just me. Why does he think he needs more?”

Despite the way she sounded, he didn’t think Buffy was being as selfish as it seemed. He suspected she was trying to convince herself that Angel could stay and not doing a very good job at it. “Buffy, if a second Slayer showed up on your doorstep one day and said they were here to help you control the Hellmouth, how would you feel?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Not really an issue. There can be only one and all that Giles-stuff.”

“Humor me. Pretend it’s possible.”

Buffy’s tone said he’d better get to the point quickly. “Fine, I’m not sure how I’d react but it would probably be uncomfortable, at least for awhile. What has this got to do with Angel?”

“I think that’s kind of how Angel feels. This is Spike’s territory and part of him instinctively resents that, even though he and Spike are friends.” And if Spike ever heard him simplify their relationship to friendship, he’d never hear the end of it. “You might be ok dealing with a second Slayer but just think how she would feel - knowing it was your town and she really didn’t have a place here.”

Ridiculous as his example was, Buffy seemed to be thinking it over. It always amazed Xander how little she seemed to know about vampire culture. Granted, Angel wasn’t exactly your typical vampire and Buffy was mostly interested in killing them, but still, knowing more about how her opponents thought would make her a better Slayer.

“I know I don’t have a say, Angel made that pretty clear. It’s just…” her voice trailed off and when she spoke again her voice was mournful. “Willow left this morning, and Wesley’s leaving soon, and now Angel will be gone in a few days. It feels like everything’s changing.”

“Yeah.” Xander could relate to the depression in her voice. “I know graduation is supposed to be about moving on but I guess I thought that everything important would stay the same.”

“Whoever said change is good was lying,” Buffy muttered darkly. “I thought that, by going to college here in Sunnydale, I could have my cake and eat it too,” she said after a minute. “Whatever that means. Now I find my cake’s leaving town and I’m going to be stuck here after all.”

After a minute, a reluctant smile tugged at her mouth. “Ok, that metaphor kind of ended up someplace weird.”

“I was just thinking that. For what it’s worth, I’ll still be around,” he offered.

“It’s worth a lot,” Buffy said quietly.
Xander hammered the nail in with a bit more force than necessary. “I hate this,” he muttered.

Giles had been sitting on the couch reading and now looked at him over the top of his glasses. “Something wrong with the design?” he asked.

“No, the shelves are fine. It’s everyone leaving.”

“Ah.” Closing his book deliberately, Giles stood and crossed the room, taking a seat in a dining room chair much closer to where Xander’s materials were spread out. “Wesley talked to you.”

It wasn’t a question but Xander answered anyway. “Yeah. Wesley and Oz and Willow and Larry and Jonathan and Cordelia and even Angel,” he added the last name as an afterthought.

“Cordelia Chase?”

“Moving to Los Angeles,” Xander reported gloomily. Spike had heard about it somehow and passed on the news that Cordelia was intending to become an actress and try her luck in Hollywood. Ok, Spike had actually said something snarky about casting couches but it pretty much meant the same thing. “And Larry got that football scholarship to UCLA, so he and Jonathan are leaving in August.” Jonathan had applied to UCLA after Larry got the scholarship and they were planning on getting an apartment together off-campus. “The worst part is, they all should leave. They’ve got things to look forward to and anywhere is safer than here.”

Giles was studying him curiously. “I thought you didn’t want to attend college? It might not be too late…” but Xander was already shaking his head.

“No. This - ” he gestured at the finished pieces of wood and the tools scattered around him, “this is what I want. I’ve got a good start on my own and I’m going to get a job with a construction company this summer to broaden my experience. I’m hoping to find one that will give me on-the-job training in carpentry because I need more than just shop class.” He stopped talking before he revealed too much - that he was thinking about maybe starting his own business making custom pieces. That was a long way down the road and he probably had a much better chance of being eaten by a demon than of starting a successful business. The statistics on start-up businesses were dismal, even without the Hellmouth factor thrown in. Besides, that was a few years down the road.

“I realize it’s difficult but Buffy and I and, of course, Spike will still be here, so you aren’t being completely abandoned.”

“I’m being stupid, aren’t I?”

“Of course not. I suspect you’re just feeling a bit sorry for yourself.”

Xander gave a short, surprised laugh. “Yeah, I am,” he admitted. “It’s not like I wanted high school to go on forever or anything stupid like that. I mean, in a lot of ways, high school sucked. But I was pretty much getting the hang of things by this year and now everything’s changing again.”

He was really going to miss Oz and it seemed like everything was changing, and not for the better. He knew he’d get used to it, but right now, he felt like the left-behind loser too useless to have exciting plans like everyone else. Which was dumb, because he’d had options and it had been his decision not to go to college. He’d just sort of thought everyone would still be around for the summer and he’d be working full time by the time they started leaving and it wouldn’t seem so depressing.

“Does it help to know that what you are feeling is very typical for someone in your position?”
After a pause, Xander said frankly: “No, it really doesn’t help.”

“I was afraid it wouldn’t.”

They shared a rueful smile and Xander changed the subject before he really started to wallow in self-pity. “What about you?” he asked.

“Fortunately, I have sufficient resources that I am not forced to rely on the Council’s largess.” Giles gave him a slight smile at his confused look. “I can wait out their decision on whether they will send a new Watcher or reinstate me,” he clarified.

“What do you think they’ll do?”

“I honestly don’t know. They are not known for their flexibility but Wesley has left them in a somewhat awkward position, especially since he made it clear to them that he’d informed Buffy of his request to have me reinstated.”

Xander grinned, impressed with Wesley’s budding deviousness. “So, he pretty much told them that he’d made it impossible for anyone else to do the job and by the way, you won’t be able to find me.”

“Quite.” Giles sounded smugly pleased by the Council’s dilemma.

“What if they say no and send a new Watcher?”

“Then Buffy and I will adapt. She knows I will always be here for her, as long as she needs me.”

“What about your day job? We kind of blew that up.”

“I would not continue as the high school librarian even if we hadn’t made it physically impossible. Frankly, if not for my Watcher responsibilities, I should have died of boredom as the school librarian.”

“Well, yeah. It’s not like anyone ever wanted to check out books.”

Talking about books reminded Xander that he had a job to finish and he picked up his tools and began working again. Working at Giles’ every day, building the series of shelves that they had planned to hold the most critical part of his book collection, was time out from reality, a peaceful haven against the changes that were happening around him. He was hiding out here, he knew that. Like someone riding out a hurricane, he was sitting tight and waiting for the debris to settle as his classmates spun off in all directions. He just hadn’t thought he’d lose so many of them so soon.

Looking around the room, Xander sighed quietly to himself. He and Spike were sitting together on Giles’ couch, Buffy and Giles had each taken a comfortable chair and that was it for the group. Willow had left for England two days ago, Wesley had slipped quietly out of town yesterday, Angel had mostly been holed up at the mansion, keeping an eye on Oz during his wolf nights, then both of them were leaving tomorrow. Spike had told Giles that, since Angel was leaving town, he had no interest in attending this meeting, figuring it was no longer any of his business.

The knock on the door broke the morose silence. Buffy had been tearful and cross in turns ever since first Willow, then Angel told her they were leaving, stopping by Giles’ to vent the anger and hurt she couldn’t share with either Angel or Willow. Giles had been gone on a suspicious number of errands in the afternoons, leaving Xander alone in his apartment working on the bookshelves and, inevitably, listening sympathetically to Buffy when she stopped by. He just hoped she was up to this meeting.
Buffy wasn’t exactly Miss Diplomacy under the best of circumstances and Giles hadn’t given her much of a heads up about why he’d called the meeting.

“I’ll get it.” He slipped out from under Spike’s arm and crossed to the door, opening it to welcome Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan. “Hey, guys, come on in.”

Giles had stood courteously and now approached with outstretched hand. “Welcome. It’s good to see you again.”

After the two newcomers had been settled in chairs in the living room, Mr. Olsen got right down to business. “We asked to meet with you, Miss Summers, to discuss the future. The Mayor’s attempt at Ascension brought our two groups together and made us known to each other. We would like to discuss making the alliance a bit more permanent.”

Buffy sat straighter, looking wary. “What do you mean?” She shot a quick look at Giles who just smiled reassuringly at her.

“The idea that the town could have been destroyed without our even knowing it was happening was terrifying,” Sgt. Morgan said bluntly in his deep voice. “At minimum, we would like to be kept in the loop about major events and kept in reserve for emergencies.”

“At minimum?” Buffy asked.

“Some of our people want to do more to help keep a lid on things, here in town,” Mr. Olsen explained. “We were hoping we could take some of the burden of your Slayer duties from you, either by sharing patrols or taking over patrols on nights when you are occupied with school activities.”

Buffy looked at Xander who grinned cheerfully back at her. Her enrollment at UCSunnydale wasn’t exactly a state secret and he wasn’t going to apologize for telling Mr. Olsen about her plans.

“It’s what you’ve been hoping for, Buffy,” Giles said quietly. “A chance for a more normal life.”

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Spike shook his head as they left Giles’ apartment. “‘More normal life’,?” he quoted sarcastically. “Slayer doesn’t know a good thing when she has it. All the killing anyone could ever want and she wants to go to school. Waste of bloody potential, if you ask me.”

“I’m pretty sure she didn’t ask you,” Xander answered judiciously.

“That’ll teach her,” Spike muttered. “In a few months, she’ll be sitting in a classroom with 100 other students learning about rocks. She’ll regret giving up the good life then.”

Xander laughed.

The meeting had gone surprisingly well. After an initially prickly reaction, where it looked like Buffy thought they were accusing her of not doing her job, she had become enthusiastic about the prospect of becoming a part-time Slayer. Giles was thrilled by the idea, seeing it as a chance for Buffy to have the life she’d been dreaming of and pleased that Buffy had shaken off her depression for the first time in days.

Spike and Xander had opted out of the meeting as the four of them began discussing joint training sessions to become familiar with each other’s fighting techniques and skill levels. They were planning on meeting again over the summer to coordinate patrol schedules and Spike had become
increasingly bored with the administrative details, finally tugging Xander up off the couch and announcing abruptly, “we’re off.”

Xander had gone willingly, it wasn’t anything he was going to be actively involved in. He was pleased for Buffy and worried about the demons who were signing up, although he was relieved by Sgt. Morgan’s assurances that only people who got by his screening would be permitted to take part in the joint venture.

“Mansion’s going to be empty soon.” Spike’s voice broke into his thoughts and he glanced over, seeing the thoughtful look on Spike’s face. “Means we can use it for training again,” he continued. “Been slacking off recently.”

“Well, there was a bit of an apocalypse issue,” Xander pointed out, reasonably. “We’ve been busy.”

“I’ll set it up again after Angel is gone. Don’t want you getting rusty.”

Xander nodded. He enjoyed his training sessions with Spike and wouldn’t be unhappy to have a regular place to work out with him again. Plus, a lot of their workouts ended in sweaty goodness, so who was he to complain?

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Spike took his time, lining up his shot, then sent the cue ball banking off the rim to kiss the 5-ball into the pocket with a satisfying clunk.

Xander was a much better pool player, thanks to having gotten a lot of practice since meeting Spike and Spike had to concentrate on the game or risk losing. Looking up from the table, he studied his Claimed. Xander was sipping his beer, eyeing the table, still looking far too tense despite their having been here for an hour.

Pool and beer were obviously not going to be enough. Xander had been restless and too quiet the past couple of days and he wasn’t working his way out of the mood by himself. Spike leaned on his cue and waited until Xander glanced at him, curious about the delay.

“Talk to me, luv.”

“What?”

Spike raised his eyebrow and Xander sighed. “I’m ok, Spike. Really.”

“Don’t look ok.”

“I know, I’ll do better.”

“Not what I meant, luv. ‘m just worried about you.”

Xander set his cue down and leaned his hip against the table. “I should be happy that they’re all leaving. Most of them are leaving for good reasons.” He looked troubled for a minute and Spike knew he was thinking about the wolf. “I just feel kind of abandoned. Which is stupid, but I can’t help it.”

“Got me, Xander. I’ll never leave you.”

“I know.” The quiet certainty in that response relieved Spike. He sometimes wondered if Xander really understood the permanency of his Claimed status.
“Let’s go home, luv.”

Spike pushed him gently back onto the bed and perched on top of him. “See if I can’t make you feel better,” he smirked, beginning to unbutton Xander’s shirt.

“I’m willing to let you give it a shot,” Xander allowed generously. He stretched his arms up over his head, content to let Spike seduce him as he could tell his lover wanted. Spike bent over him, his lips following his nimble fingers as each button opened, exposing more of his chest to the firm, cool lips that began kissing their way down his chest.

As Spike reached his waistband, he tugged Xander’s shirt out from his pants and Xander lifted up to help him, quickly shrugging his way out of the shirt and watching as Spike tossed it carelessly to one side. Spike’s hands ran up Xander’s back, tracing the lines of his shoulder blades and holding him in place as he targeted Xander’s nipples, licking and nipping at them teasingly before laving his tongue over them.

Xander moaned in appreciation as the attention tightened his nipples into hard, aching peaks and sent jolts of sensation down to his crotch, where his cock was beginning to take an active interest in what Spike was doing, growing almost uncomfortably tight in his jeans.

He was rocking his hips against Spike now, desperate for more friction and Spike’s chuckle wafted cool air across the nipple Spike was working on. Unable to wait, Xander began tackling Spike’s clothes, needing to feel that cool, smooth skin against his own. His own hands busy driving Xander wild, Spike let him work, hastily unbuttoning Spike’s shirt and pulling it off with frantic fingers.

At last he accomplished his goal, and Spike flattened his lithe, compact body against Xander’s larger one. Xander’s hands cupping Spike’s hips and pulling him firmly against him, rocking his hips hard against Spike, grinding their cocks against each other’s as they wrestled across the sheet.

Spike sat up, pulling free of Xander’s clutching hands long enough to unfasten and hastily yank down his pants. Xander followed suit, undoing his own pants and pushing them down quickly as Spike lay down against him again. He gasped as their cocks met without the fabric barrier between them, his hips bucking upward as their cocks slid against each other. “More,” he groaned.

“Got all night, luv,” Spike’s husky voice promised as his hand slipped between their bodies to close around Xander’s penis in a firm grip. Xander thrust hard into the tight grip, sensation exploding through him as Spike began to pump him hard. He clung to Spike’s shoulders as Spike kissed him, tongue darting into Xander’s mouth as Xander’s hands slid up to bury themselves in Spike’s short hair, holding his lover in place as their tongues dueled wildly.

A finger slick with pre-cum began teasing at Xander’s entrance and he gasped as it circled the twitching hole, arching his head back and exposing his throat to Spike who growled and morphed into game-face, licking along the line of Xander’s throat, teasing himself with the lure of hot blood just below the surface.

“Oh, god, Spike, fuck me,” he moaned. “Now, dammit.”

Spike’s finger pushed inside and Xander sucked in a ragged breath at the burn as his body stretched to let it in. A second finger joined the first and Xander’s whole body shuddered, his eyes turned inward at the incredible sensation of being stretched and filled.

He moaned in protest as the fingers withdrew, then howled as Spike pushed his hastily slicked-up
cock inside him with agonizing slowness. He was barely stretched and he felt every inch as Spike thrust inside with slow, almost unbearable carefulness until he was buried to the hilt inside Xander’s tight channel.

For a long moment, they lay there without moving, Xander’s ragged breathing the only sound as Spike forced himself to wait until Xander’s hips began twitching, seeking more. Feeling that tiny movement, Spike growled throatily and withdrew only to thrust forward harshly, burying his fangs into Xander’s neck at the same moment as he reaffirmed his Claim, Xander’s scream of pleasure ringing in his ears.

He thrust over and over into Xander’s welcoming heat, slamming into the gland that sent shattering jolts of pure bliss through Xander as he bucked up to meet every thrust, as the erotic sensation of Spike drinking from him sent orgasm crashing over him.

His howl of release was matched by Spike as he lifted his head, his own release tearing through him as his seed filled his Claimed, marking him with Spike’s scent, inside and out.

They slowly relaxed back down to the mattress, their muscles going slack and heavy in the aftermath of release, Xander’s heated breath feathering over Spike’s skin and causing him to almost purr with pleasure at the sensation. For a long moment, Spike was content to wrap himself around the warmth of his Claimed, inhaling deeply of the mingled scents of Xander and sex and blood.

“‘But if he finds you and you find him/The rest of the world don't matter’” he murmured into Xander’s ear.

When Xander had caught his breath, he asked, drowsily: “What was that?” Rolling them over so he was no longer underneath, he shifted a bit to find a comfortable position, settling next to Spike’s cool, strong body, arms wrapped around his vampire, feeling incredibly loved and cared for.

Spike looked embarrassed, like he’d been caught doing something obscene in public. No, wait, Spike would never look embarrassed for that reason, as Xander had good reason to know. Like he’d been caught helping a little old lady cross the street, more like.


“Love you, too, Spike. Not going anywhere either,” he answered, sleep stealing over him and pulling him under. He wanted to say something more, but it could wait for the morning. Neither he nor Spike was going anywhere. Sunnydale was their town as much as it was Buffy’s.

The Thousandth Man
by Rudyard Kipling.

One man in a thousand, Solomon says,
Will stick more close than a brother.
And it's worth while seeking him half your days
If you find him before the other.
Nine hundred and ninety-nine depend
On what the world sees in you,
But the Thousandth man will stand your friend
With the whole round world agin you.

'Tis neither promise nor prayer nor show
Will settle the finding for 'ee.
Nine hundred and ninety-nine of 'em go
By your looks, or your acts, or your glory.
But if he finds you and you find him.
The rest of the world don't matter;
For the Thousandth Man will sink or swim
With you in any water.

You can use his purse with no more talk
Than he uses yours for his spendings,
And laugh and meet in your daily walk
As though there had been no lendings.
Nine hundred and ninety-nine of 'em call
For silver and gold in their dealings;
But the Thousandth Man h's worth 'em all,
Because you can show him your feelings.

His wrong's your wrong, and his right's your right,
In season or out of season.
Stand up and back it in all men's sight --
With that for your only reason!
Nine hundred and ninety-nine can't bide
The shame or mocking or laughter,
But the Thousandth Man will stand by your side
To the gallows-foot -- and after!

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